Policy Discourses, Gender, and Education

Constructing Women's Status

Elizabeth J. Allan

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To My Family

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Some of the material and research findings reported in this book were also the highlighted in my 2003 article, Elizabeth J. Allan, "Constructing Women's Status: Policy Discourses of University Women's Commissions," *Harvard Educational Review*, 73:1 (Spring 2003), pp. 44–72. Copyright © 2003 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved. This article received the American Educational Research Association Division J Exemplary Publication Award in 2005.

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1 Introduction

Since the mid-1960s, gender equity issues in education have been a focus of public attention and academic research. During that time, much has been written about how related policy may enhance or thwart attempts to achieve equity. The complexity of the issues, however, is often obscured when reduced to either–or debates where the framing of policy problems is rarely called into question. Missing from these debates is a discussion of how women contribute to constructing their own status through policy development. Further, research rarely considers how well-intentioned attempts to advance equity policy may unwittingly perpetuate discourses and practices that reinforce *inequity*.

One purpose of this book is to provide readers with a useful framework for considering how policy efforts on behalf of equity can make use of discourses that may undermine their intended effect. As an academic who remains concerned about persistent problems of inequity facing women and other historically disadvantaged groups, I focus on gender/sex equity policy initiatives in higher education as a starting point for deepening conversations about equity policy research more broadly conceived. The framework I describe is a method of policy discourse analysis—an approach to policy analysis that works to uncover policy silences and make visible the powerful discourses framing policy initiatives.

Building on my earlier work (Allan, 1999, 2003), I delineate an approach to policy discourse analysis that works across tensions among feminist, critical, and poststructural theoretical frames to produce a method for analyzing the discursive shaping of policy problems, solutions, and subject positions. Typically, dominant discourses embedded in policy are normalized to such an extent they are rarely called into question. Policy discourse analysis illuminates these discourses to examine the discursive shaping of policy problems and solutions. In so doing, policy discourse analysis can be viewed as a method of *un*thinking as well as *re*thinking policy (Pillow, 1994, 2003).

The specific methods of policy discourse analysis emerge from the theoretical frameworks informing the approach. As such, it made sense to begin this book with an overview of these including: critical theory and Fou-

cauldian poststructuralism. These conceptual frameworks, particularly the latter, are often critiqued for their inaccessibility, which is frequently attributed to esoteric language that tends to characterize scholarship written from these perspectives. With this in mind, a primary objective in writing this book is to provide readers with a basic overview of how these theories offer helpful lenses for analyzing policy, gender, and equity, particularly in the context of education. Such an overview necessitates an important discussion about ways in which critical theory and poststructuralism are often considered at odds with one another. Poststructuralism, in its pure sense, is characterized by many as nihilistic and hence incommensurate with critical and feminist theories in which goals of emancipation are vital. In Part I of this book, I address these differences and explain how my work aligns with feminist scholars who have been working across the tensions of these theoretical frames to highlight different ways of analyzing equity policy and advancing social change.

Another objective of this book is to expose readers to the important work of university women's commissions, and in the process, provide a concrete example of how researchers might employ policy discourse analysis to analyze their policy-related initiatives from a different perspective. In Part II of this book, I describe predominant policy discourses of university women's commission reports. My analysis of these discourses derives from written texts of university women's commission policy reports produced at four U.S. research universities spanning 25 years (1971–1996). I chose to focus on university women's commissions, as they have been, and continue to be, a primary means by which women in postsecondary institutions formally address concerns and advance policy recommendations to achieve equity (Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Moore & Sagaria, 1993; Rossi & Calderwood, 1973).[1] The policy reports produced by women's commissions provide a valuable opportunity for investigating how women from these universities have constructed images of themselves in the process of policy-making, and in turn, how these images may influence and also limit thinking about equity attainment in postsecondary institutions.

Scholarly contributions are rarely, if ever, a solo enterprise, and this book is no exception. In writing this manuscript, I drew upon the recent work of many leading scholars across a range of disciplines who have contributed to feminist thinking about discourse theory as well as its uses for policy analysis: Patti Lather, Catherine Marshall, Wanda Pillow, Estela Bensimon, and Jill Blackmore in education; Judith Baxter, Chris Weedon, Sara Mills, Bronwyn Davies, and Jana Sawicki in women's studies, philosophy, sociology, and cultural studies; Mary Hawkesworth, Deborah Stone, and Carol Lee Bacchi in public policy are among the scholars who have contributed much to my thinking about the potential of analyzing policy through the lens of discourse.

Without the work of these and numerous others, this book would not have been possible. Many of the themes I share have been in circulation and

I make no claims that I am presenting a completely novel approach. I do believe, however, that this book offers a vital contribution by explicating a feminist poststructural perspective on discourse and sharing a specific method for applying a blend of critical and poststructural perspectives to policy analysis.

Since 1999, I have used the term *policy discourse analysis* to name the particular methodological approach I use for analyzing the discursive shaping of policy problems, solutions, and images. While policy discourse analysis draws upon theories and methods of discourse analysis, the use of that term alone does not convey its particular focus on policy. Thus, I rely on this term to signal that the approach I take provides an extension of traditional policy studies methodologies through an explicit focus on policy discourses. I return to discuss this rationale more fully in chapter 3.

My approach to policy discourse analysis aligns closely with, but is also different from, the work of others, including Marshall (2000) who used policy discourse analysis to analyze gender equity policy development in Australia; Baxter (2003) who uses the acronym FPDA to delineate feminist poststructural discourse analysis as a methodology; deCastell and Bryson (1997) who analyze gender equity policy in higher education; and Bacchi (1999) who employs poststructural perspectives in her "what's the problem" approach to analyzing the representation of policy problems. I will provide more detail about how the work of these scholars has influenced my approach later in this text; here I offer a brief sketch of where my method is situated in relation to these scholarly contributions.

Similar to many of the themes shared in this book, Marshall's (2000) analysis of gender policy in Australia builds on feminist perspectives and discourse-focused policy studies to trace ways in which dominant discourses and counternarratives operated to shape public perceptions about gender equity policy. As well, Marshall's earlier work, which is referenced in later chapters of this book, drew attention to the ways in which critical theory and feminist poststructuralism could be brought to bear on gender-related issues in education. Although it is not counter to Marshall's guiding philosophy, the approach I take differs, however, in that it provides a protocol for analyzing policy discourses using policy documents as the primary data source.

In much the same spirit as Judith Baxter's (2003) *Positioning gender in discourse: A feminist methodology*, I write this book as a contribution to a conversation about a newly emerging methodology informed by feminist poststructural discourse theory. I begin by describing ways in which policy discourse analysis works across multiple and often competing paradigms of inquiry. While the conceptual underpinnings of the methodologies I describe share much in common with Baxter's approach, they differ in the focus of their application. Baxter's FPDA is oriented toward discourse in speech, while my approach to policy discourse analysis is focused on the written text of policies (Allan, 1999, 2003; see also Iverson, 2005).

The perspectives I bring to this work also align with and build upon the thinking of Bacchi (1999) as shared in *Women, policy and politics: The construction of policy problems*. In that text, Bacchi draws on her expertise in public policy to articulate how her "what's the problem?" approach differs from conventional methods of policy analysis by emphasizing the importance of analyzing the representation of policy problems while more conventional methods are typically focused on arriving at better policy solutions. Like Bacchi, the approach I take with policy discourse analysis shares in foregrounding the importance of problem representation. As well, I also emphasize the discursive shaping of policy solutions and ways in which images of women are constituted via policy discourses.

In addition to those I've highlighted here, there are other feminist scholars contributing to the emerging field of feminist poststructural policy analysis. For instance, Wanda Pillow (2003) outlined a feminist poststructural genealogy approach to the study of educational policy related to teen mothers; Estela Bensimon (1995) employed feminist poststructural perspectives to analyze the total quality management (TQM) policies in higher education; as well, poststructural theories were used as lenses to examine discourses of imperialism (Rhee & Sagaria, 2004) and discourses of leadership (Allan, Gordon, & Iverson , 2006) circulating in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. While this book is partly devoted to describing the conceptual antecedents and imperatives for policy discourse analysis, it is not meant to supplant, or in any way minimize, the meaningful work of scholars who have been contributing to this important dialogue. More detail about how the work of these scholars has influenced my approach is provided in subsequent chapters.

The focused examination of university women's commission reports highlighted in this book emanated from my interest in examining women's policy-making efforts and the advancement of equity in the context of higher education. As a female academic and feminist, I believe I have personally benefited from policy changes galvanized by the work of women's commissions. Nevertheless, recent reports indicate that women do not yet experience "the benefits and pleasures of academic life to the same level and degree as presently experienced by men" (Billard, 1994, p. 115; see also Bradburn & Sikora, 2003; Conway, Ahern & Steurnagel, 2005; Knapp et al., 2004; Thacker, 2006; Valian, 2000, Wilson, 2004). Further evidence of this is marked by the fact that women's commissions in the 1990s and at the turn of the 21st century drew many of the same conclusions about gender bias and inequitable campus climates as were reached in their reports 20 and 30 years earlier (Blum, 1991; Wilson, 2004). Findings like these contributed to my curiosity about the policy-making initiatives and discourses of university women's commissions.

Committed to research as praxis,[2] my interest in discourse theory and its implications for policy-making led to me to consider how it might be possible (if at all) to reconfigure or strengthen commission strategies and the achievement of their goals. As Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1995) note,

the recent turn toward the analysis of discourse "owes much to the ways its analytic tools can be used to inform political practice and struggles" (p. 4). In sum, this book describes a methodology that can provide another tool for enhancing policy-making efforts of women's commissions and similar groups seeking to eliminate inequitable practices rooted in the structure of social relations.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The approach I delineate in this text emerges from tensions across critical and poststructural frames of inquiry and the ways in which I understand feminism to negotiate these differences. While both critical and poststructural perspectives share in the assertion that policy research should uncover assumptions hidden in the framing of policy problems, they also differ in their understandings of how hidden assumptions operate through policy and how (or if) policy can serve to subvert the *status quo*.

In formulating the questions that frame the research presented in part II of this text, I drew upon the increasing acceptance by social science researchers that documents not only record but also actively contribute to shaping culture. For example, university student handbooks reflect and transmit a dominant interpretation of the campus culture by explicating relationships, expectations, and consequences for behavior among members of the university community. Similarly, as formal university documents, women's commission policy reports are part of a larger body of text that provides the official history of institutions. As such, they not only reflect the culture experienced by women in academe, but they also contribute to the construction of that cultural reality.

Analyses informed by theories of discourse suggest that even policies designed to promote equity and advance women's status may unintentionally contribute to reinforcing the status quo (e.g., Bacchi, 1999; deCastell & Bryson, 1997; Iverson, 2005; Kitzinger & Thomas, 1995). According to Blackmore (1995), in order for women to effectively influence policy development, it is necessary to recognize how "they are being discursively positioned in any specific context and then decide upon how and whether they will intervene, interrupt or redefine" (p. 310). Policy discourse analysis provides an approach by which dominant (and taken-for-granted) policy discourses can be named and analyzed to determine how they may limit and even undermine attempts to advance equity.

KEY TERMS

Some of the terms and approaches I employ are not yet widely used in the field of education policy studies, and since discourse analysis represents an extension of traditional methods for policy analysis, it is important, at the

outset of this text, to explain terminology and concepts that are not part of the established lexicon of the field. Further, some terms, like *discourse*, require careful delineation because they are used across a range of academic disciplines and can be interpreted in ways that reflect slight or even considerable variations in meaning. Thus, I begin with discourse and then overview key theoretical frameworks informing policy discourse analysis.

Discourse

Discourse is a term frequently employed yet variously defined in academic contexts. Broadly, discourse refers to both spoken and written language use, and the study of discourse (discourse analysis)[3] includes the examination of both talk and text and their relationship to the social context in which they are constructed (van Dijk, 1997). The belief that discourses both reflect and shape the culture in which they are situated is central to the approach I take in this book. I concur with Riggins (1997), who contends that discourses "are artifacts of language through which the very reality they purport to reflect is constructed" (p. 2). Thus, discourses are dynamic constellations of words and images that are actively reinforced, resisted, and reconstituted.

More specifically, the approach presented in this book relies on discourse theories informed by the work of Michel Foucault. These theories, which will be described more fully in chapter 2, emphasize the discursive shaping of subjectivity (Mills, 1997; McNay, 1992; Weedon, 1997, 1999). My delineation of policy discourse analysis, and the study of commission reports is rooted in the understanding that "discourse is the key site for the social construction of meaning," and as such, "what people do in discourse overrides changes initiated at other levels" (Cameron, 1998, pp. 963–64). In this book, I highlight discourses of access, femininity, and feminism (chapters 7 and 8) and discourses of difference (including professionalism, race, and caregiving) in chapters 9 and 10.

Intertextuality, the ways in which all discourse is interpreted against a backdrop of other discourses (Marshall, 1992; Riggins, 1997), is used to convey the idea that discourse is socially situated. More than simply being a group of statements, discourse is a constellation of related statements that reflect and reproduce particular points of view (Fairclough, 1995; Mills, 1997; Weedon, 1997). As Luke (1995) writes, "discourses mark out identifiable systems of meaning and fields of knowledge and belief" (p. 15). For example, the social practice of schooling is often described through two predominant discourses. One discourse represents schooling as a force of empowerment and liberation for individuals and society, while another discourse frames it as an effective means of training good citizens and maintaining a well-ordered and controlled society. As evidenced by this example, discourses are never neutral; they always "reflect ideologies, systems of values, beliefs and social practices" (Hicks, 1995, p. 53). Building

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