

**WELFARE POLICY, PRACTICE AND ENERGY DEMAND**

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In this paper we set out our conceptual orientation and some preliminary analysis of UK welfare and employment policy in terms of it being an area of ‘invisible energy policy’. We use key examples from our analysis to illustrate some of the issues that have emerged for us in thinking about processes of change and steering. Our starting key questions inspired by the DEMAND position papers concern how we *can define, detect and understand change and steering within our empirical work*; and what *understanding energy demand as an outcome of practice* means for the kinds of questions we ask and *the ways that we conceive change and steering*. These are cross-cutting themes that run throughout the two position papers and form a broad orientating focus for the paper.

## **Introduction**

Many contemporary approaches to tackling issues of energy demand focus on improving technological efficiency and/or on encouraging behavioural change. The practice turn within energy research, however, highlights the need to engage with more fundamental questions concerning how our particular requirements for energy are constructed and reproduced (e.g. see Shove, 2004). Rather than focusing on improving the efficiency of technologies that support and engender particular kinds of practices, we are directed to examine the specification of need and the processes by which various forms of demand come to be considered normal. This raises important questions about the processes and dimensions of socio-economic-political life that influence trajectories of practice. Such questions connect fundamentally with issues of power and bring into view a need for practice theory to grapple with notions of governance, steering, and direction. Within some conceptual traditions, such notions might be situated as outside of practice, as some form of driver or external influence on social action. Understandings of social action consistent with practice theory, however, bring a different orientation, one which is more attentive to complexity and non-linearity, while also still recognizing processes by which practices are shaped and shifted.

In this paper, we address key issues that arise for understanding the role of governing processes, strategies, and policies in steering social action, with an underlying focus on questions of how change toward more just, socially inclusive, and less resource intensive configurations of practice could be achieved. We put forward a highly qualified concept of steering which none-the-less highlights how influence is exerted toward particular trajectories even where complexity and non-linearity create disconnects between intentions and the patterning of social life. For our case study we focus on an area of policy that has little explicit relation to energy but that has important implications for shaping practice; namely welfare and employment policy. As a case policy area it includes goals that have implications in terms of increasing energy demand (e.g. economic growth), reproducing particular patterns of demand (e.g. through employment policies), and reducing demand (e.g. across welfare policies such as for housing). It further represents a critical policy area for examining questions about how the requirements for energy are shaped and how the constitution of ‘need’ for energy intersects with welfare issues of social participation, poverty, and justice. On this latter aspect, it is possible to see that the same processes which create issues of high demand are generative of problems of under-use, access, and affordability. As these latter concerns are integral to poverty there are important implications for thinking about the wider welfare dimensions of reducing the need for energy in terms of both social participation and resource intensity that are brought more firmly into view through examining this policy area.

In the following section, we first set out previous research and conceptual issues relating to the notions of ‘steering’ and ‘change’ that we take forward. The paper offers a preliminary analysis of contemporary UK welfare and employment policy (legislation and discourse) in order to advance understanding of how social practice is and can be steered. We conclude reflecting on the insights that the analysis offers into the ways that we can detect and understand change, and issues concerning the relationship between practice theory oriented analysis, public policy, and social change.

## **Concepts: Practice Theory, Change and Steering**

### ***Practice Theory and Change***

First we attend to what a practice theory orientation means for how we conceive change and steering. Practice theory embeds particular conceptions of social action and change but also encompasses a wide range of differing specifications of the theory. From Bourdieu, to Schatzki, to Shove, different conceptions of practice consistent with non-dualistic understandings of the structure-agency relation have been delineated. Each has different implications for how we think about change. For Bourdieu, though not explicitly discussed in terms of change, his conception of social reproduction is fundamentally temporal. Bourdieu (1998) explains social reproduction in the following terms. He poses that objective social categories (such as the family) form the basis of corresponding subjective social categories – such subjective social categories are in turn the matrix of countless actions (such as marriages in the case of the family) that help to reproduce the objective social category. This cyclical relationship between the objective world we encounter, which is inculcated into our subjective mentalities and then enacted to reproduce the objective world, is what Bourdieu refers to as ‘social reproduction’.

Though the notion of social reproduction has been critiqued for bringing a focus on routine and continuity, Bourdieu’s notion of ‘disruption’ brings a way of thinking about change processes that challenge the status quo and take society in new directions. In discussing social reproduction Bourdieu points to the enactment of disruptive subjective social categories and actions that create challenges to socially reproduced ways of doing. Continuing with his example of the family he cites the processes by which the idea of staying married was broken down and actions of separation and divorce, as examples of rupturing in relation to objective structures of ‘family’. This offers then a way of thinking about change both as ‘continuity’ - through the gradual development of particular ways of doing broadly consistent with what has gone before - and as ‘disruption’ – through challenges that form in relation to socially reproduced ways of doing (see Butler et al. 2014). The forms of ‘action’ implicated in both disruption and continuity can be material as much as they are social, so the size of houses, for example, shapes the objective structure of the family.

In relation to Schatzki (2002: 234), this conception of change is broadly consistent with the idea that ‘constant doing must not be equated with change’; continuity can be seen as consistent with Schatzki’s notion of activities of maintenance, while disruption would be for Schatzki more aptly characterised as ‘change’, as this refers to subjective social categories and actions that ‘alter practices and orders more robustly’. Our take on a Bourdeusian conception of change differs

only slightly in that we position continuity as a form of change that sits in distinction from disruption, rather than reserving ‘change’ to refer only to a particular kind of disruptive event. Bourdieu’s conceptual discussion is particularly useful for our thinking on change and steering precisely because of the place he gives to the state and processes of governing in social reproduction. Central to his analysis, is a question about where objective structures come from; if objective social structures form the basis of subjective social categories that we inculcate and enact over time, this suggests a role for forms of influence in their formation. Added to this, is the space Bourdieu gives to ideas, as much as actions and materials, in processes of continuity and disruption. For us, this connects with the concept of framing and problematizing that has been advanced through governmentality theory, amongst other conceptual works (e.g. Miller and Rose, 2008; Dean, 2010). Such concepts speak more directly to questions of power and offer means for considering the influence of discourse and ideas (rationalities or ideologies) in shaping and delimiting the possibilities for action. This brings us from a practice theory inflected conception of change through to questions of how change is steered and, in particular, what the role of policy and governing bodies more widely is in such processes.

### ***Steering, Governance, and Policy***

Previous research has offered some insights into the role of policy in shaping practice with particular implications for energy demand. For example, Shove et al. (2012) provide an analysis of the Japanese Government’s ‘Cool Biz programme’ (whereby government buildings were not heated or cooled when temperatures were between 20-28 °C, instead office workers were encouraged to wear less formal business attire) to show how policy can exert influence to create change in practices, in this case resulting in lower energy use. Hand et al. (2005) show through a historical analysis how government campaigns related to health had influence in constructing particular conceptions of cleanliness that formed part of the process of making-up daily showering as a widely performed practice. In our own work using biographical interview methods (Butler et al. 2014), we have shown how government policies encouraging flexible labour intersected with personal lives to shape practices with implications for long-term mobilities.

These analyses and others (e.g. see Shove, 2015; Bulkeley et al. 2015) are suggestive of the influence of policy but also highlight how notions of control, prediction, and impact, along with underpinning principles of cause and effect, are illusory. Given that outcomes are rarely predictable or connected in linear ways, the possibilities for directing practice or change are thus inevitably constrained. Never-the-less processes of framing and the enactment of particular actions along with material developments do operate to delimit possibilities and can thus be wielded to exert (intentional) influence on practice if only with limited purchase on the likely implications. This requires, then, a different approach to conceptualizing steering; what is needed are concepts that can recognize the inevitability and importance of policy and governance ‘interventions’ in practice without ascribing a linear straight-forward notion of how such processes operate.

Here we combine the concepts of change derived from Bourdieu (discussed above) with complexity theory to highlight a non-linear, unintentional conception of change and steering,

which suggests that the process is one of generating social cues that create or negate possibilities for people to take up and reproduce or reinvent practices (see Butler et al. 2014). Such reproductions and reinventions become cues in and of themselves that can open up or close off further possibilities for change across the multiple dimensions of lived totality. To use our terms from above ‘disruptive’ forms of action contribute to the constitution of ‘spaces for thinking new thoughts, activating new actors, [and] generating new ideas within societies’ (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991: 161 cited in Urry 2010). Equally, forms of social action that contribute toward ‘continuities’ constrain the possibilities for novel courses of action and for new ideas to take hold in practice. Governing bodies including governmental organizations, but also the wider set of institutions that have roles in shaping public discourse and material developments, arguably have greater power to influence objective social structures, create social cues, and delimit actions. In understanding this, concepts of framing, problematizing, rationalities and technologies of governance are of use for analyzing how power operates through discourse and shapes both the possibilities for particular courses of action.

In brief, the concept of *problematizing* highlights how governing involves processes of *rendering things problematic* (Dean 2010; also see Miller and Rose, 2008). Problems are not pre-given, simply waiting to be revealed, but are constructed and made visible through complex processes of interaction. In contexts of liberal government, problems are often connected to some aspect of individual or collective conduct which must be made amenable to intervention. In order to relate the intrinsic links between a way of representing and knowing a phenomenon and a way of acting upon it so as to transform it, there exists an analytic distinction between ‘rationalities’ or ‘mentalities’ of government and ‘technologies’ (Miller and Rose, 2008; Dean, 2010). Rationalities are ways of rendering reality thinkable in such a way that it becomes amenable to calculation and programming. Technologies are assemblages of persons, techniques, institutions and instruments for steering and shaping conduct. This refers to all of the devices, tools, techniques, personnel, materials and apparatuses that enable authorities to act upon the conduct of persons individually and collectively, and often in distant locales. Miller and Rose (2008: 16) explain ‘rationalities and technologies, thought and intervention, [are] two in-dissociable dimensions through which one might characterise and analyse governmentalities and begin to open them up to critical judgement’. In this respect we find analytic possibilities within governmentality as a way to look at policy practice and understand processes through which social structures are generated and practices entrained.

In the following, we set out a preliminary analysis from our research on welfare and employment policy to work through some of these conceptual ideas. Below, we briefly discuss research methodology and the data sources that we draw on for the paper.

### **Case Study Area, Epistemology and Research Methods**

We selected welfare and employment policy with a particular focus on the UK Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) because some connections exist to the Department of Energy and Climate Change but it in no way has energy demand as a central part of its remit or explicit goals. As one of the largest government departments with connections across multiple other policy areas and the ‘highest spending’ of any Whitehall department, DWP represents an important and complex policy context. Recent changes in Government to Conservative/Liberal Coalition and

majority Conservative have seen the department become the focus of extensive and major reforms. This makes welfare and employment a fast changing and politically contentious area of policy that provides scope for examining impacts of policy change as they unfold. The department's policy priorities span pensions and the ageing society, welfare policy and reform, poverty and social justice, and employment. The connections to energy policy that exist are found in the role that DWP plays in delivering the winter fuel payment, as part of its policies relating to pensions and ageing society, and in providing proxy data for accessing the cold weather payment (i.e. the benefits received through DWP along with other criteria determine eligibility for the cold weather payment). In general though, and borne out through our research, energy demand does not form a core concern of the department.

Our methods for analysing policy and its implications involve; 1) systematic document review and detailed analysis of key documentary evidence; 2) in-depth interviews with actors involved in shaping public debate, policy-making, and/or policy implementation; 3) biographical interviews with people directly affected by DWP policies (e.g. those transitioning to universal credit as part of welfare reforms); and 4) discussion workshops with actors in policy and other governing bodies (e.g. industry, NGOs). For this preliminary analysis we examine discourse from the document review and evidence (1), and the qualitative interviews with actors involved in some way in policy development, implementation, critique or delivery (2), to give us a way into questions about processes change and steering.

### **Analysis and Discussion: Steering and change in welfare policy**

In the following we work with concepts of change and steering derived from social reproduction and complexity theory (outlined above), positioning change as both continuity and/or disruption to social structures. Our discussion is shaped at its core by questions about *framing and processes of delimiting possibilities for social action* through the propagation of particular ideas, rationalities, problematisations, and technologies. We examine the significance of problematizing and delimiting as a particular dimension of steering change, both as continuity and disruption. To start, we suggest a process of re-imagining problematisations could be helpful in opening up the range of ways that issues can be framed with attentiveness to socio-economic-ecological issues. We then move to discuss our data in terms of the insights it provides into current configurations of policy, and use this to engage with questions of applying practice-oriented forms of analysis within policy (see Shove, 2015).

### ***Welfare policy, problematisations and reimaginings***

To illustrate how processes of problematizing operate to delimit possibilities for action, we work through an example of welfare reform policy that pertains to issues of poverty, and offer a reimagining that highlights how things could be thought and done differently. Welfare has come to be explicitly problematized as in need of reform owing to high costs of welfare provisions and lack of 'need'.

Interviewee: "I suppose politically... that they've gradually over time managed to paint people on welfare as scroungers yet most of the people on welfare are actually working hard, or else they have a very legitimate reason for not working but they've managed to paint this thing... over a long period of time". (Interviewee Policy Delivery)

This process of problematizing has seen an explicit focus on working age benefits (as opposed to pensions or other benefits currently connected to older age such as the winter fuel payment). In this context welfare reform policies pertain to work and operate to frame problems of poverty in terms of ‘worklessness’ and as relating to the individual attributes of a person.

“**Entrenched worklessness** can leave children without a role model and contribute to and compound problems experienced by adults: mental health problems are more common among people who are out of work than those in employment, whilst large numbers of those claiming benefit experience problematic drug and alcohol use or have a history of offending. **Work is undeniably the best and most sustainable route out of poverty**”. (Reducing Poverty Indicators, Entrenched Worklessness, 2014)

This constrains or delimits the focus of policy onto strategies targeted at getting individuals into work as currently configured and addressing deficits in skills, ability, or willingness, through strategies and governmental technologies like work coaches.

“Your work coach may refer you to these schemes... you may do work experience to add some career history to your CV”. (Back to Work Schemes, 2014)

Before highlighting the implications of these particular problematisations for continuities or disruption in energy demand, it is interesting to reflect on the question of intention. It is possible to suggest that the framing of welfare in terms of worklessness or a lack of need is very much intentional, and propagated to create space through which particular courses of action become possible. Interviewees attribute agency in referencing ‘they’ (though it is not necessarily clear who this refers to) and problematizing is an active agentic process requiring some form of direction. This suggests some ground for interrogating intention in the processes of framing which contribute toward the delimitation of courses of action, even if intention is more problematic in discussing specific outcomes.

As currently configured, workplace practices contribute to particular patternings of demand in terms of peaks with regard to both domestic energy use and mobilities. The particular framing of problems of poverty in terms of work without questioning the structural patterning of work practices thus contributes to continuities in existing patterns of demand toward high dependencies on energy use. Problems of welfare dependency could equally be framed to include other structural and systemic issues, including access to work and workplaces, and issues associated with mobilities and travelling or moving to areas where workplaces are situated. Applying a lens of low carbon transition, however, they might be configured to challenge existing arrangements that contribute toward needs for mobilities, such as the separation between workplaces and homes and the social organisation of working practices more generally. By opening ways of understanding social problems it becomes possible to see and reimagine different possibilities for policy that more fundamentally challenge current structures pertaining to working patterns and forms of organisation that re-create high dependency on energy (e.g. in terms of mobilities).

In this case, one reimagining would be to unite the idea of work place hubs as a possible route to addressing high-energy dependencies (Spurling and McMeekin, 2015) with problems of poverty and worklessness (redefined as a problem that extends beyond individual characteristics). In their analysis of how practice theory might differently position arguments for policy change Spurling and McMeekin (2015) make an argument for the creation of ‘new spaces’ that could cater for new forms of interlocking between practices. They cite the examples of Liverpool Central Library and Kings Cross Hub as spaces which could facilitate abilities to work ‘from home’ in the same venue. In essence, one space becomes the working environment for multiple different employers and different forms of activity, and could diminish requirements for heightened mobilities while also addressing issues of energy intensity associated with high levels of home working.

Though neither Kings Cross Hub or Liverpool Central Library are currently configured with sustainability ends in mind, or even the reconfiguration of work, they provide indications of what might be possible if we sought to change interlocking practices of working, commuting, eating, and socialising to be radically different and ultimately less energy intensive (Spurling and McMeekin, 2015). Allied with concerns about worklessness, we can imagine that such reconfigurations could be created to address issues of poverty and a whole range of social issues, such as social participation. At present, such reimaginings of work are evident in pockets of action typically associated with companies such as Google and high tech industries (The Economist, 2013), but such forms could be applied (not to all) but certainly to multiple forms of work and explicitly configured with sustainability, poverty, and wider issues of social participation at their core.

Such a policy approach would direct efforts toward processes that challenge existing structures relating to energy consumption. The conception of change set out earlier in the paper suggests that this approach would not necessarily deliver change in a directed way but rather would operate to introduce ‘social cues’ that open up possibilities for particular courses of action. Indeed, just the recognition of and effort to embed ideas about low carbon transition, which are fundamentally about societal transformation, within processes of welfare reform would constitute a social cue.

So we can think about changes in policy – of which there are many readily identifiable examples – and how shifts in policies, strategies, and technologies of government operate to shape practice. We can highlight how problems and concomitant solutions could be formulated differently to open up novel possibilities for reconfigurations of practice that address multiple aims (e.g. resource intensity, social participation, poverty). But there are further dimensions to change visible through our research that speak to issues of mobilising these ways of thinking within the policy making process as currently configured. For the second part of this discussion, then, we use the example of welfare and employment policy to open up insights into current configurations of policy, reflecting on the challenges for more disruptive forms of change.

### ***Applying practice thinking within policy***

It is possible to identify forms of boundary work within the policy process and processes of framing which (intentionally) serve to delimit problems as being within (or outside) the remit of



different policy departments. One way in which this manifests is in processes of impact assessment through which government departments seek to understand the effects of their strategies on practice. Within DWP policy (and other policy areas), impact assessments can be taken as indicative of efforts to steer with intention and assess if goals are being achieved. They are potentially important for understanding current configurations of policy because they can be seen to entrain narrow understandings of what implications or impacts are, and formulate boundaries around particular policy areas or specific aims and goals.

Particular technologies of government, such as quantitative indicators, are utilised to ensure key aims are being met and these, in turn, have influence in shaping how processes of impact assessment are undertaken. For example, in relation to poverty the number of people in work is utilised as an indicator of meeting poverty reduction aims. This has implications for how issues are framed (as discussed above), for example, in confirming the relevance of worklessness for addressing multiple goals. But such technologies also operate to delimit the kinds of impacts that are considered as well as who the 'subjects' of policy are:

“they’ll (DWP) produce impact reports on each of the policies, sometimes you have to read between the lines, they’re sometimes a bit... when I first looked at the impact report on disabled people and I thought, “this doesn't seem right, I’ve worked out how much Universal Credit is going to affect disabled people and some people are going to be hugely worse off and yet they’re saying there’s no impact”, and then I noticed this tiny little reference underneath, “we haven't taken into account support for disabled people”, I thought how do you decide there’s no impact because you haven't taken into account the policy? (Interviewee Policy Delivery)

Here, it is possible to suggest that political factors (in this case pertaining to concern about perceptions of negative policy impacts on vulnerable groups) also play a role in the development of impact assessments. Crucially, though the activities of policy assessment as currently formulated act to bring a narrow focus on what and who is impacted by any given policy, rather than facilitating wider forms of reflection that seek to understand the ways that any one policy (in combination with many others) has implications for multiple social and political aims. Such processes of boundary setting and delimiting in the assessment of impacts are thus important for understanding the way that limitations (and possibilities) for considering multiple issues are made. Ultimately, current efforts directed at building insight into impact are likely to militate against consideration of longer-term or wider implications for other policy aims, beyond specific departmental goals. It is not only impact assessment in which we can find examples of boundary setting but also in the work that occurs to distinguish between policy areas and departmental goals.

“The Civil Service is still constructed in such a way as it defends its own bit of its own empire and is very unhappy about pooling resources. Particularly when as in areas like fuel poverty living adequately in a warm house and therefore saving on potential other social care expenditure. One department is seen as being responsible for actually making sure that you're keeping warm and that's an expensive commitment. And it's another department which is seeing the benefit of that from the fact that you are no longer calling

on them for emergency health support and so on and so forth. We just do not know how to manage to bridge that sort of stuff.” (Interviewee Charity – policy)

These legacies in the way departments are structured, responsibility and accounting is configured, and associated funding allocated, limit the possibilities for cross departmental working. Instead, they create imperatives for forms of boundary work that operate to diminish the possibilities for considering issues that have more fundamental implications across multiple dimensions of social life (like transformations to reconfigure needs for energy). This then, in our terms, is one part of the processes that influence how and why issues come to be problematized in particular ways, and is likely to institute tendencies toward continuities as opposed to disruption. There are particular legacies that concern *why and how* issues are framed. These legacies represent subjects for a second order of critical engagement that seeks to understand what needs to change within institutional structures to facilitate disruptive change, and take account of ideas that depart paradigmatically from existing policy.

### **Concluding Reflections**

We suggest that concepts from the governmentality tradition – problematizing, rationalities and technologies (e.g. Rose and Miller, 1992) – can be usefully combined with practice theory and notions of complexity (Bourdieu, 1998; Urry, 2010) to define, detect and understand change and steering within our empirical analysis. In particular, we have found these concepts useful for thinking about the range of actions and discursive strategies involved in problematizing in ways that create possibilities for some forms of practice while constraining those for others. They further give means for understanding steering in ways that can attune to non-linearity and the notion of ‘social cues’; a concept used here to offer a less prescriptive way of interpreting aspects of social life that influence the spaces for enactment of forms of practice that either contribute to continuities or can be seen as more disruptive.

For this preliminary analysis, we have discussed some of the explicit ways in which change and steering figures in our research; first steering is broadly evident in terms of agenda setting and modes of framing debates and delimiting the possibilities for action; secondly it is sometimes more narrowly focused through particular lens in terms of policy goals and policy impact evaluation. This opens up insight into the ways that government operates and applies a critical lens, arising from the concepts discussed above, to understand what this means for change toward differently configured forms of practice. In concluding, we briefly reflect on the role of this kind of analysis in processes of steering and engage with some of the issues raised by Shove (2015) in discussion of the relation between social theory and public policy.

The current analysis, on the one hand, examines current policy in terms of its likely influence on practice and deconstructs it through re-imagining how challenges and solutions could be conceived differently. The place of this form of analysis in public policy has been argued to be one of challenging status quo thinking, rather than feeding and fuelling current policy agendas (Shove, 2015: 43). Our preliminary explorations of our data suggest a mode of analysis that tackles the question of status quo thinking head-on. That is to say, we can examine how current configurations of the policy process constrain the influence of more critical and radical arguments for change. Here, we suggest forms of political boundary work and governmental

technologies (such as impact assessment), along with the ways of thinking about change that underlay them, are important dimensions of the challenge. This is a different order of questions about steering that can form a focus for analysis within a research agenda that takes change and steering as its focus.

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