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Policy research as critical praxis

Abstract

In responding to Woods and Gardner's (2011) article, this piece positions policy research as a potentially rich site for critical praxis. It works through the possibilities around (i) negotiating the politics of policy research; (ii) the iterative and hybrid nature of policy research; and (iii) the internally differentiated nature of states. While remaining clear-eyed around the limits Woods and Gardner point to that shape collaborative work around policy, the article argues that policy research can be a site where the ethical and normative commitments of a critical agenda can be pursued. This requires that we recognise, first, policy research as a context for situated knowledge production within the complex social terrain of the state and, second, the performative and constitutive effects of knowledge.

Keywords

critical, research, praxis, policy

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Policy research as critical praxis: commentary on 'Applied policy research and critical human geography: some reflections on swimming in murky waters'

While there is now broad recognition of the diversity of critical geographies that can nurture transformative thinking and practice for progressive social change (Castree and Wright 2009, Blomley 2008), deliberation on the merits of policy research with the state as critical geography lingers on. Woods' purpose in this engaging piece is to move beyond this deliberation, commence from the position that policy research and critical geography can be compatible, and bring the *realpolitik* of policy research to the surface for open discussion and to extrapolate lessons for managing the dilemmas it poses. As many of us face growing pressures within the neoliberalised university to demonstrate our instrumental value, our 'relevance' and, of course, our ability to generate external research income through policy research, this discussion is certainly a timely one. Woods' aptly draws out the complexities of engaging with the state; the dynamism of political priorities, sensitivities and anxieties; the conflicting expectations of differently politically-situated interests; and the openings for reconciling normative concerns with the outputs sought by the state. With all this in mind, the piece is geared towards developing practical guidance for surviving the potential 'taints' of policy research with critical integrity intact.

Through my commentary I want to endorse Woods' agenda but also push beyond his conclusion that policy research with the state and critical geography can be compatible

and achieved without compromising critical integrity. Instead, and without dismissing the complexities and risks involved, I want to locate policy research as a potentially rich site for critical praxis whereby the access and alliances with policy makers throughout the research process can be mobilized to actively propel the ethical and normative commitments of a critical geography. This involves an orientation to policy research as a particular context for situated knowledge production and recognition of the performative and constitutive effects of knowledge. From this critical post-structural orientation, situated knowledge production is part of a strategy to develop transformative practices (see Gibson-Graham 2006, Le Heron 2006, 2007). Policy research thus becomes a context in which to consider what knowledge might be productive in propelling the ethical or normative commitments of a critical agenda: what might open up different understandings of policy ‘problems’, re-frame and reconstitute policy questions, suggest different technologies of governance, and enable different enactments of policy in line with these commitments. This orientation explicitly politicises the knowledge production process in policy research and places it on ethical and normative ground. To tease this out, I reflect on three interrelated aspects of the policy research landscape Woods recounts: (i) negotiating the politics of policy research; (ii) the iterative and hybrid nature of policy research; (iii) the internally differentiated nature of states. In each case I want to extend on Woods’ position and suggest orientations that might assist in actively marshalling policy research as an occasion for critical praxis.

Negotiating the politics of policy research

Woods’ analysis and reflection on his experiences present a vivid picture of how the politics of policy research pitches us into the ‘murky waters’ of pragmatic negotiation around compromises, trade-offs and politically expedient re-framings of our research findings. As a primary strategy for navigating these politics while warding off critical compromise, Woods recommends critical reflexivity. The main referent for this reflexivity presented in the paper is, understandably, a pragmatic one: defending

professional integrity, involving demonstrating expert proficiency, never misrepresenting research findings, never introducing political bias. These are sound principles of engagement to be sure and the authoritative status of professional, expert knowledge can no doubt be a referent for reflexivity and a resource to draw upon in deflecting politically motivated requests from the research commissioners.

But to do more than avoid compromise and, instead, to cultivate policy research as a tentative opening for infusing policy with critical ethical and normative bearings, means engaging explicitly with the politics and ethics of knowledge production, returning to the idea of knowledge as performative and reflecting on the performative effect of trade-offs, compromises and re-framings. For instance, what might certain trade-offs or compromises mean for how an issue can be represented and understood, how might this understanding shift the policy practices likely to be considered, how might this close off other action possibilities, and how do these gel with critical ethical and normative aspirations? Approaching policy research as a context for situated knowledge production provides a compelling framework for integrating ethical and normative integrity, alongside professional integrity (proficiency, rigour, technical and analytical skill, adherence to formal institutional ethics protocols etc) as a basis on which we can make distinctions between the trade-offs, compromises and re-framings that can be contemplated and those that can not. Of course, this is no simple undertaking and how it practically translates is, unavoidably, contingent on the particular contexts in which judgments and decisions are made (see Olson and Sayer 2009). But the point, expressed in terms of lessons for policy research, is that our reflexivity needs to be referenced to a definition of professional integrity that explicitly includes critical ethical and normative integrity.

The iterative and hybrid nature of policy research

Woods' narration of the research process involved in his team's Defra contract illuminates the iterative and hybrid nature of policy research, even where that work has

been commissioned with a prescribed brief. His account reveals a collaborative engagement with Defra: not a linear but a relational process of to-ing and fro-ing which enabled the prescribed research brief to be extended and refocused and the research design to be elaborated. And his telling reveals Defra and other stakeholders' openness and flexibility as they sought to fill gaps in policy ideas, cast about for answers, tried to balance conflicting demands and recognized opportunities to ask new questions. Yet, Woods' recognition of the moments of active critical praxis, wherein the policy agenda is shaped and critical ethical and normative concerns could be pursued, is rather modest. He recognizes these moments as 'work(ing) with the grain to extend and strengthen the critical dimensions and outcomes of the study', pushing critical political and academic agendas through the policy recommendations, and generating data to be fed into critical analysis in later academic publications. Yet there were multiple moments permeating the entire research process that Woods describes here that could be more fully recognised as collaborative, engaged instances with real potential for cultivating what Le Heron (2007) terms 'progressive knowledge spaces'. Fully acknowledging the potential of these moments as critical opportunities to (re)shape the framework for knowledge production strengthens the prospects of translating them so as to *reorient* rather than just *extend* the grain of the study. They are opportunities, in quite practical ways, to reformulate the policy questions or frame new questions, to generate new critical prisms and practical resources for knowing social processes and their outcomes and, in so doing, to recast policy priorities and open up new possibilities for interventions, governing technologies and management practices. These are moments of critical praxis that are not corralled to the latter stages of the research; writing the report, developing the policy recommendations or, indeed, taking data 'back to the academy' for critical analysis. They are present throughout the process Woods describes and they may secure more than 'incremental improvements' (p24) but translate into more radical challenges to the status quo.

Of course, it is important to remain clear-eyed about what can be achieved and to acknowledge that activating these collaborative moments towards critical ends is not easy. It is experimental and demands pragmatism, persuasion and confidence in an uncertain terrain. As Woods' narration demonstrates, it is likely to be more attainable if the researchers have established credentials and credibility in the policy research domain and can maintain good collaborative relationships with state actors. It may be possible in some scenarios and unrealistic in others. Woods' advice to be informed about the political context of the research is invaluable here. Some moments are more 'seizeable' than others (see Burgess 2005) and sensing when policy makers are receptive to new strategic frames and concepts rather than merely wishing to legitimate existing policy ideas can help distinguish these (see Healey 2008)¹. Even so, the attempt may fail, and even where it succeeds its outcomes may still be blunted by changing political priorities or lost in the policy cycle. These are permanent risks. Nonetheless, recognizing the potential for critical politics that lies in the iterative nature of the policy research process is a precursor to harnessing its possibilities for advancing a critical agenda.

The internally differentiated nature of states

Woods' account is testament to the internally differentiated nature of the state in two important regards. First, he recognizes its 'dispersed and complex nature' (p5) and, through his Defra experience, relates the differentiated political and programmatic interests, priorities and motivations across various scales, sectors and organizations. Second, he acknowledges the state as 'peopled' and reflects on how individuals' diverse expertise, educational and professional experiences and preconceptions inflected the dynamic evolution of the research context. To this I would add the diverse social and ethical norms that motivate these individuals and infiltrate their performances as state actors and, inevitably, infiltrate the research context (see Askew 2009).

¹ And this distinction would surely help researchers in being politically selective about which opportunities to engage in research with the state they might pursue and which they should not.

The state's complex and dynamic social terrain largely features in Woods' account as a source of complication and tension to be navigated within the research process. For anyone who has undertaken policy research with government, the reality of this is undeniable. Nonetheless, there is a sense too in which the state's very complexity is productive of opportunities for critical praxis. States are spatially differentiated, assembled networks of institutions and people, sets of knowledge and related practices and technologies (Larner et al 2007). They are works in progress. Their institutional coherence, sedimented as it maybe, is provisional: a contingent achievement. As such, and as Woods' experience reflects, states are multi-vocal, addressing multiple projects. Their institutional capacity is unable to be easily aligned to singular ideologies or political projects. On the one hand, this represents complications that policy researchers must navigate but, on the other, it means that there are attendant opportunities to prise open 'progressive knowledge spaces' and to mobilize the normative and ethical sensibilities of state actors that already reside in the state and resonate with those of critical geographies. In any given piece of policy research the opportunities to work with this multiplicity may be limited or overwhelmed by structural elements and political imperatives. But the differentiated nature of the state suggests that policy research can do more than retain its critical integrity and, alternatively, can broker opportunities for critical praxis which, in the right circumstances, can actively expand state aims and objectives to propel the ethical and normative commitments of a critical human geography.

For better or worse, policy shapes society, economy, environment, community and self and is a powerful way to effect change across these domains. As Woods suggests, engagement with the dynamic policy process, then, must stay in our sights as one appropriate and potentially productive alignment for critical geographies. Indeed, I would extend on his position to suggest an orientation to policy research *with* (as opposed to *for*) the state in critical praxis: an engaged and politicised process of collaborative, situated knowledge production aimed at advancing critical ethical and

normative agenda. This relies on a recognition of states, first, as complex social terrains with intense institutional capacities and, second, as porous to intersections with critical researchers aiming to advance progressive policy interventions. Engaged policy research enables this intersection and it involves a dynamic, never simple process, the steps of which will not necessarily gel easily with the formalism of contracts that govern commissioned research. Resources are few to help us to think through this and other contingent challenges and to respond practically to the taxing repertoire this demands of researchers. Woods' piece makes an excellent contribution on this front and, I hope, will evoke further contributions on the possibilities, pitfalls and practicalities of critical policy research with the state.

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