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# Social geography: seven deadly myths in policy research

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## I Introduction

This third and final review of action-orientated research in social geography focuses on policy research, an area which has seen most commentary in recent years (Peck, 1999; Banks and MacKian, 2000; Massey, 2000; Martin, 2001; Dorling and Shaw, 2002; Lee, 2002; Imrie, 2004; Ward, 2005). Despite this attention, much of it from social geographers, examples which are illustrative of themes in this debate are noticeably absent (Imrie, 2004). The first intention of this review is to highlight some recent work in social geography. Second, based on this overview, I want to fracture some of the assumptions which resurface in the wider debates. My argument is that, when it comes to policy research, it is as though poststructuralism never happened. Rather than being another easy-come criticism of those engaged in policy research in geography, this is a critique of the way others continue to categorize, dualize and stereotype what is done by policy researchers. Third, I will suggest that the 'policy turn', a parochial concern in itself, has so far failed to provide much material support for geographers doing this type of research.

A clutch of recent papers has at last unpicked the notion of 'relevance' (Imrie, 2004;

Beaumont *et al.*, 2005; Ward 2005). In a persuasive and nuanced account, Staeheli and Mitchell (2005) identify the ways in which geographical relevance is socially and politically constructed. Rather than repeat these arguments, I will just comment that 'relevance' has become overused – indeed subject to almost wholesale alliance within critical geography (itself subject to almost wholesale alliance in human geography) – so that it is no longer very useful. The term is at once subjective and in theory applicable to everything (Dorling and Shaw, 2002). Instead, in focusing on action-orientated research, these three reviews have placed value on engagement and the impacts which social geographers' research has outside the academy, exploring different strategies for understanding and maximizing these impacts, and the issues for scholarship which are thrown up along the way.

Policy research, as Ward (2005) outlines, is not just about working with policy-makers. I have previously discussed how social geographers engage with activists and community groups (Pain, 2003a; 2004). Here the focus is on research which is intended to have reasonably immediate impacts on social policy.<sup>1</sup> This varies greatly in approach, but, while

one stereotype of policy researchers concerns their acquiescence to policy-makers, much of social geographers' work across the spectrum constitutes what we might more properly call counter-policy research.

The review is organized around seven deadly myths about policy research, which I argue are disabling the contributions which geography can make to policy and which engaging with policy can make to the discipline. I present these as a set of dualisms. While the wider commentaries have raised some important issues, their representations of geographers' work have not always matched the diverse meanings and materialities of geographical practice. This more optimistic slant on the debate is not to deny the problematics of policy research for critical geographical praxis which many have pointed to.

## II Freedom versus responsibility

Many social geographers have argued that we have moral responsibility for tackling the social problems which lie at the heart of the subdiscipline (Cloeke, 2002; Dorling and Shaw, 2002; Gregson, 2003; Fuller and Kitchin, 2004; Kindon, 2005; Morrison, 2006). They place different emphasis on how we might approach the task, but across the spectrum there are many of us whose work is funded by, or who otherwise collaborate with, policy-makers, and one of the questions we face is about prejudicing academic liberty. Given the increasing pressure from many universities to undertake contract research, the concern is that this involvement places us in policy-makers' pockets, financially and politically. As Barrett *et al.* (2002: 325–26) reflect from their experiences of acting as consultants on rural development, serving the community 'begs questions as to who the community is . . . getting something done is not the same thing as effecting meaningful change; it may rather serve to reproduce existing problems and power relations'.

Typically, though, social geographers work with and for policy-makers and maintain

independence and strong critiques. Bingley and Milligan's (2004) study of children's experience of woodland, mental health and well-being undertaken for the UK Forestry Commission demonstrates there can be support for critical research which takes a very different approach to that traditionally associated with policy research. Equally, findings from an innovative research project led by Wills (2004) on policing and community safety, which engaged undergraduate students as researchers, are now being used by police, community organizers and the Greater London Authority.

Social democratic governments in Europe and New Zealand have provided greater opportunities for evidence-led research (Imrie, 2004; James *et al.*, 2004; Beaumont *et al.*, 2005; Burgess 2005; Morrison, 2006). Cummins (2003) outlines the host of recent UK government initiatives which geographers interested in health and social welfare might engage critically with, while policy debates using the language of social exclusion, social capital and community offer opportunities for social geographers to challenge particular conceptualizations (Morrison, 2006). For example, Goodwin and Armstrong-Esther (2004) report on an action research project which investigates social capital as it relates to health among young people. Burgess (2005) has worked extensively with policy-makers on social inclusion and urban nature agendas. Social policy on gender issues is expanding in many countries, and feminist geographers have critically examined how such policies define and address gender issues, and how researchers engage with them (see Klodawsky and Preston, 2004, for an overview of international work). England (2003) examines gender discrimination and ableism in employment equity, while Momen (personal communication) is developing a gender atlas for development agencies to target work for women in Bangladesh. Social geographers are also well placed to ensure that the greater emphasis on consultation and participation is more than lip service in government

imperatives of listening to communities (Fuller *et al.*, 2003; Pain and Francis, 2003; Burgess, 2005). In a comparative study of counties in England and New Jersey, DiGiovanna and Leyshon (2004) are working with policy-makers as well as young people with the aim of improving mechanisms for including young people in community planning.

Of course, such engagement must be carefully managed so as not to be 'swept along, almost uncritically' (Imrie, 2004) and ignore wider imperatives of social justice which such policies do not reach. However, while experiences of ruptured progress, failure to have impacts, and selective political use of work are well documented, these possibilities fail to deter many. Rather they are another element to be planned for and negotiated as part of the process of policy research, for example through deploying 'spaces of relevance' to navigate the complex and shifting relations between academy, the state and the wider public (Beaumont *et al.*, 2005). It is also worth remembering that the mainstream structures of successful geography (the demands of top journals and research council funding, for example) do not necessarily offer more freedom. There are not only differences in the potential for political impact if we work only through these structures: arguably there is less potential for negotiation about predefined imperatives.<sup>2</sup>

### III Exciting theory versus dull policy research

A second and related criticism is that policy research compromises the best of what we do: blue skies research driven by fascination which yields new theoretical insights. While the theory/practice dualism has been challenged, most recently by Imrie (2004) and Staeheli and Mitchell (2005), the mainstream structures of geography often place most value on high theory of particular sorts (Ward, 2005). Burgess (2005) speaks of the danger of being known, instead, for 'low practice'. Meanwhile it is anomalous that

highly topical and contested areas such as asylum and immigration have seen theoretical and methodological innovation but little grounded policy research (Spencer, 2001).

There is plenty of recent work in social geography which explodes this dualism. For example, in health geographies theoretical development is rapidly gathering pace, but a commitment to having direct impacts on policy remains. In research on changing geographies of care for older people, Martin *et al.* (2005) make an important contribution to debates around therapeutic landscapes and critical policy perspectives on community care. Cummins and Macintyre (2002) challenge the notion of 'food deserts' and the policy responses that have arisen from that assumption. The work of Smith and Easterlow (2005) on housing and health has led to major rethinking of geography of health inequalities that challenges both academic and policy constructions, and has also resulted in detailed policy recommendations taken up by various agencies (see British Medical Association, 2003). Bondi's study of voluntary sector counselling engaged policy actors throughout the project and produced substantial policy recommendations (Bondi *et al.*, 2003) while developing a new area of academic interest in the spatialities of counselling (Bondi, 2003).

Elsewhere there are also numerous examples. Walter *et al.*, (2006) retheorise whiteness based on research with Irish migrants to Britain, work which also resulted in a range of policy implications and engagements (Walter *et al.*, 2002). Turok and Bailey (2004) report on a major project examining urban social cohesion and competitiveness, which had strong operational links with policy-makers at each stage, an analysis which closely weds concepts and policy. Panelli *et al.*'s (2003) international study of women's fear in rural settings is a good example of critical feminist research which has significant policy recommendations (Panelli *et al.*, 2002). Critiques such as Warrington (2005) on constricted access to educational opportunities in the UK,

Boyer's (2003; 2006) gender, class and place-based analyses of contemporary US welfare policy, and Slater (2004) on gentrification rework established social geographical themes. As for the related concern of whether policy research can be truly emergent or necessarily dictates conclusions and outcomes in advance, researchers using participatory approaches have shown how to work towards the opposite, keeping outcomes open, responsive to research findings, and chosen and owned by researched communities (DiGiovanna and Leyshon, 2004; see Pain, 2004, for further examples).

The experience of many is that intellectual and theoretical arguments develop in and from political activity so that neither is separate or superior (Massey, 2002). Routledge (2004: 80) has recently argued for 'living situated theories in places beyond words so that reality becomes lived rather than merely an object of abstract study'. The differentiation between 'pure' and 'applied' geographies is a western one which does not apply in the same ways elsewhere (see Timar and Enyedi's 2004 discussion of differences in eastern European settings, which they relate to the prevailing political and economic conditions structuring academic work). The growing number of PhD projects in human geography in the UK cofunded by public, private or voluntary sector agencies is also testimony to the potential for close integration of theory and policy, as well as a healthy sign of the relevance and influence of human geography (Demeritt and Lees, 2005). When successful in meeting the challenging aims of such programmes, projects such as Askins' doctoral work on visible communities' use of English National Parks have resulted in a highly conceptual contribution to the discipline (Askins, 2006) and outputs which, after deep engagement with the policy community, result in tangible changes in thought and practice (Askins, 2004). But collaborative studentships undoubtedly make for a harder road to a doctorate (see Macmillan and Scott, 2003), and the lack of formal academic

training for such students, beyond the support of supervisors who may have experience of policy research, is startling.

#### **IV Academic versus activist**

Third, some have argued that being an activist, no matter what relationship with policy this might entail, conflicts with and compromises 'real' academic endeavour. Briefly – as I touched on in my first review – the work of, for example, Routledge (1996), Fuller and Kitchin (2004) and Ruddick (2004) effectively explodes this divide. There is no inevitable conflict between these roles, the performance of which often does not involve discrete actions or spaces. For Routledge (2004: 88), for example, 'these sites of struggle may be complementary at times, different fronts of resistance on which we as geographers can engage'.

#### **V Critical geographies versus applied geographies**

The fourth and fifth deadly myths about policy research are rumbling internally among those geographers whose work seeks an impact on social change. In setting out an agenda for radical research beyond the academy, Fuller and Kitchin (2004) set up a clear distinction between applied and critical geographies. Here applied geographers are seen as uncritical servants of the state, while critical geographers actively challenge the status quo based on an ideological stance which informs theory. But ideological and theoretical positionings which are against social inequality, alone, get us nowhere towards enacting them. For example, the bulk of work on children's geographies has honed understanding of children and childhood as marginalized identities but has had relatively little impact on children's lives (Smith, 2004; Smith's own work on childcare provision is one of the notable exceptions to this – see below). In some parts of geography a certain paper radicalism has become mainstreamed, while consultancy and 'applied' contract research may have more positive political impacts.

Moreover, this distinction is too clear-cut for a porous area of research and praxis, given there is plenty of critical applied research. The work of Barber *et al.* (2005) for the UK Department for International Development on 'making migration development friendly' is a high-quality, positive contribution to an area which tends to be policy- rather than migrant-led. The long engagement of social geographers at Brunel University on issues for out-of-school childcare provision, funded by government departments and local authorities, is an example of critical qualitative research which has direct impacts (Barker *et al.*, 2003; Smith and Barker, 2004). Coles and Barr's (2004) study of housing experiences and requirements to support development of a local authority Housing Strategy in southwest England exemplifies the potential for social geographers to use their skills and expertise to identify problems of social inequity and improve practice. Bebbington's research within the World Bank provides an example of how critical engagement inside what some might view as an instrument of the enemy can have a significant impact. The issues of debate and culture within organizations have a significant influence on how development projects are conceptualized, succeed and fail (Bebbington *et al.*, 2004).

I am not arguing here that anything should go in policy research, nor that ideological positioning is unimportant. Nor is this to deny the amount of uncritical applied research that exists. The point is that intentions are not enough alone, and there is a tendency for blanket dismissal of applied work which can do the work of critical geography effectively in some contexts. An interest in policy research is inevitably an interest in power and politics, and must mean addressing these in our own experiences and practices (Massey 2002; Lake 2003; Routledge 2004). These contexts, and therefore ways of working, can be messy (Pain and Francis, 2003), which leads onto the next deadly myth.

## VI The minister's ear versus grassroots change

There still exists a two-way elitism among those who work in a 'top-down' mode of policy research – ie, reporting directly to policy-makers, especially at a senior level – and 'bottom-up' research at grassroots level which involves working with community and interest groups to effect change (see the exchange between Blomley, 1994, and Tickell, 1995). The dualism is implicit in the recent writings of more mainstream researchers (eg, Martin, 2001) and the more radical (eg, Fuller and Kitchin, 2004). Where policy research is valued in the mainstream structures of successful geography, there is a certain scaling of what is viewed as the best route to making a difference (eg, McGrath, 2003): international is better than national is better than local.

In fact the report that gets the minister's ear (or lies on the assistant's shelf) may have far less impact than a carefully built and administered piece of local research which places emphasis on capacity building or is plugged into influential organizations and networks from the outset. Cahill's work with young women of colour in New York did both – it was a ground-up conceptualization based on their experiences of stereotyped identity-making and neighbourhood change, involving women in developing very practical strategies and recommendations, and in dissemination and presenting results widely to policy-makers after completion (Rios-Moore *et al.*, 2004). Beaumont *et al.* (2005) suggest that we need to rescale common notions of policy research, as potential spaces of relevance exist at various scales and in various institutional spheres well beyond government. Indeed, there are successful projects which work across scales; for example Pugh's (2005) work developing institutional capital in fisherfolk communities in the Caribbean, where local people act as their own development consultants, is supported by British High Commissions in the region (see also <http://members.aol.com/jnpugh/TitleGIF.htm>).

As Routledge suggests, deep local knowledge of our subjects has a political dimension too, and is often a necessity for informed and effective political action in other arenas.

## VII Powerful policy-makers versus benign geographers

Sixth, in assuming acquiescence among geographers who work with policy-makers, there is an assumption that policy-makers hold most power, despite different personalities, structures, contexts and sets of politics within policy-makers' arenas. All are working in hierarchical work cultures which mirror our own, and all have more or less influence. Bebbington's research with the World Bank uncovered a diversity of views on development issues and the Bank's role among its staff (Bebbington *et al.*, 2004). As Imrie (2004) notes, power has been under-theorized in these debates, and should be seen as reflexive and shifting. Experience of policy research is less 'us and them' and more a relational process which is always becoming, as geographers work between worlds (Routledge, 1996; 2004) in an 'endless moving between' ideas and policy (Massey, 2002: 645).

Relationships with policy-makers are also dialogical. Policy researchers write of a two-way flow of information and ideas (Burgess, 2005) which is sometimes unsettling but always sharpens theoretical understandings. Bryson (personal communications, 2004) speaks of this active, ongoing process in his research on addressing social and financial exclusion, which has impacted on EU and UK government policy. For Burgess, building good relationships is crucial for the development of mutual support for research goals. And then 'good research can also change the definition of what is 'relevant' to policy-makers' in a reflexive process (Burgess, 2005). Growing acceptance and promotion of research using qualitative and participatory techniques among policy-makers (see Bingley and Milligan, 2004) is one manifestation of this.

Of course, this dialogue may have negative effects too – in contrast to Martin (2001), Buck *et al.* (2005) suggest that fuzzy concepts may arise from engagement with policy rather than from failing to engage with it, and policy-makers may not want to hear challenging research. Beaumont *et al.* (2005) describe how local government members turned against the research they had commissioned when the findings became unpalatable, questioning its scientific basis and political bias. I have described similar experiences over several years' research with local government departments raising the profile of young people as victims of crime (Pain, 2003b). However, there is often a diversity of viewpoints within organizational cultures (see Lewis *et al.*, 2003), and it is possible to play on these differences and form strategic allegiances. Another tactic is to pursue alternative forms of dissemination to other influential people and wider communities (Pain and Francis, 2003; Beaumont *et al.*, 2005)).

## VIII Geographers as victims versus geographers as villains

Finally (and this is really sinking to caricature for effect now), a seventh deadly myth is the tendency to construct academics as victims or perpetrators in all of this. Castree (2002) and Imrie (2004) have both argued, reasonably, that there are limits to academic engagement beyond the academy because of growing pressures within. Imrie (2004) talks of the tendency of debates over policy research to 'blame the victim' and ignore constraints. Yet, collectively, we are responsible too – for being a part of unhelpful working cultures, for bureaucracy, for failing to subvert auditing exercises (Castree, 2002). One kind of activism facilitates another, and it is vital that identifying and working against these pressures remains part of our activism. 'Defensiveness and risk averse behaviour are inevitable consequences of the neo-liberal project to . . . drive intellectual endeavour into the current destructive, competitive struggle for so-called "excellence"' (Burgess, 2005).

Yet many social geographers are finding creative ways around this in seemingly un-supportive institutions, and becoming more willing, not less, to find new ways to engage with policy.

## IX Conclusion

There are signs that we are moving beyond the last decade's debates on policy research. In all three of these reviews my aim has been to look at what social geographers are actually doing, rather than considerations of whether they should be doing particular things. Their praxis quickly fractures the dualisms I have set up here. I do not want to end with an exhortation to do more. Hundreds are doing plenty. The problem is rather the recurring, sometimes short-sighted perspectives on policy research, reflected in hegemonic practices, structures and values of the wider discipline.

What would be most helpful are means of supporting new researchers who want to work this way (see also James *et al.*, 2004); we need less attention to whether and why, and more sharing of who does what and how. At present there is only a limited body of knowledge, no textbooks, no postgraduate training courses or workshops on how to approach and negotiate policy research. Although some are beginning to write about strategies, most do not write about process at all. While some seasoned policy researchers may be comfortable with a faint air of mysterious heroism, those new to it learn the same difficult lessons on a steep curve. So the call here is for forums, networks and texts which share the wealth of experience which exists, and research which is more illuminating about its own contexts and processes.

Finally, these debates are relatively parochial, mesmerizing the discipline in the UK in particular, if we are honest only partly owing to certain institutional constraints. The literature on policy relevance often tends to exclude already marginalized 'development' research and poorer regions of the world, reflective of the ways in which

Anglo-American geography represents its knowledges as 'global' (Gibson and Klocker, 2004; Willis, 2004). There is surprising ignorance of space and context in considerations of how policy research is shaped and operationalized at any scale (Timar and Enyedi, 2004). Many of these issues discussed here also underline the importance of understanding the complex ways in which power shapes and is reshaped by praxis. This would aid the sharing of strategies of resilience and ways of reworking policy research, which would be more enabling than simply resisting or dismissing involvement altogether.

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## Notes

1. As ever, trying to read off geographers' action from geography literature is problematic. I have augmented published accounts where I have been able to with reports and other dissemination formats, conversations and email. The review must be extremely selective, excluding much excellent policy research.
2. I am dualizing here to make a point: of course it is possible to be successful through these avenues and conduct critical, innovative and politically engaged research, but equally so with research funded by policy-makers.

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