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Author(s): Sharp, L. and Richardson, T.

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Long title: Reflections on Foucauldian discourse analysis in planning and environmental policy research

Short title: Reflections on Foucauldian discourse analysis

Authors:

Liz Sharp, Department of Environmental Science, University of Bradford, Bradford, West Yorkshire, BD7 1DP. Tel: 01274 235494. Fax: 01274 305340.

e.sharp@bradford.ac.uk (will check proofs)

Tim Richardson, Department of Town and Regional Planning, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN. tim.richardson@sheffield.ac.uk

Reflections on Foucauldian discourse analysis in planning and environmental policy research

Abstract

Discourse analysis is becoming an increasingly common approach in planning and environmental policy research. This paper asserts that the generic treatment of discourse analysis obscures distinct approaches where ‘discourses’ can combine different elements of text, systems of thought, and action. Textually-oriented approaches have been more prevalent over the 1990s but this paper explores a different approach, grounded in the theory of Michel Foucault, which broadens discourse to embrace social action. Comparing and contrasting two studies which have utilised this approach, the paper suggests that there is considerable room for variation concerning the subjects of study, the institutional scale of analyses, the methods of investigation, and process of analysis. Nevertheless, this paper identifies certain core elements of a Foucauldian discourse analytic approach. The paper concludes that this emerging approach to discourse analysis promises considerable insights if applied more widely in planning and environmental research.

Keywords: discourse analysis, Foucault, environmental policy, planning, methodology

Reflections on Foucauldian discourse analysis in planning and environmental policy research

Introduction

Planning and environmental policy research has seen an increasing number of studies in recent years which have drawn on post-structuralist theory in order to analyse ‘discourse’¹. This is an important new approach to the study of policy which recognises the historical and cultural specificity of particular ways of knowing the world. This development can be seen as paralleling practitioners’ increasing recognition of the range of cultures in the constituencies they serve. However, even a brief reading of these studies indicates that they make use of very different approaches to discourse analysis. The term ‘discourse’ clearly means different things to different researchers, and to their audiences, varying from strictly linguistic approaches which focus on communication, to approaches which embrace ideas and actions as integral to discourse.

But why should it matter if academics wish to research planning and environmental policy using subtly (or dramatically) different approaches to discourse analysis? Does it make any difference to the research findings that are generated, or to their usefulness in developing reflexive policy making? We believe so. Most importantly, this is because different approaches to discourse analysis contain critical assumptions about how changes in policy relate to broader social change. In particular, greater or lesser significance is attributed to developments in institutional structures and communication as causal factors in bringing

¹ In environmental research there has been a steady stream of books incorporating discourse based approaches to policy analysis (e.g. Lash et al, 1993; Hajer, 1995; Myerson and Rydin, 1996; Macnaghten and Urry, 1998). In planning research, discourse based approaches are manifested both in books (e.g. Healey, 1997; Flyvbjerg, 1998) and journals, such as the recent discourse based issue of the journal *Urban Studies* (see Hastings, 1999a; Jacobs, 1999). More broadly, the journal *Discourse and Society* explores ‘the political implications of discourse and communication’, and was supplemented in 1999 by *Discourse Studies*, a journal for the study of ‘text and talk... the structures and strategies of written and spoken discourse’.

about social change. Such varied assumptions seem likely to lead to differences between discourse approaches over what is judged to be significant in analysis, and what types of policy relevant outputs are generated by the research. Healthy debate is needed between policy researchers and the planning and environmental policy communities to clarify where and how discourse analysis of different types can contribute to reflexive practice. This paper is a contribution to just such a debate.

The objective of this paper is to explore one particular ‘Foucauldian’ approach to discourse-analysis². This approach, grounded in Michel Foucault’s theories of discourse, power and knowledge, is further informed by Maarten Hajer’s research. The great advantage of this approach was that it allowed a focus on the policy processes and practices associated with specific difficult planning issues. The paper draws closely upon the authors’ experiences of applying the Foucauldian approach in two recent research projects: one project explored how environmental concerns informed the development of EU policy for European transport networks; the second project examined how British local authorities have put notions of ‘sustainability’ into practice. Through reflecting on our own experiences, this paper highlights the choices and issues associated with discourse-based research. We hope that these reflections will be of interest to other researchers considering the use of such approaches. We also believe that it may be beneficial for practitioners to gain some insights into how planning researchers operate.

In the first part of this paper the Foucauldian approach is located in the context of wider research practice. We begin by examining why researchers might want to utilise a ‘discourse’ approach, and go on to explore the particular methodological challenges which result. A Foucauldian approach to discourse analytics is then introduced as just one way of dealing with these sets of issues and challenges. In the second part of the paper we draw from

our own research to exemplify how a Foucauldian discourse analytic methodology can be operationalised, and to show how we responded to the challenges posed by using this approach. We aim to show that the reflexive approach adopted by the researcher - a necessary part of constructing a research design - which is crucial to the success of a discourse analytic approach.

PART 1

1. Why analyse discourse?

The first question that should be considered is simply this: why would planning and environmental policy researchers want to do discourse analysis? The analysis of discourse - in all its forms - is an activity which researchers carry out within the school of approaches that can be described as broadly 'social constructionist'. For Burr, there are four common elements which characterise such approaches (Burr, 1995: 3-5):

- a critical stance towards taken for granted knowledge;
- historical and cultural specificity;
- knowledge is sustained by social processes;
- knowledge and action go together

Hence, all such approaches view the research subject as socially, culturally and historically situated. Moreover, all such approaches put considerable emphasis on knowledge, and hence, on the communications through which knowledge is exchanged. From these guidelines we can see much contemporary planning and environmental policy research as broadly constructionist. The critical stance towards 'truth' means that the objective of such

² The term 'Foucauldian' is used as a convenient way of identifying this approach. It is not intended to imply that this is the only valid interpretation of Foucault's work.

investigations becomes not the discovery some ultimate ‘truth’, but rather a means of ‘providing coherent and consistent explanations for events’ (Jacobs, 1999: 208).

Social constructionist approaches have some appeal to researchers of planning and environmental policy because of the messy and complex interactions which make up the policy processes with which they (we) engage. It is now widely accepted that concepts like sustainability are not simply imposed in a top down way, say from central government to local government, and then implemented unproblematically. Instead, these concepts are contested, with struggles taking place over their meaning, interpretation and implementation. Any research which studies the way these types of struggles are played out in practice is taking an explicitly or implicitly social constructionist approach.

Given the widespread acceptance of some degree of social constructionism, why do some authors use the term ‘discourse’ and others avoid it? One answer to this question relates to the objective of the author and the audience for the research. When research is focused at achieving direct policy change through making arguments to a practitioner audience it may not be appropriate to engage in the theoretical and epistemological arguments that underlie such research. Flyvbjerg’s (1998) study of urban planning in the Danish city of Aalborg provides an example of such an approach. Such studies may or may not be accompanied by more theoretical or methodological explanations of their approach (in this case these are set out separately in Flyvbjerg (2001)). In contrast, most studies that make use of the term ‘discourse’ are making an explicit bid to ground their understanding of policy processes in a social constructionist epistemology. Indeed, as we discuss below, the wide variety of meanings that are given to the term ‘discourse’ may mean that such studies may have little else in common. The term ‘discourse’ can therefore be seen as a signifier of an author’s intention to achieve theoretical and epistemological grounding. In the discussion below, our attention focuses on research that makes explicit use of the term ‘discourse’ in its explanation

for events. Because we have taken a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis, we also refer to other planning research which, though not explicitly discourse analytic in its methodology, is grounded in Foucault's work and so lends insights into its operationalisation.

2. What is 'discourse'?

Researchers use many different notions of discourse, often without a clear definition of precisely what is meant by the term. In developing a research methodology it is crucial that this issue is clarified, as it shapes the choices that must then be made about the research: where to look, what to look for, and how to analyse what is found.

Discourse is often understood as the sum of communicative interactions. At the simplest level, when we talk to each other, we are engaged in 'discourse'. In this interpretation, discourse in policy making most obviously happens at public events such as meetings, inquiries, and in consultation processes surrounding the preparation of policies, plans and programmes. Analysis of conversations, speeches, articles, statements, can all be regarded as examples of this type of *discourse as text*. In these cases it is what is said or written that counts as discourse (for example, Hastings, 1999a). By extension, policy discourse can be understood as the bundle of exchanges which give shape through metaphors and practices to a particular policy-making process or debate. Patsy Healey, for example, has previously described a policy discourse as 'a system of meaning embodied in a strategy for action' (Healey, 1997: 277). This could be thought of as *discourse in text*, where the discourse has an existence beyond the text itself. Another interpretation sees texts as containing multiple and competing sets of 'discourses', or linked ideas and metaphors. Here, discourses have coherence beyond the text and the policy documents mirror a changing balance of power between the competing discourses. An example of this *discourses in text* approach is Mazza and Rydin's analysis of urban policy in British and Italian cities. They consider the different ways that problems are conceptualised in different settings, for instance how in some

locations urban traffic is seen as a problem of congestion, in others as a threat to heritage conservation or the environment, and in others a question of access. Their analysis suggests that such conceptualisations are linked to the powerful discourses present - heritage conservation in Edinburgh, for example (Mazza and Rydin, 1997).

In all of these approaches, discourses are thought of textually. However, in order to analyse policy processes more fully, we wanted to be able to move beyond a textually-oriented approach, to embrace the many aspects of policy making that lie beyond the texts that are produced along the way. For Foucault, and for the interpretations of Foucault put forward by researchers in spatial and environmental policy such as Maarten Hajer, Bent Flyvbjerg, and Ole Jensen, 'a discourse' is not a communicative exchange, but a complex entity which extends into the realms of ideology, strategy, language and practice, and is shaped by the relations between power and knowledge. Whilst Foucauldian discourses may shape what happens in public meetings and policy processes, such events are simply manifestations of their existence. In this conceptualisation, the continuous power struggles between competing discourses create the conditions which shape the social and physical world, and construct the individual. Our research methodology therefore makes use of a Foucauldian definition of discourse which interprets discourses as multiple and competing sets of ideas and metaphors which embrace both *text and practice*: 'a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorisations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices through which meaning is given to physical and social realities' (Hajer, 1995: 44).

The contrast between definitions of discourse based on text and the broader Foucauldian view is central to much that follows. It is important to remember, however, that there are common elements that bridge these differences. As the previous section highlighted, all such users of 'discourses' implicitly stress both the importance and the complexity of communication in achieving social change. Moreover, the key theorists underlying such

approaches appear to share a common concern to expose inequalities of power as a means for achieving social change. In Foucault's own writing such a concern is manifested by his concern with power, as well as his campaigning for prison reform and gay liberation (Macey, 1994). Habermas' work demonstrates a similar emphasis through his discussion of the public realm and his concentration on the ideal speech situation (Healey, 1997). It follows that differences between these approaches is not about overall goals, but rather concerns the means through which change can be achieved.

3. How do discourses influence social change?

If analysing discourse is to be of much practical relevance to policy making, it is important to show how discourse, or changes in discourse, make a difference to what happens in policy processes or in society more broadly. We have found that different approaches to discourse analysis are underpinned by different models of social change, which we consider to be important, if not always explicit, indicators of their significance.

Many of the textually-oriented approaches used in planning research are linked with Habermas' theory of communicative action. It is held to be important to analyse text and talk because it is through communication that social change takes place. The normative model of social change is that: 'changes at the social level can be constituted in part through changes in linguistic practices' (Hastings, 1999b: 93). These changes in linguistic practices are in turn achieved through the reform of institutional structures. For example, Hastings' work shows how the explicit encouragement of partnerships through government funding regimes has been a means of orchestrating change in the way that regeneration partners communicate. Interestingly, her analysis indicates that it is the community rather than the private sector partners whose expressed beliefs have been altered through the development process.

This model of social change has been challenged by some planning theorists who have found difficulty with the normative nature of the Habermasian approach (e.g. Flyvbjerg and

Richardson, 1998, Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998, Huxley and Yiftachel, 1998). In particular, the achievement of good communication between parties is privileged as *the* normatively important end, over and above the achievement of substantive policy goals. According to these approaches, when good communication is achieved all parties are able to affect the direction of social change. This assumption has led to a further critique that textually-based Habermasian approaches privilege agency over structure (Jacobs, 1999).

The Foucauldian view of discourse is based on a different model of social change, that different systems of meaning or discourses compete for influence in society, and, consequently, that structural changes in society can be conceptualised as shifts in the relative influence of different discourses. It follows that these wider discursive struggles condition what happens in specific policy making processes. What should be done in such difficult circumstances was (deliberately) not answered by Foucault. Instead of being prescriptive about 'what should be done' to secure change, he simply suggested that those who sought to bring about change, to challenge the status quo, could use his tools to do so. As he put it in an interview with geographers: 'it's up to you, who are directly involved with what goes on in geography, faced with all the conflicts of power which traverse it, to confront them and construct the instruments which will enable you to fight on that terrain.' (Foucault 1980a: 65). Bent Flyvbjerg's work uses just this approach:

'In the *longue durée*, we should see that in practice democratic progress is chiefly achieved not by constitutional and institutional reform, but by facing the mechanisms of power and the practices of class and privilege more directly, often head-on: if you want to participate in politics but find the possibilities for doing so constricting, then you team up with like-minded people and you fight for what you want, utilising the means that work in your context to undermine those who try to limit this participation. If you want to know what is going on in

politics, but find little transparency, you do the same. If you want more civic reciprocity in political affairs, you work for civic virtues becoming worthy of praise and others becoming undesirable. At times direct power struggle over specific issues works best; on other occasions changing the ground rules for such struggle is necessary, which is where constitutional and institutional reform come in; and sometimes writing genealogies and case histories like the Aalborg study, that is, laying open the relationships between rationality and power, will help achieve the desired results. More often it takes a combination of all three, in addition to the blessings of beneficial circumstances and pure luck.

Democracy in practice is that simple and that difficult' (Flyvbjerg, 1998: 236).

This approach creates a challenging role for the researcher as an active agent in achieving social and policy change.

4. How is a Foucauldian analysis carried out?

In this interpretation of discourse, power relations are central: 'a discourse is an entity of repeated linguistic articulation, material practices and power-rationality configurations' (Jensen, 1997). Foucault's analyses of the discourses of medicine and psychiatry, for example, showed the importance of discourses in constructing and maintaining social norms, in turn shaping individual identities by delimiting and conditioning thoughts and actions (Foucault, 1965, 1973, and see also the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault, 1990). It was this control of discourse which was a central concern for Foucault. His work contains systematic attempts to understand how the apparently infinite potential for creating ideas and thoughts and expressing them in language and actions is controlled and constrained.

Rather than asking about the truth of an argument, Foucault's approach suggests that we should rather ask how, why, and by who, truth is attributed to particular arguments and not to others. This insight is of particular relevance to the understanding of the policy process as

being shaped by the relations between power and rationality. It also helps us to understand why Foucault is not condemning rationality outright, but simply saying that rational and/or irrational arguments may be appropriated as 'truth' through the exercise of power.

Maarten Hajer's research draws explicitly on Foucault's work in what he describes as a cultural politics approach. Here, Hajer provides a good example of a discourse analytics which embraces not just text and communication, but also actions and practices. His analysis of the acid rain controversy in Britain and the Netherlands illustrates this approach (Hajer, 1995). Hajer uses acid rain to reflect on the extent to which a pragmatic approach to environmental policy gave way to ecological modernisation over the 1980s. He provides a narrative account of how policy developed - tracing initial problem construction through to the development of (apparent) 'solutions'. The description takes a Foucauldian perspective highlighting the charged political nature of seemingly technical decisions. For instance, he charts how over the mid 1980s the British Forestry Commission transformed the criteria it used to measure tree health in the UK (Hajer, 1995: 138). He also draws out how different cultural legacies give way to different styles of policy making in the two countries - describing, for example, how the Dutch tradition of national planning associated with their fight against the sea was reflected in the apocalyptic presentation of the environmental threat. In his findings, a paradoxical mismatch between policy rhetoric and actions is identified in both countries. 'While acid rain was in the end accepted as programmatic issue that called for a change of policy strategies, the remedial measures failed to give a material form to that new reality' (Hajer, 1995: 267). His conclusions describe a series of discursive strategies through which such paradoxes are maintained.

In developing a research methodology, we considered how to analyse the subtle workings of power in complex policy processes. We felt that our understanding of Foucault's work, informed by Hajer, opened up a conceptualisation of policy discourses that did not try to read

policy making as either a rational scientific process, or even as a rational deliberative process. Planning and environmental policy could be conceptualised as being constructed on a field of power struggles between different interests, where knowledge and truth are contested, and the rationality of policy making is itself exposed as a focus for conflict. Local struggles over policy making could be seen as shaped by wider struggles between competing economic, social and environmental discourses. Discourses emerging in policy making could be framed as complex bodies of values, thoughts and practices, including communicative acts and scientific knowledge alongside unspoken actions, and the deployment of lay knowledge within webs of power relations. This notion of contingent rationality suggested an understanding of policy making which might more closely fit the messy world of policy than approaches which sought rational objectivity, or made normative prescriptions of how policy 'should' be made.

The characteristics of a Foucauldian approach can therefore be summarised as follows:

- A view of social change as shaped by and shaping changes in communication (in common with a Habermasian analysis);
- A view of social change as shaped by and shaping changes in practices (in contrast with a Habermasian analysis);
- A view that 'good' social change cannot be pre-specified by theory (in contrast with a Habermasian approach)
- A view of social change as shaped by power, conceptualised as competition between differing systems of meaning or 'discourses';
- A view of a discourse as a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorisations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices, through which meaning is given to physical and social realities;

- A view of discourse competition as shaped by power relations;
- A view that a Foucauldian analysis can challenge the status quo through narrating changes in the field of discourse competition through time.

Once these difficult conceptual issues have been tackled, a series of more practical challenges follow. These concern how the Foucauldian approach, summarised above, can be put into research practice. It is worth noting that whereas Foucault's writing was the main framework from which the conceptual position above was derived, Foucault is less clear and less consistent on more detailed practical and methodological questions. Our subsequent analysis is therefore drawn not just from Foucault's work but also from writers such as Hajer and Flyvbjerg whose interpretation of Foucault's conceptual position is similar to our own. The methodological implications of the approach are also highlighted through further contrasts with textually-oriented discourse approaches.

5. How are different discourses identified which can be researched?

One of the early decisions which needs to be taken is which discourses will be the focus of research. One approach would be for the researcher to try to establish which discourses are around in the particular policy process they are researching, through a grounded theory approach (e.g. Mazza and Rydin, 1997). Alternative approaches would be to identify key discourses and discursive conflicts from theory, or from analysis of the broader socio-political context of the policy process, as in Hajer's work. A key issue here is the extent to which the researcher makes early choices, thus selecting some lines of inquiry whilst closing off others. We consider this to be an open question, which relates somewhat to the particular

research questions that are being pursued. In part 2 we discuss in some detail how we resolved this difficulty.

4. Where are discourses manifested?

Textually-oriented approaches to discourse analysis typically take two approaches. One is to see discourses as manifested in the utterances of planners, politicians, or other actors. The other is to see policy documents, such as committee papers, development plans, or strategies, as their manifestation.

One of the key differences of an approach to discourse which embraces practice is that it broadens the ways in which discourses can be understood as being manifested, which has important implications for research design. Here, discourses are understood to be manifested in policy rhetoric, but also in institutional structures, practices and events. Significantly, the relation between policy rhetoric and action, as discussed above in relation to Hajer's work, can be incorporated into the research methodology.

6. How are struggles between discourses manifested?

Typically, policy documents are analysed to show how particular discourses are dominant, or where tensions in policy reflect struggles between different discursive formations. Mazza and Rydin, for example, look for 'shared understandings, verbal pictures and conceptual connections which together structure the discussion of policy into discourses' (Mazza and Rydin, 1997: 6). The struggles between these different discourses then gives shape to the policy process. In planning and environmental policy, it is often the struggle between different economic, social and environmental discourses that gives shape to policy rhetoric. However, these discursive struggles may also be manifested in the minutiae of changing

institutional structures and practices, in events within the policy process, and in policy outcomes. Again, the message is that it is important to look beyond the text.

7. How are the outcomes of these struggles manifested?

In linguistic approaches based on the idea of discourses in competition, the outcome of these struggles is generally seen as the form of the policy rhetoric which results. Changes in policy rhetoric will reflect a change in the power relations between different discourses. However, within the Foucauldian discourse analytic approach discourse change implies – and is tested by – changing practice as well as changing rhetoric. So in Hajer’s work the apparent shift from pragmatic to eco-modernist approaches to environmental policy forms a ‘discourse framework’ which enables the analysis to proceed.

This broadening of the meaning of discourse has been criticised for reducing ‘discourse’ to a catch all term which is imprecise and therefore not useful as a research focus. We would respond, however, that by establishing that discourse embraces actions, and creating a theoretical framework which relates rhetorical, institutional and policy changes, we can generate a powerful research approach which moves beyond the limitations of textually-oriented approaches. In Hajer’s research, and in our own, which we discuss below, discourse analysis is used not in an abstract comparative sense, but to explore certain practical questions about the operationalisation of rhetorical constructions such as ecological modernisation, environmental integration and sustainable development, which require research beyond the confines of text. We believe that in this way the origins of particular policy outcomes can be traced within the successive stages of development of and contest between discourses.

Given this dynamic and volatile view of policy processes, it is important to be aware of the temporal boundaries of the analysis. Outcomes of the discursive struggle can be seen as those

manifestations of the discourses which are influencing individual well-being *at a particular moment*. Thus - to take a trivial example - we could suggest that a new fascist immigration policy document does not have an impact on outcomes until it starts to change the practices of the immigration officers. The outcomes of discursive struggle can be understood as a sort of echo – they usually reflect the winners of past discursive struggles. While present discursive struggles may be manifested in current outcomes, their substantial effects are more frequently delayed.

8. How are the research aims focussed into a manageable research project?

A frequent feature of discourse analysis is a focus on particular policy texts such as development plans or other strategic documents. There is a risk here of attaching too much importance to key texts, which are somehow given elevated status simply by being the focus of research. In a long policy process, such texts may be important in showing the struggles to set agendas and frame problems and policy responses. Again, the Foucauldian approach allows a shift of emphasis, where texts *may* be significant and require close scrutiny, but where other practices, actions or events may in fact be as important. This is more than setting policy documents in context. It is an attempt to establish which are the key events in policy making, and to focus on them in research.

So whilst it may be useful to focus on changes in communication, and the linkages between these changes and institutional structures, it may be equally or more illuminating to focus on new practices, and how they are constructed through discursive struggle. The key methodological questions, which we return to more fully below, then become how to establish what is important in a long and complex policy process. How can the research be focused in a way which is practical and likely to yield useful findings, if the obvious route of engaging with policy texts is not taken automatically?

9. How can the story of discursive conflict be convincingly presented?

Policy making is complex, rich in fine grain detail, and the type of research we are advocating inevitably gathers large amounts of data which must somehow be analysed and convincingly presented. Where it may be possible to deconstruct a text and present the results within the space of a few thousand words, explaining and linking the key events in a policy process lasting several years is a more challenging task. However Bent Flyvbjerg has argued the need for a detailed narrative, which can be explored by the reader, rather than the presentation of a synthesis. His *Rationality and Power* (Flyvbjerg, 1998) stands as a fine example of this approach. There is, though, a difficulty here for the policy community, who demand pithy and succinct research findings. This is perhaps one of the most significant problems in ensuring that discourse analytics can impact on policy making. Even publication in academic journals is difficult where the constraints on length of articles can only allow a segment of narrative to be presented. A linked issue concerns the extent to which the analytical framework is made explicit to the reader. As noted earlier, a key factor here may be the audience for whom the account is intended. To use the example above, Flyvbjerg's account of planning processes in Aalborg is a narrative which avoids the specification of different 'discourses' or any other analytical framework. A contrast is provided by Hajer's work which specifies how a discourse of ecological modernisation challenges a more traditional approach to environmental planning (Hajer, 1995). In part 2, below, we discuss how, by developing our conceptual framework further, it was possible to reconstruct a critical narrative in a manageable way.

10. Is the approach helpful in addressing policy outcomes, implementation and broader social change?

We have already suggested that if discourse analytic research is going to be useful, it needs to speak to policy communities and to others engaged in or affected by policy making. We believe that the research approach we are exploring here can be useful in several ways which are distinct from textually-oriented approaches. The first is the linkage between rhetoric and action which is implicit in the approach. The difference between what is said and what actually happens is central to the research. The second is that by finding and analysing critical moments in policy making it may be possible to provide critical feed back on policy practices which may help in reflexive activity by policy communities. Understanding the difficulties with public participation programmes, or why certain types of barriers to policy implementation exist, may result. A limitation of this approach is that, in common with other discourse-based approaches, the study of the policy process cannot always be connected beyond practices to material outcomes. To a large extent this limitation is an inevitable drawback of much planning and environmental research - long research time spans are needed if the effects of policies are to be analysed through time. Moreover, the changing environment is frequently subject to multiple influences which cannot be disaggregated.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

From our analysis, we have drawn out a tentative set of key elements which distinguish research methodology based on a Foucauldian discourse analytic approach (Figure 1). We are not suggesting that these elements together provide a rigid framework for doing such research. Rather, that they may guide the researcher in the difficult decisions that must be made as the methodology is devised.

Broadly, the approach described parallels that used by Flyvbjerg and Hajer. In particular, there is a common focus on the construction of a critical narrative based not just on

documentary rhetoric but also on institutional structures and actions parallels the work done by these theorists. Insofar as the approach advocated differs from that of these analysts - particularly Flyvbjerg - it is in the explicit identification and specification of differing discourses early in the analytical and narrative processes.

Before progressing to Part 2, and the description of how this approach was applied, it is appropriate to reflect briefly on the potential difficulties and problems of this approach. A central difficulty is the emphasis that is put on the researcher in selecting which elements of social practice are to be regarded as important in the analysis. This problem is the *quid pro quo* of Foucault's wide definition of discourse. A second potential difficulty relates to the approach's limited capacity to generate policy recommendations. This arises from Foucault's deliberate avoidance of defining 'what should be done'. It also links to the broad definition of discourses in which there is no single set of identifiable agents of change. This difficulty means that Foucauldian analysis may not directly generate the normative advice that the policy community sometimes seeks. Finally, the discussion has suggested that a Foucauldian approach, in common with much research in planning and environmental policy, has difficulty making linkages to material outcomes. This relates to the complexity of the subject matter and the limited timescales under which most research is conducted.

PART 2: Analysing discourse in policy research

We recognise that many of the issues raised in Part 1 are common to other qualitative research methodologies. However, it is clear that pursuing a Foucauldian approach provides particular ways of responding to these challenges. While some of the questions above appear quite straightforward to resolve once this approach has been adopted, some of them are more open to interpretation, and require further discussion. In part 2, then, we consider more fully how these more difficult questions were resolved in practice, drawing from our research

experience. The key issues we explore further are framing discourses, focusing the research, and refining the conceptual framework. We discuss two research applications. The first, carried out by Liz Sharp, concerned the development of local environmental action in British local authorities. The second, carried out by Tim Richardson, analysed environmental integration in the EU policy process for trans-European transport networks. Through a series of points which broadly chronicle our experience, we reflect on the processes, challenges and dilemmas which we negotiated whilst conceptualising and carrying out discourse analytic planning research.

Framing discourses

In the previous section we highlighted how the identification of a societal discourse shift was a key stage in the development of the discourse analytic research design. In this section we argue that the identification of such a change in society was inherent to the original motivation for our research. This identification was important in theoretical terms for it contextualises how the research relates to wider structural shifts in society. It also has significant practical implications, as discourses are identified which become the focus of research.

Tim's research on trans-European networks (TENs) was motivated from the realisation that a very substantial programme of transport infrastructure projects was being proposed across Europe at a time when policy (in the UK at least) was apparently shifting away from such schemes because of the dire forecasts of environmental, social and economic problems that would result from attempting to build roads to accommodate the forecasts. His research first sought to understand why this was happening – what were the forces driving the European infrastructure programme, and, second, to understand how the programme was moving

forward so successfully at a time of increasing concern over the social and environmental impacts of transport (Richardson, 1997).

Several discourse shifts shaped the terrain to be researched. Firstly, the twin discourses of European Union: the political integration of the European community, and the economic integration of the single market, together created a logic which required the creation of long distance high speed transport networks. From the mid 1980s, official EU discourse, manifested in policy documents, increasingly recognised the need for TENs, which were eventually recognised in a chapter of the Maastricht Treaty. Secondly, over the same period, a resurgence of environmental discourse placed road traffic as one of the most serious environmental problems facing the EU. The research could thus focus on how these wider discourses contested the particular policy process under analysis. The research question could be refined to ask how the hegemonic political and economic discourses in the EU shaped the policy process, and conditioned the success or failure of environmental integration in the development of Policy Guidelines for the trans-European transport network.

Tim's research concludes that in the EU, the powerful discourses of the single market and political integration are deeply ingrained in the culture of the key EU institutions, conditioning the possibilities of the policy process, shaping the problems that need to be solved, the methods to be used in their analysis, and the solutions that can be considered. This powerful conditioning has resulted in a TEN policy process which has successfully assimilated environmental concerns by not only creating a suitable policy rhetoric, but constructing a process which, at first sight, appears to allow positive integration. The research reveals firstly the weakness of this construction, but secondly, and more importantly, that this construction is the product of the hegemonic discourses of the EU itself.

Liz's research was motivated by an awareness of the substantial increase in local authority action on the environment. A quantitative increase in the extent of such initiatives had been

well documented in existing research, while other studies had considered the nature of particular initiatives (for example, Therivel, 1996; Sharp, 1997); no research, however, had looked at the whole package of a local authority's initiatives, nor charted how this developed through time. Moreover, there was a question over the nature of this shift. Liz was aware of substantial variations in the types of initiatives different Councils were promoting under the same 'environment' banner: in colloquial terms, some were 'hard' and others 'soft'. For example, one initiative might measure and mitigate the extent of the Council's own use of chemicals, another might use community arts to stimulate greater public awareness of their locality. A key objective was therefore to differentiate between different types of local environmental action (Sharp, 1999).

How were these changes to be conceptualised in terms of 'discourse shifts'? Clearly, the research was concerned with an overarching change in local authority concern from a concentration on merely immediate and visible aspects of the local environment to a broader concern with less visible damage to the environment, and damage which impacted beyond the local authority boundaries. We can conceive of this as a shift from a 'non-environmental' discourse to an 'environmental' discourse. However, the wide variation in the nature of local authority environmental initiatives suggested a need for a more complex conceptualisation. Liz's intuitive understanding of the variation between projects appeared to fit in which the theoretical distinction between 'technocentric' and 'ecocentric' approaches to the environment (O'Riordan, 1989; Pepper, 1996). She thus selected to look at the broad shift from a non-environmental to more environmental approach, differentiating, however between environmental approaches based on technocentric and ecocentric discourses.

From the above it is possible to distinguish differences in the application of discourses within the two research designs. In Tim's research, the discourses are identified directly from policy literature and broader reading related to the policy area being studied. The discursive

struggles which became the focus of the research emerged from the case study. For Liz, the discourses were identified from environmental academic literature: a theoretical framework of environmental discourses was constructed which was later taken into the field and applied to the case studies. So, while in Tim's work the EU policy process a struggle was seen to be occurring between economic, political and environmental discourses, and so became an obvious locus for research, Liz chose to seek to understand local environmental initiatives in terms of their implications and contribution to environmental discourses.

This process of selecting the discourses that are to be the framework for the research is a vital area in which the researchers' subjectivity impacts on the research. It is always the case that the selection of a topic for research reflects a researchers' interests and preoccupations. In discourse analytic research, this subjective impact is the selection of discourses. Whether identifying discourses directly from the policy domain, or more abstractly from theory, it is clear that the policy domain is being simplified somewhat to allow analysis. The advantage of identifying discourses in the field is that they are more clearly observable within policy conflicts. Discourses are portrayed as they are arrayed, without any attempt to organise frameworks. The advantage of the predetermination of discourses from theory is that, in a complex policy process with multiple elements, some structure could be imposed which would simplify the research process. Each approach was appropriate to our research. Either way, the selection process has a key impact on the implications of the research findings. In many discourse studies, particularly those using textually-oriented analysis, the search for objectivity precludes recognition of the subjectivity of the researcher. In Foucauldian inspired discourse analytics, however, the position of the researcher needs to be acknowledged, to help the research audience understand the choices made.

Focusing

One important critique of Foucault's work is that he was highly selective in use of sources, quoting only from those which supported his broad observations. In the choice of specific subjects for our research we sought to overcome this difficulty through the use of a reflexive process of selection. Explicit description of this selection process is important as it indicates the extent to which the specific findings of the research can be more generally applied.

A key selection problem for Liz was choosing two critical case study authorities to indicate the wider processes at work in British Local Government. Two selection criteria were developed. Firstly, it was decided that the investigation should concentrate on those authorities which were more 'active' in the development of local environmental activity rather than those which continued to approach the environment in a localised and exclusively aesthetic sense. Because it was assumed that prior to the 1980s all authorities took a 'non-environmental' approach to their activities, these active authorities were classified as undergoing a discourse shift. By disaggregating and analysing existing questionnaire data, a pool of about fifty 'environmentally active' authorities were identified, from which case study authorities would be selected. Next, through interviews with Local Agenda 21 officers, two authorities were selected which displayed contrasting types of initiatives: one where the ecocentric discourse was more dominant and another in which the technocentric discourse was more dominant. In the two authorities selected, the interviewees described and justified their activities in sharply contrasting terms.

In Tim's research the challenge was to find a way to usefully focus research in a policy process which has lasted at least a decade and a half, and has engaged institutions at the EU level and in every member state. Clearly, the question of environmental integration could be addressed in many ways across the different arenas, events and texts that comprised the policy process. The approach adopted was to identify through initial reading and interviews a critical moment in the process of environmental integration. The research therefore analysed

a single contested issue: the construction of Strategic Environmental Assessment as a policy instrument designed to achieve environmental integration. This was clearly a subjective and pragmatic decision, designed to reduce the overwhelming amount of data which was being gathered, yet generate a useful analysis. However, the reasoning was supported by the political importance attached to SEA – by the European Parliament who pressed for SEA against the resistance of the Council of Ministers, partly in response to lobbying from environmental pressure groups. Analysing the specific construction of SEA within the policy process was a way of exploring the fine grain of the conflict over environmental integration – how the discursive battle was played out in political and institutional power struggles.

Using the focusing device of selecting a critical moment raises the concern that events can become ‘critical’ simply by being foregrounded in this way. Other important events are marginalised in the process. Approaches discussed above which focus on key texts seem particularly prone to this dilemma, because they place the development plan (for example) as the critical moment, without necessarily addressing significant institutional or political contexts or events which may be more decisive in affecting policy outcomes. In Tim’s research, the focusing process was deliberately more open, and could have led to a policy document, an institutional reform, a political struggle, or as it turned out a policy instrument – it was the fieldwork that shaped the focus, rather than any assumptions about the primacy of texts or institutions.

The process of narrowing the research focus continued into the main fieldwork stages of the both investigations. Interviews with policy actors were focused on their perceptions of the power struggles that were taking place. In Tim’s study, politicians provided colourful accounts of the power plays which took place behind closed doors in the conciliation process between Parliament and Council. Similarly, in Liz’s work some community participants described the ‘remarkable change of character’ experienced by some officers when

politicians entered the room. In selecting potential interviewees, those who had specific concerns with the research topic were identified, partly through authorship of documentation, partly through position, and partly through snowballing. Operationalising the Foucauldian discourse analytic approach required a distinctive combination of research methods. Because the object of research is discourse in text and practice, it was not considered adequate to simply analyse policy documents. The task was to reconstruct the policy process, gathering information about critical events and processes that explained the operation and effects of discourses.

In Tim's research, reconstructing the narrative also involved a shift from historical analysis of the process of discourse building, to the analysis of events as they were happening during the research period – the institutionalisation of discourse. This problem was resolved by carrying out a secondary analysis of the emergence of TEN discourse, through documentary and literature analysis, followed by a more mixed approach to the live events which included reading, but also interviews with policy actors, and observation of specific events (such as meetings of the Parliament's transport committee, or of environmental activists). Inevitably the concerns of the interviewees influenced the focus of the research, but balance was sought by deliberately seeking opposing positions, particularly in selecting interviewees. The complex amalgam of policies which constituted local environmental policy did not allow Liz's research to adopt the same split of her research into discourse building and institutionalisation. Nevertheless, a similar research strategy combined historical analysis, through documents and contemporary interviews, as well as the investigation of current events – which were observed and researched further through interviews.

The problems discussed in this section have been key moments of focusing our research, but in fact a selection process continues throughout the research and analysis - which documents are looked at, which events are considered to be significant, who is interviewed, and what

aspects of interviews are quoted. In this respect, the research dilemmas are not unique to the discourse analytic approach, but dog all research processes. Nevertheless, the discourse analytic approach did provide guidance about some aspects of selection. For example, using discourses in a theoretical framework helped Liz to select case study authorities, and Tim to focus on the critical moment. In conclusion, it appears that like many other approaches the discourse analytic approach *is* highly selective. However, the discourse framework which guides the selection process focuses on critical moments in policy making. It does not exclude the wider setting, and so may provide useful explanations of broader processes.

Framework development and analysis

This section considers how the vast range of rhetorical statements, policies, structures and actions encountered during fieldwork were understood in discourse terms. For both Liz and Tim, it involved the further development of the discourse analytical frameworks discussed above. However, a significant difference in analysis resulted from Liz's use of a conceptual framework to manage data relating to a large number of different policy strands, while Tim's framework allowed a much closer focus on reconstructing one particular strand in fine detail. Necessarily, the analyses diverged as Liz sought to classify policies into different categories, and Tim assembled the data required to reconstruct the single strand of policy narrative.

Tim's research design set out the successive stages of the building of pre-policy discourse; the construction of the EU policy process; the institutionalisation of the new discourse; and consequent policy development and implementation. Throughout these stages, a conflict between European economic and political integration discourses, and environmental discourse, continued. The critical problem in the research was to establish that the events which were being analysed bore relation to the conceptual framework. The point was not to prove that events within the policy process demonstrated that discursive competition of a

certain type was occurring. Conversely, the aim was to see if the discursive framework could assist in explaining what was going on in the policy process, and in particular could illuminate precisely how the battle over environmental integration was played out. The difficulty, then, was to draw some relation between interviews which yielded much useful information about internal politicking, inter-institutional and inter-personal power plays, and so on, and the discursive conceptual framework. The obvious danger was that the early identification of discourses would pre-empt later analysis and obscure other aspects of the picture.

In Tim's research the aim was to reconstruct the narrative of one strand of policy development, to understand the contested construction of Strategic Environmental Assessment. Once this focus was established, the approach was to critically analyse policy documents and interview policy actors to carefully probe the events which shaped this process. As Flyvbjerg argues, '... the dynamics of conflict and struggle become the centre of analysis' (Flyvbjerg, 1998: 6). The effects of institutional politics, for example, were teased out by interviewing actors occupying different positions in the struggle. However, focusing on the relative minutiae of a single policy instrument allowed questions to be asked about the rationality at work as environmental integration proceeded. Instead of simply seeking different institutional positions, the deeper discursive struggles were revealed. However, within the analysis there was no attempt to attribute particular discourses to the statements of individual policy actors. The narrative was reconstructed, through the analysis of interview transcripts and documents, as a small illustration of a broader power struggle between discourses over the fate of environmental integration in European policy making.

Liz used a similar conceptual framework for the analysis of authorities' evolving environmental policies, tracking changes in policy rhetoric, structures, and specific initiatives or actions. However, local authority policy development was different from that observed in

the EU, it took place intermittently, in brief spurts, and on many fronts, and required that these three elements needed to be investigated over the whole period under study. This process brought new complications. While environmental rhetoric and local authority structures could be clearly tracked through time, forming an analysis of the numerous initiatives (over 600) listed in local authority documents formed a particular challenge. The dilemmas posed by one part of this categorisation process are discussed here in detail.

At an early stage in the research, some practitioners had differentiated between authorities that had concentrated on 'internal' greening of their own operations, and those that had focused their efforts on 'external' activities, in attempt to change the behaviour of public in their district. The effects of internal activities were regarded as being more immediate and quantifiable than external activities, even though the extent of their impact might be less.

During the fieldwork, Liz refined the 'internal-external' duality into a categorisation system based on the question, 'whose environmental impact is affected by this action?' Attempts to apply this categorisation met with some success, but highlighted need to incorporate the complexity of local authority roles in relation to the public: some actions *force* the public's environmental impact to change - for example, through the development of a traffic management system - while others *promoted* changes in behaviour - for example, through publicity promoting less car use. In the revised classification system the former 'general public' category now had classes for the provision of facilities, the use of regulation, and the promotion of changed behaviour. This iterative development of categorisation continued, until a pragmatic limit was reached in view of the time constraints on the research.

This example of one small if particularly problematic part of Liz's analytical process illustrates many of the difficulties consequent to any process of classification. Firstly, the categories of classification are seldom obvious: there is no objectively 'correct' set of classes. Instead, the appropriateness of a classification system depends on its theoretical

significance, which was revealed for Liz during the course of classification. Secondly, it is often a researchers' intuition, rather an externally derived 'problem', which prompts further iterations in the classification system. The second and vital iteration in the above classification system was only prompted by Liz's discomfort with the 'general public' category. This emphasises the need for researchers to be reflective throughout. Finally, researchers also need to rely on intuition to keep the classification process in perspective. External limits to the usefulness of the classification system should be taken account of before the researcher decides to embark on a further iteration of the categories.

Conclusions

In this paper we have attempted to explore the opportunities and difficulties which arise from adopting discourse analytic approaches to planning research. Within the two empirical studies, we negotiated these challenges by devising and using quite different research designs and methods. In each case the conceptual framework and its implementation were iteratively and reflexively developed: each researcher's explicit reflexivity was vital to developing a discursive framework which related to the research subject.

We believe that the Foucauldian discourse analytic approach resolves some of the difficulties of other approaches. Firstly, it provides a means of bringing structural forces into the research through the explicit analysis of the 'discourse territory' – either from broader literature or within the policy domain in the early stages of the research. This goes further than other approaches which 'acknowledge' structural forces, but have no explicit means to build them into their analysis (Jacobs, 1999).

The question of bias is more open. In some versions of discourse analysis, 'only relatively small pieces of texts can be analysed so that the researcher is always open to allegations of partiality in their selection of a discursive event' (Jacobs, 1999: 209). Although discourse

analytic research considers more than ‘small pieces of text’ the researchers’ partiality is still a significant influence on the research process in both the selection of discourses and the focusing of the research. Indeed, as we discussed at the end of part 1, the broad definition of discourse means that the researcher’s choices - and we use this word rather than ‘biases’ - become even more important. We do not consider this to be an inherent weakness of the approach. On the contrary, we would argue that the social constructionist perspective would make it difficult to deny the influence of researchers’ partiality or *subjectivity* on the research process. However, we would suggest that the specification of discourse territory in advance of the research process helps to make this subjectivity transparent. As such, the reader is able to come to their own judgement about the approach the researcher has adopted.

We believe that discourse analytic approaches have the potential to engage with the complexities of policy making in ways that other approaches do not. The model of social change that underlies the approaches may be helpful in explaining some of the difficult dynamics of policy making – for example where participants in planning processes feel relatively powerless – which may be of particular relevance to practitioners exploring empowerment approaches.

The critique that Foucauldian approaches generate limited policy recommendations is true of our accounts. Our policy narratives do not allow specific recommendations to be immediately read off the text. However, we would question whether the generation of such recommendations is an appropriate expectation of all research. Our intention is that our texts should challenge the practitioner-reader to think critically about their own practice. Just as Foucault does not presume to provide a theoretical judgement about ‘what should be done’, so we do not presume to make a similar judgement about the varied contexts in which practitioners are operating. We hope, however, that critical analysis of one context will stimulate critical thought about another.

A challenge which remains for our own work is this: whilst discourse analytic approaches reach beyond the text into contextualised actions and events, does it pay appropriate attention to policy outcomes? In our work this is a serious concern. It matters to us that discursive power struggles shape policy in ways that impinge on policy outcomes. By tracing back these struggles, we hope to add to understanding of why policy results in certain changes which are not always anticipated.

So what has this paper achieved? It is notably in the minority among academic papers in exploring research processes, rather than substantive findings. We feel that such process-based papers are important for researchers and practitioners alike. At a very basic level, the explicit exploration of research dilemmas aids reflexivity among researchers and enables comment and critique by practitioners. Process-based papers also provide understanding of particular research methodologies. In this paper we have sought to demystify the confusing mixture of approaches that analyse discourse in planning and environmental research. We have achieved this by retracing our route through the selection and operationalisation of the discourse-analytic approach. Thus, a final achievement of the paper is that the rich reflective data of the discourse analytic approach provides a guide to other researchers wishing to emulate, or indeed, differ from this approach.

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Figure 1. A Foucauldian approach to research: Summary of methodological questions

How are different discourses identified which can be researched? Before the research process, from broadly observed shifts in society and from literature review.

Where are discourses manifested? In policy rhetoric, documents, plans, or programmes, but also in institutional structures, practices and events.

How are struggles between discourses manifested? In changing policy rhetoric, and in the minutiae of changing institutional structures and practices, in events within the policy process, and in policy outcomes.

How are the outcomes of these struggles manifested? In the form of policy rhetoric and in the institutionalisation of new policy practices and outcomes.

How are the research aims focused into a manageable research project? By focusing on changes in communication, linkages with institutional structures, and the construction of new practices.

How can the story of discursive conflict be analysed and convincingly presented? By reconstructing a critical narrative.

Is the approach helpful in addressing the policy outcomes, implementation and broader social change? Yes, by looking at the difference between policy rhetoric and what actually happens.