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Theorising the Intersection of Public Policy and Personal Lives through the Lens of ‘Participation’

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Abstract

The continued interest in political economy-inspired perspectives on economic and social policies is an attempt to understand policymakers as human beings who are influenced by values, votes and other factors that were once thought to be exogenous to policy choices. However, there is still little theorising about those on the other side of the policy equation. This article seeks a better understanding of how ordinary people engage in a very personal way with policy.

I present a model of participation grounded in empirical research with members of a poverty-reduction project in Ghana, and a conceptual framework informed by an interpretive or sense-making approach to policy analysis. The model is based on the three principles of ‘subjectivity’, ‘temporality’ and ‘situatedness’: First, human beings make subjective interpretations of policy grounded in their life histories; secondly, temporality is an inherent aspect of how individuals cognitively organise their lives; and thirdly, people experience policy as one of many overlapping contexts in which they are situated.

Résumé

L'intérêt continu pour les perspectives sur les politiques économiques et sociales inspirées par l'économie politique est une tentative visant à comprendre les décideurs en tant qu'êtres humains influencés par des valeurs, des votes et d'autres facteurs que l'on pensait autrefois exogènes aux choix politiques. Cependant, il y a toujours peu de théorisation concernant ceux qui sont de l'autre côté de l'équation

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politique. Cet article cherche à mieux comprendre comment les gens ordinaires s'impliquent dans les politiques d'une façon très personnelle.

Je présente un modèle de participation ancré dans la recherche empirique avec les membres d'un projet de réduction de la pauvreté au Ghana et un cadre conceptuel informé par une approche interprétative ou de construction du sens (*sense-making*) de l'analyse des politiques. Le modèle est fondé sur trois principes : la subjectivité, la temporalité et la situationnalité (*situatedness*). Premièrement, les êtres humains font des interprétations subjectives des politiques ancrées dans leurs histoires de vie ; deuxièmement, la temporalité est un aspect inhérent de la façon dont les individus organisent cognitivement leur vie ; et troisièmement, les gens vivent la politique comme un des nombreux contextes qui se chevauchent, dans lesquels ils sont situés.

Introduction

In the constant and often unsuccessful quest for paradigms of development that work, policymakers, researchers and practitioners have come to agree on a few basic principles. Perhaps the most self-evident of these is the idea that development should be fundamentally about people.

The concept of participation designates human beings – their priorities, knowledge, assets and well-being – as the focal point of development. Participation encourages the recognition of ordinary people (erstwhile 'beneficiaries' and 'targets' of policy) as social actors who exercise agency in cognition and behaviour and who, to a large extent, determine the success or otherwise of any policy intervention. This article however points to the limitations of participation, as currently conceived and practised, to fully account for the complexity of people's cognitive and behavioural interactions with policy. It offers an alternative interpretation of participation as individuals' patterns of involvement in a policy intervention based on how they make sense of that intervention within the multiple and layered contexts in which they live.

The article is based on a qualitative study of the Nhyira Beekeepers' Association,¹ an income-generating project in the Afram Plains District, funded by the Social Investment Fund (SIF). The SIF provides financial and technical resources to 'community-based' organisations to diversify livelihood options for the poor and to provide them with increased income through various income-generating activities. The SIF in Ghana is a local version of a standardized development programme of the World Bank. It is therefore very much a conventional project, in that it incorporates many of the themes of current development discourse, including poverty reduction through community participation (cf. Anyidoho 2005). I use as primary data multiple interviews and observations of twenty-five out of twenty-seven members of the Nhyira Beekeepers' Association, as well as interviews of SIF and local

government officials, and residents of the district. The data were collected during fieldwork between 2003 and 2004; follow-up interviews were conducted with SIF officials in 2005.

The Concept of Participation

Participation is a process of involving ‘socially and economically marginalised peoples in decision-making over their own lives’ (Guijt and Shah 1998:1). Participation is an attempt to correct the traditional top-down approach to development policy and programming where those whose lives are most influenced by these processes have the least say in policy making and implementation (Chambers 1983, 1997).

Despite its ubiquity in both development discourse and practice, participation lacks clarity as a concept (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Guijt and Shah 1998; Kapoor 2002; Parfitt 2004). What is missing in the literature is a systematic understanding of how people conceive of and enact participation in practice (Cornwall 2002:10). Even though many studies have shown that policy ‘targets’ may interpret policy in ways that are at odds with the way policy is articulated by policymakers and practitioners (e.g. Bledsoe and Banja 2002; Buvinic 1986; Mosse 2001; Schroeder 1999; Smith 1999), we lack an empirical-based model to explain how people actually construct their participation (Mosse 2001; Cornwall 2002). This article applies a sense-making approach to participation in order to understand the process by which people make meaning of the goals and benefits of a development intervention, which is a necessary first step to understanding how they pattern their participation.

Insights from a Sense-making Approach to Policy Making

A sense-making approach which studies the person-policy nexus acknowledges, as a starting point, that people impute meaning to policy (Ball 1993, 1994; Yanow 1996, 2000). A policy can contain a multiplicity of sometimes contesting ideas. People involved in the policy process as formulators, implementers or ‘beneficiaries’ latch onto specific intended or unintended meanings of the policy. A sense-making perspective, therefore, suggests that social actors engage in the policy process by deriving meaning from policy and acting on those meanings (Levinson and Sutton 2001).

In interviews, participants of the Nhyira project echoed the SIF brochures and policy documents in saying that the project represented for them a way to reduce their poverty. However, there was a second-order meaning of the project for its participants. By relating the project to their own perceived priorities, individual project members variously interpreted the income-generation project as an opportunity to gain supplementary income, alternative

employment, working capital and institutional access. Those interpretations led them to pursue diverse strategies and different patterns of participation within the same project (Anyidoho 2005).

In other contexts, the potential meaning of the project might be different from the categories that were found in the Nhyira group. In other words, the meanings from the Nhyira project may not necessarily be generalisable to other projects. However, certain principles of sense-making are theoretically generalisable from the Nhyira findings. I propose that we can understand how people enact participation through the application of the concepts of subjectivity, temporality and situatedness.

Subjectivity

The theme of subjectivity encourages an exploration of all that shapes individuals' understanding of a policy intervention and consequently shapes their actions within it. This means going outside the usual policy spaces in which we examine participation, and also going beyond the usual variables of gender, age, income and education that are conventionally used to explain variations in people's perspectives and actions. Finally, the principle of subjectivity recognises the importance of the individual-in-community.

On the first point, participatory methodology usually involves public discussions and activities around specific projects. Yet lives are not so easily demarcated. As Cleaver (2001) points out, there are other, non-formalised spaces in which policy is negotiated. Cleaver advocates, therefore, a careful exploration of the 'non-project nature of people's lives' (p. 38). A sense-making approach accounts for the connections that people make between public and private spheres of experiences. From this perspective, policy is always experienced and interpreted in the context of 'whole lives' (Lewis and Maruna 1999). In my work with the Nhyira group, I included life narratives in my set of research instruments, the underlying theoretical assumption being that life is invested with meaning, purpose and direction within a narrative framework (Maruna 1998; McAdams 1993, 1995, 2001). Through narratives, people fit pieces of their lives together in a somewhat coherent whole, exploring cause and effect, and imposing meaning and significance on, or deriving meaning from, situations and events. Within these life narratives, the income-generating project in which individuals were involved assumed its proper place and meaning, which were sometimes at odds with the meanings and priority that SIF officials presumed it would have.

Secondly, indicators such as income, age or marital status, though important, may not adequately reflect people's relationship with policy, nor can they explain differences in response to policy among individuals. Admittedly, there are some approaches that attempt to account for individual

variations and plurality; for instance, the influential human development approach recognises that persons who are differently positioned in terms of economic and social assets respond differently to development interventions. In fact, a salient theme of Sen's (1999) seminal work on the human development perspective is that individuals are unequally situated in terms of human capital or capabilities and, consequently, in their ability to take advantage of opportunities for self-improvement. Indeed, in my own study of the Nhyira Beekeepers' Association, I found that the core characteristics of well-being often modelled as human capital were important in how people explained their participation. Members tended to vary in their approach to the project according to the assets of money, health and education available to them. There were people whose age (and attendant health concerns and family pressures) limited their options for improving their standard of living. However, I also found that the impact of these attributes on their interaction with the project was mediated by their sense-making. Therefore, even members who were similar in terms of age, material possessions and so on, perceived different moments of opportunity in the income-generating project (cf. Anyidoho 2005). Thus, a person's mode of participation in the enterprise of development is not a neat function of his or her social characteristics and economic assets, important as these are; it is also by 'emotions, experiences, interpretations, individual longings and identities' (Lewis and Maruna 1999:233).

Finally, paying attention to subjectivity implies paying attention to the individual. Development theory usually presents a composite picture of the 'average man', 'vulnerable women' or 'the rural poor' (Kabeer 1994). This translates into a tendency for researchers and practitioners to make, at most, cursory acknowledgement of the individual and then straight away to 'codify the translation of individual into collective endeavour' as the basis for intervention (Cleaver 2001:40). This is particularly true of participation, which is usually spoken of in reference to community (Cleaver 1999). Addressing agency and meaning at the individual level forces us to see participants as people, rather than as a part of some imaginary community. It also forces us to grapple with the complexity of individual agency beyond facile models of the rational man whose decisions are based purely on self-interest or the 'social being' who subjects his/her will and preferences to the good of the group (Cleaver 1999).

The objection to highlighting individual subjectivity may be that policy is not made on a person-by-person basis, and that it is, therefore, impractical to do policy research at the level of the individual. There is indeed a place for groups, and in fact, sense-making is as much a property of the group as it is of the individual (Yanow 2000). However, my arguments about individual

subjectivity act as a corrective to the inordinate weight given to groups and organisations in the development literature. Moreover, some attention to the individual supports policy making by giving insight into the lives of the individuals who make up the aggregate.

Another possible critique could be that the attention given to individual subjectivity de-emphasises the power of collective interest to motivate collective action (Cleaver 2001; Francis 2001). This is a concern especially for researchers eager to promote participation as a counterbalance to stifling mainstream development paradigms, and who see the fulfilment of this potential through harnessing the power of the masses. I would argue against this notion that attending to individual sense-making implies a neglect of the collective. An appreciation of individual sense-making merely suggests that it can be dangerous to prescribe and proscribe the basis for collective identity and action, as the discourse on 'community participation' tends to do (Anyidoho forthcoming; Cornwall 1998).

Temporality

Policy makes false assumptions about predictability and stability in policy implementation. The reality is that some level of fluidity is the normal feature of implementation contexts, as a result of changing policy, the vagaries of life, and the dynamism of socio-cultural, political, national and global settings. All this implies that sense-making is a continual process.

Studies on policy implementation, using a sense-making perspective, have put forth the idea that policy is continually being formulated. Policy is therefore presented as an iterative process rather than linear progression from formulation to implementation and then evaluation. In other words, policy changes across settings and over time (Hill 2001; Lin 2000; Levinson and Sutton 2001; Spillane 2004). What has not been adequately explored is the fact that the understanding of policy changes over time even for one person or within one group. In my interviews with members of the Nhyira project, I elicited retrospective accounts of how people's understandings of the project were modified in the course of the project. I found that changes in meanings could be triggered by changes in people's life circumstances. For instance, when a young carpenter in the Nhyira group, who was very involved in the SIF project because he was unable to make a living off his main occupation, found an opportunity to work with a construction company in the city, the role of the project in his life shifted from a primary income-generating venture to a means of obtaining additional income. More often than not, however, the revisions in the way that individuals made sense of the project were a response to changes in rules about organisation, membership and requirements for obtaining funds, and these changes were largely due to the fact that the Social Investment Fund, which initiated and

funded the Nhyira project, was in flux in terms of its own organisation, personnel and funding (Anyidoho 2005).

Temporality is an important concept in our understanding of how people construct their participation because of the unstable policy and circumstances in which 'participants' live. Many of the 'targets' of development projects are the poor and the vulnerable whose lives tend to be characterised by a great degree of uncertainty. In the case of the Nhyira group, this instability was compounded by the fact that its primary means of livelihood was farming which is greatly dependent on the vagaries of the seasons and climate. It is also true that the usual 'beneficiaries' of these kinds of projects live in developing countries which are very much influenced by patterns of funding and development discourse by donors and influential development 'partners' which are also subject to much variation over time.

Situatedness

It is a truism to say that people live out their lives in many contexts and at many levels, fanning out from interpersonal (family) to wider societal and global settings (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998). Richard Chambers, the godfather of participatory methodology, has sometimes been criticized for over-privileging community-level processes (Kothari 2001) and thus losing sight of the background contexts that shape how people respond to policy. Policy making in development or any other arena involves actors variously positioned in social, economic and political systems, and with differing amounts of resources with which to push their interests (Brock, Cornwall and Gaventa 2001). Yet, conventional accounts of participation do not do justice to the political nature of social relations among the various actors in the development process (Cleaver 2001; Cooke 2001; Mosse 2001; Cornwall 2002; Williams 2004). Power is a factor in the micro-politics of interactions among participants, and between participants and development officials. Power is also a feature of the institutional, national and transnational settings within which these micro-level interactions take place.

Whether individuals are conscious of it or not, the meanings that they make about themselves and their dealings with policy are influenced by cultural conventions about form and genre, and about what constitutes a good story (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; McAdams 2001; Silverman 2000). Therefore, 'individual narratives are [always] situated within particular interactions, and within specific social, cultural, and institutional discourses' (Coffey and Atkinson 1996:62). For the above reasons, there are limits to the reasoned agency of individuals or communities, which cannot solely determine the direction and outcome of policy. Action at the local level, while vitally important, cannot be a substitute for effective policy at the

national and international level. Participation should not, therefore, be an excuse to shift the responsibility for development, or the blame for its failures, onto the shoulders of ordinary people, as is always the danger (Amanor 2001; Williams 2004).

In general, the concept of situatedness extends prior research which demonstrates that people do not arbitrarily impute meaning to policy, but that their interpretations are shaped by the context of their lives, as well as wider social and cultural influences (Spillane 2000). However, in previous studies in this area, the attempt has been to explain people's professional lives in institutionalised spaces by inserting aspect of their 'private' lives into the policy space (e.g. Drake 2001; Martinez-Flores 2004). I argue that it is a conceit of policy research to assume that policy is marked off in this way within people's lived experience. This study advocates a shift in standpoint so that the context of making sense of policy is the broad landscape of a person's world, within which there are no artificial boundaries between the private and the public.

Conclusion

This article presents participation as what happens when people negotiate multiple spheres of experience. People participate in projects within the flow and logic of lives-in-progress. I have presented this negotiation between individual lives and public policy as an important, continual process that takes place against the backdrop of uncertain life circumstances and shifting policy discourse and practices.

This perspective should change what we expect to see of participation as observable behaviour. In the Nhyira project, individuals patterned their participation on the meanings that they made of the project. From that perspective, non-participation in a specific project for a time did not necessarily imply disengagement with the basic enterprise of development, and entries into and exits from development projects were not always signs of disinterest or lack of commitment among participants (Anyidoho 2005). Individuals are simultaneously engaged with many different contexts, meaning that they are 'only ever partly enrolled in the projects of others' (Long, quoted by Cleaver 1999:606). Further, since variability marks both personal lives and policy, people will constantly reassess their challenges and opportunities, and renegotiate their participation. This perspective is largely missing in discussions about participation. In the current literature, inconsistent participation might be ascribed to lack of commitment or to heavy workloads and other constraints. It is helpful to realise that discontinuous patterns of participation may also be due to people's exercise of what Sen (1999) calls reasoned agency in the face of the instability of lives.

Note

1. The names of all persons interviewed have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

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