

# **Beyond merciless critique - reflections on the contribution of sociology in the social policy space**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines governmental policy development processes in the context of Bourdieu's (2003) question as to how and under what conditions sociologists would involve themselves in processes 'where the fate of individuals and societies (are) increasingly being decided'. The paper provides an overview of several policy development processes before moving to address the challenges facing sociology in today's social policy space. First, the paper argues that policy makers can do little with sociology if all we have to offer, as Bourdieu (2003) put it, is unrelenting critique. Second, policy commentators draw attention to the fact that academics generally have been reluctant to engage in murky policy processes, which are often the fruit of tradeoffs. Nonetheless, policy decisions are made, whether sociology is at the table or not. The decisions are simpler poorer for the absence. If the view is accepted that it is not enough to criticise, and that we want to achieve change (Marx 1947), the question remains then as to how sociology will work to shape a social future?

**Key words:** policy development, the role of sociology

## **Preamble**

The idea for this paper arose from discussions I was having with Dave Marsh at the launch of the National Institute for Rural and Regional Australia earlier this year. At the time I was the manager of a corporate social policy section for a large Commonwealth government department. Beyond managing the day-to-day aspects of the department's social policy, the role also involved sitting on a number of high-level inter-departmental social policy committees. In all I spent five years working on policy development for the Commonwealth across three departments. I have also spent many years interacting with policy-makers as an academic and community

activist working on disability issues. The purpose of this paper was to provide personal reflections, as a sociologist, on the policy process as I had experienced it.

## **Introduction**

The needs of specific groups in society are realised in the context of complex social histories which often result from the convergence of multiple causes; ‘people get caught in the contradictions of the social world, which are experienced in the form of personal dramas’ (Bourdieu 1998:1; Mills 1970). Within the Murray Darling Basin, for example, a presenting problem of a shortage of water occurs in the context of farms having been established as post-war settler blocks, where industry development has been promoted through government supported irrigation systems in times of high rainfall, the application of (un)sustainable farming practices, the over-allocation of water resources by government and industry over time, drought, climate variability and climate change, the world trade agreement, the removal of tariffs to protect local industry, fluctuating commodity prices, dramatic shifts in input costs and the emergence of an emissions trading scheme to name but a few.

In the face of social problems resulting from multiple causality, decisions (be these personal responses or policy decisions) need to be made in the absence of certainty. Certainly when we make our own decisions, rarely do we do so in the circumstances of our own choosing (Marx, 1970). It is within this context of identifying and addressing social problems with complex causality that Bourdieu asked how we, as sociologists ‘might more effectively intervene in the political world and if so under what conditions’ (Bourdieu 2003:17)? Before moving to explore this question further, I want to switch for a moment to address the government policy development process and to consider how this process is undertaken.

## **NPPs**

New strategic policy directions (e.g. National Mental Health Strategy or Closing the Gap Strategy) require many millions of ‘new’ government dollars. The new policy proposal (NPP) development process is the mechanism through which new monies are allocated through the budgetary process to government departments. A call for an NPP can arise through a variety of mechanisms including activism, the Cabinet and COAG processes, governmental responses to significant commissioned public reports or internal departmental initiatives. However once the process commences, it is usually shrouded in a high level of secrecy. It is at this point that departmental senior staff, working in close collaboration with other impacted government departments, the ministers and their advisers, take control of the process and put their mark on it. Where large amounts of money are at stake, and especially where initiatives cut across portfolio functions, high level inter-departmental committees may also be established. These are spaces largely occupied by economists. Agricultural economists, labour economists, health economists, economists with perspectives on Indigenous people and women. Rarely though are the decisions to be made, essentially economic. For the economist, not only is economics central to policy making, in their view ‘there is no other set of criteria that exercises a greater influence over the actions of ... government’ (Schumacher 1973: 240). Schumacher’s somewhat dated comments would not be so problematic for me had not senior Canberra economic bureaucrats echoed almost the exact words to me in recent months: Canberra is about the distribution of scarce resources and who better to placed to determine such decisions than economists? The problem of note here is not the basic use of cost efficacy or benefit models that determine the best use of public resources to achieve an agreed end, but the use of market values. It is problematic

when such values are routinely applied to determine policy development. Increasingly it is being realised that leaving things to the invisible hand of the market and individuals pursuing their own personal interests, does not result in the levels of benefit to the broader community theoretically envisaged. Indeed, the opposite is often the case.

One of the many problems with this process is that within market based decision making paradigms, the decision can be taken to 'let costs lie where they fall – the laissez faire solution' (Titmus 2006: 44). Resulting diswelfares (Titmus 2006: 45) (the social costs of policy changes which benefit some at the cost of others) such as the abolition of skill sets, premature retirements, loss of land values or the loss of community amenity are not considered within cost benefit models. Rather, the state's strategy is to continue the amputation of its 'left hand' (the social service side) is underscored (Bourdieu 1998:2). However, it is also evident that such decisions are not administered uniformly. No help, for example, is presently being offered to assist farmers compete with producers from other countries whose food production processes are subsidised by their governments. Subsidies will be offered, it seems, to large Australian corporate polluters under the proposed carbon pollution reduction scheme.

Within such processes it is a positioned notion of need or outcome that is driven by people with the opportunity to influence the policy process, who frequently are not accountable to the community impacted by their decisions, who shape the material that goes into NPP assessment models. Within the existing system there is no evaluation of the extent to which the assumptions under-pinning the representations accurately reflect stakeholder views or needs beyond those of groups who have the opportunity to influence the decision making process. Nor are the scenarios which

form the basis of cost benefit analyses routinely followed up – how real were they? Yet it is these processes which determine resource allocation on a daily basis. Day in and day out, untested, unevaluated, econometric models, based on all sorts of assumptions, drive policy adoption. Road versus public transport policy in New South Wales may be an illustration of this process where the evaluative orientation was towards free market policies and individualised transport. Processes such as these need careful attention and review and sociologists are well placed to do such work. Nonetheless, the shaping of this process occurs with the input from the central agencies (Treasury and Finance) where the economic lens (centred on market values) is particularly applied. Projects that survive this process in turn go to Cabinet and the Budget process where they are refined and, if again they survive the process, are announced on Federal Budget night.

There is a second level of policy formation that also deserves brief attention; that of policy execution. Significant capacity to act exists within the government department that administers a specific government policy and its associated budget. The rule of thumb in government is that the person who has the chair, gets to make the call; that is the decisions fall to specific individuals, right across the bureaucracy, at all levels, who get to decide what happens on a specific issue. For sure the departmental senior executive staff generally set and drive a department's overall agenda and strategy in consultation with a ministerial office. However, once the strategy is set the execution of strategy falls to the middle management bands (SES Band 1 and their EI 2s)<sup>1</sup>. In turn, depending on work loads, key decision may be made by the 'on the ground' analysts. It is in these situations that opportunistic but well placed individuals seeking to shape the policy agenda get to have a lot of influence and the busier the section the more influence they may have. With the increasing concentration of staff supporting

the neo-classical framework within the bureaucracy, more and more operational decisions are made from within values frameworks centred on rationalist economic theory.

Safework Australia is concerned with occupational health and safety in Australia. The agency operates under a tripartite management structure made of up representatives of state and federal governments, along with employer and union representatives. Policy and strategic issues can be introduced into the process by any of the members. Issues raised in this process may be referred to sections within the agency for further research and development. Outputs prepared by agency staff are then sent out to members for consideration and debate at meetings of the tripartite groups. Union and employers representatives in turn, have the opportunity to consult with their members before key policy decisions are made. Rarely do decisions proceed until a consensus of opinion from the three groups has been reached. While many departments have mechanisms where representatives of the jurisdictions can meet and discuss policy, only Safework Australia has a process where non-bureaucrats have the opportunity to openly participate in policy development.

### **Reconciling policy development and practice**

Bourdieu asks what role we should play in the processes ‘where the fate of individuals and societies (are) increasingly being decided (Bourdieu 2003:17)’? And in turn he answers this question by suggesting that a key role for sociologists is ‘merciless logical social critique ... aimed at uncovering the social determinants that bear on the producers of the dominant discourse’ (Bourdieu 2003: 20). My position is that while critique is certainly required, on its own it is not enough either tactically or strategically. Tactically, without sufficient rapport with the bureaucracy, the system

simply shuts out critique; the organisational process of government treats critique as treason and as an attack on itself – as acting outside the family as it were. Recall that someone made a call and at the end of the day we are therefore criticising a person's call and therefore it is personal. It is important to note at the SES officer band 1 level and above, an officer is evaluated on how well an issue is managed – *are they sound*, Sir Humphrey would ask?. The control of debate and of stakeholders makes up a critical aspect of SES performance evaluation. Critique of a new or emerging issue can typically mean death to such an issue – it gets too hot to handle. But even assuming that the rapport is there with the bureaucracy and that critique doesn't shut an issue down, critique on its own simply creates a knowledge vacuum and players without concerns about knowledge claims are every ready to fill such a void.

The question hangs then as to the extent to which sociologists who are interested in being at the decision making table, are prepared to accept the rules of how the process operates. Saunders and Walter (2005: 8) observe that the policy making community is constrained by 'the need to develop realistic solutions to practical problems within feasible time lines'. In launching the Saunders and Walter book, the then Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Peter Shergold, made the following remarks:

Not infrequently I talk to academics who tell me that they work in the area of public policy. It awakens my interest. Often I am rudely disappointed. They may be researching in areas that are at the forefront of policy debate – health, welfare, early childhood development, education, employment – but they appear uncomfortable when asked directly what policy changes they would implement. This is seen, I discern, as a matter for others – less talented others – to ascertain from a proper consideration of their research findings. Practical policy which affects people's lives seems to be regarded as a trade skill, sullied by the dirt and grime of political compromise.

Other academics have very clear policy prescriptions, often argued forcefully and sometimes propounded with a level of

polemical certainty. While I am engaged by many of their ideas, and somewhat disquieted by the single-mindedness of their underlying philosophical conviction, I discover that my questions about possible compromise positions are met with a strong gaze into the mid-distance. A second-best outcome, I realise, is not good enough.

The art that I find so beguiling – developing policy iteratively, moulded by an environment of political contest and organisational advocacy, responsive to unexpected opportunity, stymied by unforeseen barriers and shaped by financial exigency – is an uncomfortable discipline for the purist.

In the context of the insights that Bourdieu, Shergold, Saunders and Walter put forward, we need to ask ourselves are we prepared to engage in practical policy processes that affects peoples' lives, knowing that such processes will be impure; knowing that the knowledge brought to the table will be impure. Many expect the process to be open and participative and perhaps that government will come to us. I trust that you can see that this is not going to happen, certainly not formally and certainly not in the short term. Sociologists interested in influencing policy may choose to make their work accessible to policy officers by making their insights available in condensed formats on-line, by sending policy officers copies of their work and going to see them to discuss it. But one should not realistically expect a two-way process. The lack of transparency within this process is problematic for many academics, who in turn choose not to participate at all. Yet if we choose not to participate at all, are we also prepared to accept the consequences of process that go ahead anyway without our input?

We hear a lot about the triple bottom line (economics, environment and social); is it not time for the social to come to the forefront? I consider that the question before us as a collective, be it as people who undertake philosophical and/or empirical sociological work in its various forms – is what does sociology need to do in order

that the social is considered as an integral part of the public decision making process?

This is the question I think we need to debate.

If the sociology of knowledge teaches us anything, is that we will never have certainty. No knowledge production process, be it philosophical, qualitative or quantitative, or a combination of the three, will contain all the answers on any given matter. Similarly, no policy process will be perfect, it will be a compromise. Our options are to sit on the sidelines and criticise or to bring both our critique and our imperfect knowledge to work on imperfect processes, working towards the best decision that can be made on the day, be it on mental health policy or emissions trading schemes. Are we prepared to work towards the second best outcome today, knowing that 'tomorrow' we may have another chance to achieve the preferred outcome? And at this point I want to distinguish between individual interest groups plugging away at influencing the policy process (be it in the environment, health, women's' issues, labour relations, rural social policy and the like) and the broader voice of sociology. The issue for me is how we as a collective go about building a legitimacy and an acceptance for the social in the policy space where we move beyond critique and contribute to the change process; that people would think it odd that there are no sociologists sitting on and advising high level government committees; that people would think it odd that policy development would occur without the input of sociologists. That moreover, that we, as a public presence, make it evident to decision makers that it is not acceptable that our expertise is excluded from the processes that lead to the production of practical policy which affects people's lives.

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**Notes:**

- 1 A senior executive service (SES) Band 1 is quite a senior manager in the Australian government, they would typically lead a branch within a government department and be responsible for managing two to four sections. SES Band 1 officers would report to a division head; the division head would be part of the executive management team for the department. Sections are lead by Executive Level 2 officers. Sections can range in size from a few people to 40-50 people. Executive Level 2 officers provide day-to-day leadership and management of their designated program of work, such as policy development. Executive Level 1 officers would typically be highly skilled staff with expertise in the section's program of work.

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