P67 – Methodology workshop

Studying customer-orientation in the policies of a 'coercive' public service: Translation, genealogy and determining the scope of analysis

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Abstract (about 150 words): The methodological question presented in this paper concerns how to analyse how a particular policy principle or idea—namely the principle of 'customer-orientation'—is translated into the operational policies of a 'coercive' (i.e. regulatory) public service. In particular, I am interested in discussing how far back and in what level of detail I ought to trace the ideas, techniques or 'style of thought' that underpin the customer-orientation policies of the service that I am studying. I present two possible approaches to addressing this question in order to orient and facilitate discussion: one that focuses on the translation of policy ideas/discourses within and between particular governmental organisations; and another that focuses on the genealogy of the style of thought employed in particular policies or reforms. I conclude by describing how these approaches have informed my research to date and the questions that they pose for my research going forward.

Keywords (5 to 8): translation; genealogy; problematisation; customer-orientation; coercion

The methodological question that I would like to discuss in this paper centres on the issue of how policy ideas, discourses, techniques, etc. are translated into operational policies and practices by particular public service organisations. In particular, I am interested in discussing how far back and in what level of detail researchers ought to trace the ideas, etc. underpinning particular policies. I have identified at least two approaches that might help us to respond to this question. The first, suggested by Newman & Clarke (2009: 20), encourages us 'to consider how [policy] is multiply re-interpreted, re-inflected and re-assembled in specific settings as it moves from central government to local governments or provider organisations, or from the realm of senior managers to the offices, wards and stations where it is practised'. This approach requires tracing a rather detailed chain of translations over a relatively short distance, potentially remaining with the boundaries of a particular institution or governmental complex. Alternatively, a second approach encourages us to go

beyond such boundaries and, as Collier (2011) suggests, trace the genealogy of the 'style of thought' that characterises the particular policy or reform that we are analysing. This may not entail examining every link in a complex chain of translations, as suggested by Newman and Clarke (2009). However, it does require undertaking a much longer genealogical analysis to determine how a particular mode of thought or 'problematisation' developed and how it came to underpin the policies or reforms in question.

My interest in this question emerges from my PhD research, which is based on an ethnographic study of the Compliance and Regulatory Services (CaRS) branch of the Brisbane City Council in Australia. The study focuses on a recent attempt by the CaRS branch to improve their relations with the public that they regulate by instilling 'customer focus' in the practices of their frontline compliance officers. Originally restricted to the private-sector, customer-orientation discourses and techniques now pervade the managerial strategies of many public service organisations (Rosenthal & Peccei 2007), including 'coercive' public services (Aberbach & Christensen 2007), such as the CaRS branch. The use of customer-orientation in coercive public services raises a number of questions due to a) the centrality of compliance and enforcement to the 'services' that they provide; and b) the ambiguity surrounding who exactly counts as their 'customers'—offenders, complainants, communities, and/or the public *in toto* (Aberbach & Christensen 2007; Alford & Speed 2006; Clarke 2009; Sparrow 2000)? Hence, my research aims to answer the following questions: How is customer-orientation understood within a coercive public service like BCC's CaRS branch? How is it employed in attempts to reconfigure how coercive services are delivered? And what discursive resources (ideas, principles, styles of thought) are drawn upon in this process and from where are these derived?

The problem that I raised above affects how I might respond to each of these questions but has particular salience in relation to the last question. Thus far, I have lent more towards the first approach sketched above (Newman & Clarke 2009). That is, I have engaged in a detailed analysis of how a policy idea—i.e. customer-orientation—is translated over a short distance between organisational units, thus confining my analysis within the boundaries of the BCC institution. Specifically, I employed ethnographic methods to collect and analyse data on how the CaRS branch translated a set of relatively generic customer-orientation policies designed for BCC as a whole into its own programme of reform. My analysis concentrates on how the CaRS branch draws on the discursive resources contained in the BCC policies to problematise specific issues arising within its day-to-day regulatory operations. For example, I examine how CaRS uses these resources to problematise the large volumes of complaints and appeals it receives from 'customers' as the product of poor customer focus amongst its frontline compliance officers. I also examine in detail how these discursive resources are translated into strategies for instilling customer focus in the enforcement practices of staff; for example, by training them in how to educate 'customers' about local laws and how they are regulated.

As my central aim was to understand how customer-orientation is translated in the unique context of a coercive public service, examining how BCC's broad customer focus policies are drawn upon by the CaRS branch may in fact be sufficient for answering my research questions. Indeed, BCC's policies are relatively generic (necessarily so, as they are designed to be relevant to all its various branches) and thus required extensive translation by the CaRS branch to orient them to the conditions that characterise coercive services. Thus, examining how the CaRS

branch took up these policies captures the point at which customer-orientation is translated in relation to these unique conditions.

Yet, this approach may not be sufficient for understanding how the customer-orientation policies employed by BCC—and, subsequently, the CaRS branch—relate to broader developments in the government of public services. Indeed, it is not clear whether BCC's customer-orientation polices rely on a style of thought or problematisation that also informs the policies and practices of other coercive public services or public services more generally. In order to grasp this in a satisfactory way—and to avoid the problematic tendency of some studies to simply compare their empirical observations to the private-sector/new public management ideal of 'customer sovereignty' (e.g. Clifford 2012; Fellesson 2011; Rosenthal & Peccei 2007)—it appears one would need to employ the second, more genealogical approach described above (Collier 2011).

Thus, the question that confronts my research going forward is whether I need to incorporate a genealogical component into my analysis—which, as stated, has to date focused on intra-institution translations of customer focus policy—in order to establish its relevance to the study of customer-orientation policies more broadly? As I am well into the final year of my PhD, I do not take this decision lightly. Indeed, undertaking a genealogical analysis now will certain extend the time required to complete my thesis beyond my existing timeline. However, if undertaking such an analysis will improve the quality of my research then it will be worth the extra time. I look forward to discussing this issue in Lille.

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