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This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Critical Policy Studies*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Persson, M. (2015)

A policy problem that cannot escape its past: constraints on the reformation of safety policy.

Critical Policy Studies, 9(2): 158-176

<https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2014.971038>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:oru:diva-61528>

A policy problem that cannot escape its past – constraints on the reformation of safety policy

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published in Critical Policy Studies, 2015, 9 (2)

Published online: 03 Jan 2015, available online:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2014.971038>

Abstract

Within many current policy theories there is a tendency to first identify change and then explain it. A retrospective analysis of policy changes risks missing continuous processes and struggles for change as well as mechanisms of resistance to change. Taking this as a point of departure, this paper develops an understanding of the policy process as a struggle over meaning, as a way to allow for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of policy change and continuity. This approach is illustrated by an analysis of the formation of public safety policy in Sweden. Alternative storylines giving 'new' meanings to the policy problem were strategically incorporated into the policy discourse. However, it is found that an ideational path-dependency of the policy constrains the possibility for problem reformulation and thereby also the possibility for policy change. The discourses that instantiated the policy problem not only affect the ways in which the problem is rendered thinkable for the purposes of its government, but also for policy analysts as well as the public. The analysis shows that it is crucial to understand the interrelations between different discourses (within policy, politics and research) to understand the mechanisms of policy change and continuity.

Keywords: policy formation, policy change, discourse, safety, fear of crime, path-dependency

Introduction

In examining policy change, the main focus has been on interest intermediation, as for example in the Advocacy Coalition Framework. However, this paper argues that to better understand the process of policy change and continuity it is necessary to pay closer attention to ideational mechanisms (Hall 1993; Hajer 1995; Schmidt 2011). This applies in particular to policy fields characterized by ambiguity, where the problem definition is vague, shifting or even contested. In such cases the policy formation process is continuous and the policy actors seldom have clear objectives (Zahariadis 2007). Thus, the process of governing ambiguous policy problems could be characterized as a collective sensemaking process (Weick 1995). Understanding the policy process as a contestation of the meaning of policy problems (see Stone 1997) allows for a more detailed understanding of the dynamics of policy change and continuity. An ideational approach also allows for being sensitive to the interconnectedness of different policy fields and institutional processes through ideational trends. In this paper, these points are elaborated in an analysis of the formation of public safety policy in Sweden, and of the attempt to change the dominant understanding of the policy problem of fear of crime and feelings of unsafety.

Issues related to fear, security and feelings of unsafety have become thoroughly politicized over the last decades (Robin 2004). The emphasis on risk in contemporary society is argued to foster feelings of insecurity and fear (Bauman 2006). As a part of this, crime prevention and community safety policies aim not only to reduce the risk of crime and victimization, but also to counter fear of crime and feelings of unsafety (Gilling 2001; Crawford 2009). However, reducing fear of crime has proved to be more difficult than anticipated (Lee 2007, 151). Conceptually as well as politically the focus has more or less remained stuck on the discrepancy between measured risk and experienced fear, a framing of the problem that restricts the role of researchers to explaining that difference (Lidskog and Sundqvist 2012, 1009). Appeals to rationality in the form of information about actual crime levels and risks of victimization, as well as means for taking precautions, do not seem to be able to reduce fear of crime. Critics argue that fear of crime should not be seen as merely a reaction to crime risk, but as reflecting wider and more existential feelings of unsafety, fuelled by societal processes such as individualization, urbanization and secularization (Elchardus, De Groof, and Smits 2008; Cops 2010).

This paper builds on an understanding of policy and research as intrinsically related, shaping each other in a process of co-production (Jasanoff 2004). The history of crime prevention and policies to reduce fear of crime is a prominent example of the interrelationship between politics and policy and the academic world (cf. Latour 1987; Fischer 2003). Lee (2007) locates the birth of the concept ‘fear of crime’ to the United States in 1965, when large-scale victim surveys were conducted for the first time, with the goal of accounting for unrecorded cases of crime. It was in these questionnaires and in the subsequent President’s Commission Report of 1967 that fear of crime was first measured and its politicization began (Lee 2007). Lee illustrates how what he calls the ‘fear of crime’ feedback loop has laid the foundation for the establishment of fear of

crime as a critical political issue; for an immense amount of research on fear of crime; and, not least, for the categorization and interpretation of experiences in terms of fear of crime. Lee (2001, 480–481) writes:

By 'fear of crime' feedback loop, I mean/.../ that research into victims produces and maintains the criminological concept of 'fear of crime' quantitatively and discursively; that this information operates to identify fear as a legitimate object of governance or governmental regulation; that the techniques of regulation imagine particular types of citizens – fearing subjects; that these attempts to govern 'fear of crime' actually inform the citizenry that they are indeed fearful; that this sensitizes the citizenry to 'fear of crime'; that the law and order lobby and populist politicians use this supposed fearing population to justify a tougher approach on crime, a point on which they grandstand, and in doing so sensitize citizens to fear once again; and that this spurs more research into 'fear of crime' and so on.

The policies and research feeding this loop have resisted persistent criticism. The crime prevention and community safety policies that are a part of this development have, among other things, been argued to shape an exclusive society that fosters 'otherification' (Gilling 2001; Young 1999) and a criminalization of social policy (Gilling 2001; Edwards and Hughes 2005b; Crawford 2009). The research field of fear of crime has been extensively criticized for limitations in how central research concepts are conceptualized (Hale 1996; Elchardus, De Groof, and Smits 2008; Lee and Farrall 2009). However, the call for alternative methods and interpretations has had limited influence over the administrative criminology in government departments, where the early, narrow conceptualizations of fear of crime are predominant (cf. Lee and Farrall 2009, 212).

At the beginning of the new millennium, the policy discourse of public safety in Sweden was subjected to reform efforts influenced by critical research. Key policy actors attempted to change the policy discourse by putting more emphasis on safety and feelings of unsafety, to thereby neutralize the emphasis on security issues and risk management and shift the direction of the policy field to include social and structural factors, as well as promoting aspects. Several of the key themes of the policy debate resembled arguments put forward by critical researchers within the academic debate, e.g. that fear of crime is a projection of wider and more unspecified insecurities (Hollway and Jefferson 1997; Jackson 2006; Lee 2007; Elchardus, De Groof, and Smits 2008); or that fear and unsafety are essentially subjective, implying that it is impossible to discover either general causes or solutions (Lee 2007). Indeed, drawing on and cooperating with critical researchers was the main strategy of the policy actors seeking change. By questioning the dominant understanding of the problem of (feelings of) unsafety,¹ through critical assessments and conceptual discussions, the policy discourse came under (re)formation.

This paper analyzes this policy (re)formation process of public safety policy in Sweden. It examines how central actors worked to create an alternative understanding of the policy problem of fear of crime/feelings of unsafety, and in particular how their use of conceptual and critical research affected the policy discourse, as well as what factors that constrained the adoption of an alternative policy direction. The aim is not to provide a general explanation to policy change, but to explore the micro mechanisms of policy change and continuity within the policy formation process. The main focus of the analysis is the national policy discourse and the process of

defining and governing the policy problem at a bureaucratic level, with attention given to the interaction between the local and national level. Two institutions are identified as key actors in the reformation process, wherefore these actors' strategies and their effects on the policy discourse are central to the analysis. In newer policy fields it is increasingly common that the problem-defining assignment and the expert and opinion-making roles are decentralized to the bureaucracy (Rothstein 2005). Authorities are assigned to produce knowledge and govern other authorities through knowledge dissemination. Such an arrangement assumes an objectivist ontology and tends to conceal the value dimension of knowledge claims (Fischer 2003). It is therefore crucial to learn more about such governing processes, how meaning is ascribed to policy problems, and what mechanisms that may constrain that process.

In the following section, I engage with the current theoretical endeavor to develop a dynamic view on policy change and continuity. In doing so, I view the continuous process of policy formation as part of a struggle for the unachievable goal of discursive closure or fullness (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 8). By applying insights from discourse theory, micro mechanisms of policy change may be analyzed through the interaction between actors' ideas and strategies, and surrounding discourses and institutions (cf. Schmidt 2011). Such an analysis also contributes to the theory of path-dependence by illustrating 'how institutionalized policy paths are reproduced in and through social and political action' (Torfing 2009, 76). The third section accounts for the materials and method. The subsequent sections contain the analysis, which is divided in two parts. The first, building on interviews and documents, examines how central policy actors went about promoting an alternative understanding of the policy problem, thereby initiating policy change. I argue that the policy discourse opened up for renegotiation concerning the understanding of (feelings of) unsafety as the dominant perspective was challenged. In the second part, I analyze policy conferences to explore how the actors' ideas and strategies interacted with surrounding discourses and institutional settings. I show that the discourse that instantiated the policy problem constrains alternative ways to understand and govern the problem. Certain causes are privileged while others are discounted. In the last section, I discuss the findings in terms of an ideational path-dependency and highlight the discursive approach's contribution to the theoretical understanding of policy continuity and change.

Policy formation and the process of change and continuity

Explaining why and when policies change is an aim shared by most of the predominant policy process theories (e.g. ACF Sabatier, IAD Ostrom and PET Jones). Their focus on policy change can be seen as a reaction to the success of new institutionalism in explaining stability and continuity. However, critical voices argue against the distinction between change and continuity and identify the two in terms of a duality, as parts of the same process (Marsh 2010). Theories that explain change have been encouraged to better account for cases of non-change. Meanwhile, historical institutionalists strive to develop their theory of path-dependency to better explain change (Pierson 2000; Peters, Pierre, and King 2005). One of those who are building on new institutional theory to account for a dynamic view of change and continuity is Schmidt (2011) who argues for an interpretive approach to institutions that takes ideas and discourse seriously.

Discourse theory offers an alternative understanding of the policy process. The essence of the political is not a struggle between interests but the articulation of identity and meaning (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000). The interests and positions of actors (subject positions) are not seen as given, but as socially constructed, and as such they ‘undergo constant historical and social changes as a result of political practices’ (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 6). The formation of policy can be seen as an ongoing ‘collective puzzlement on society’s behalf’ (Heclo, cited in Hall 1993), where actors’ objectives often are unclear (Zahariadis 2007). The implementation of solutions constantly changes the field, as the formulation of a law or policy sanctions or proscribes different actions as well as identities (Bacchi 1999). At the same time the formation of policy is restricted by discursive systems. A discourse can be defined as ‘a shared way of apprehending the world’ (Dryzek cited in Howarth 2010) which is structured around categorizations based on dualisms, similarities and differences (Howarth 2010). The puzzlement and sensemaking that are central to the formation of policy (in particular concerning wicked problems) are influenced and constrained by dominant discourses, from which cues are drawn (cf. Hall 1993, 289; Weick 1995). To better understand the dynamics of policy change and continuity, more attention has to be given to the formation of meaning: the policy formation process.

To analyze the (re)formation of policy, this study builds on a growing literature that accords a central function in policy formation to storylines (Stone 1989, 1997; Schön and Rein 1994; Hajer 1995; Radaelli 1999; Fischer 2003). Storylines connect the policy problem to its causes. The struggle over causal ideas is central to policy formation (Stone 1989). Causal stories ascribe guilt and responsibility (Stone 1997) and imply solutions (Rittel and Webber 1973, 161). They also express relationships between the particular problem and other related and intertwined social processes. Storylines thereby simplify complexity (Stone 1989; Weick 1995, 130) by overstating causalities and bringing different discourses (scientific as well as political) together (Hajer 1995, ch. 2). However, the reduction of complexity has its pitfalls. The complexity and conditionality of research findings are often reduced in the process, and closure is obtained at the expense of loss of meaning (Hajer 1995, 62). Studying the formation of a storyline illustrates how values, norms and scientific knowledge are intertwined. Hence, science is not seen as contributing ‘objective’ knowledge, but as taking part in forming and legitimizing a policy narrative, and excluding alternative problem definitions and solutions (Fischer 2003). This process will be analyzed next to examine the effects of the intentional inclusion of critical research on the policy discourse.

Though most theorists of narration, framing and discourse coalitions acknowledge actors and the possibility for them to strategically use or try to establish storylines, the emphasis in their analyses tends to be on the storylines themselves, their relative strengths and dynamics. Meanwhile the dominant line of research has emphasized actor-centered explanations in terms of calculated strategic action. For instance, according to the Advocacy Coalition Framework, policy is shaped through a struggle between coalitions (people or organizations sharing the same normative and causal beliefs) (Sabatier and Weible 2007). Hence, coalitions act with the intention to change both policy and understandings in accordance with their own positions. Narrative theorists with similar ontologies (e.g. Narrative Policy Framework; NPF) see storylines as strategically constructed by actors in an effort to influence policy decisions (Shanahan, Jones, and

McBeth 2011). Without rejecting individual strategic behavior, I argue that an individualist ontology neglects essential processes, namely the process of sensemaking (Weick 1995) and the intentional and unintentional formation of meaning and identity. Hajer (1995, ch. 2) recognizes that actors have an intuitive notion of discourse. This study takes that notion as a starting point and focuses on how actors intentionally engage in discursive struggles and how their attempts to shape the meaning of the policy problem are constrained – in other words, how the meaning of a policy is intentionally and unintentionally (re) produced. Thus, a discourse analytical approach to policy change and continuity does not see the relative influence of coalitions of individuals as a conclusive explanation of (non) change. It goes further, analyzing the dynamic interrelationships of interests, acts and articulations with surrounding discourses and institutions.

Materials and methods

By observing the policy field over 5 years (2008–12), in particular the networking and policy forming arenas, the central actors, institutions and arenas have been identified, as well as the practices whereby policy formation is taking place. A central steering mechanism in this policy field is ideological steering, understood in terms of steering through knowledge and ideas (cf. Rothstein 2005). Ideological steering is conducted through conferences, handbooks, collections of ‘good examples’, benchmarking, knowledge summaries, networking and so forth. Numerous conferences are held and reports written to spread information, settle conceptual disputes, improve the problem definition and promote mutual learning. In these practices the meaning of the policy is articulated (cf. Yanow 2007).

This study is based on several sources: observations, interviews and documents; with particular attention being given to the intertextuality between them (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 86). Participatory observations have been conducted at six national policy conferences and public debates on the issue, while five other conferences have been studied retrospectively through conference materials and (when available) written summaries of the talks. On the basis of these observations, 13 interviews have been conducted with key actors, mainly ones who strived to change the policy direction. These interviews, together with documents, are employed to capture the strategies used to change the policy discourse.

Two central policy conferences have been chosen for in-depth analysis of how these strategies, and in particular the strategic use of knowledge, played out in the policy discourse. These were both arranged by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR), and were each about six hours long. SALAR can be viewed as a bridge between the national and local level, with the role of representing local authorities in national policy networks and disseminating knowledge among local authorities as well as between local and national authorities. Additional reasons for choosing these conferences were that they had the explicit aim to negotiate the understanding of the unsafety problem and how to address the issue; they were arranged by a civil servant who shared the ambition to change the dominant policy discourse; and they represent an arena with a wide range of involved actors. The speeches and discussions at these conferences were recorded and transcribed. The material was then approached as a text

representing a collective meaning-making process. When citing this material in the analysis, I therefore refer to the conference and not the individual speaker.

The transcripts were coded based on themes and concepts using NVivo. The analysis focuses on the construction of the problem of (feelings of) unsafety. I have traced how meaning is ascribed to the policy problem through connections to different frames, discourses or statements. In that process, actors draw cues from different discourses and combine them to form a coherent storyline (Hajer 2006) which makes sense of the problem (Weick 1995). Different arguments may indirectly support and give meaning to each other through their similar ways of representing the world, what Hajer (2006, 71) calls discursive affinity. The analysis pays particular attention to how different storylines, intentionally or unintentionally, support or contradict each other. By following the steps of argumentation, I have been able to trace how cues from one discourse or frame may come to represent or support a different argument in a subsequent step of the argumentation. In that way, dominant arguments and structuring mechanisms have been identified.

Aiming for a changed understanding of (feelings of) unsafety

When talking about the problem of fear of crime in Sweden, the word *otrygghet* is used. This may be translated as unsafety, but with an emphasis on feelings of unsafety. The meaning is closer to the recent and competing way of conceptualizing crime-related insecurity, namely general feelings of unsafety (Elchardus, De Groof, and Smits 2008; Cops 2010; De Donder et al. 2012). In the following section, I will therefore initially refer to the problem of fear of crime, but when referring to Swedish policy I will use the term (feelings of) unsafety.

Background Fear of crime emerged as a policy problem in the United States in the 1960s. It stemmed from an effort to get a wider comprehension of the ‘crime problem’ and to collect relevant data (Lee 2007). The politicization of crime-related fear was spurred by the fact that fear of crime and recorded exposure to crime did not correlate; hence, the presumption that fear of crime is in part a separate phenomenon, with separate causes. Though separate, they are connected in a common storyline that has fostered policy in a wide range of countries (Gilling 2001; Crawford 2009; Lidskog and Persson 2012; Persson 2013; Garland 2001), though with divergent institutional expressions in different countries and localities (see e.g. Edwards and Hughes 2005a; Crawford 2009; Gilling et al. 2013). The core elements of the policy storyline hold the following.

- Society is changing, with increasing urbanization, secularization and globalization.
- These processes weaken traditional bonds of social control.
- Crime levels and social disorder are rising.
- As a consequence of the aforementioned three points, fear of crime and people’s feelings of unsafety are growing.
- Legal institutions and rehabilitative responses have not adequately responded to the situation, which undermines their legitimacy.

- These problems find expression at the local level, and therefore need to be countered with locally adapted solutions.

These assumptions have influenced the local crime prevention and community safety policies adopted in most western countries (see e.g. Crawford 2009), including Sweden (Lidskog and Persson 2012; Persson 2013). However, policy development in different countries and localities is not uniform (Crawford 2009; Gilling et al. 2013), nor should these core assumptions be considered static. Alternative storylines are triggered by contextual differences and may ascribe different meanings and significance to these premises. When these premises are translated to fit particular contexts, different aspects of the problem may be emphasized and different policy solutions and institutional settings may emerge.

The policy problem of fear of crime has traveled from the USA to the UK, and onward to large parts of the western world and beyond (Crawford 2009). In its path, new institutions have emerged. The authorities that govern safety policy in Sweden (both at the local and national level) have a coordinative function. Their aim is to build institutional capacity around the issues that the policy is intended to govern. As safety is related to several policy fields, and affects multiple political levels, the policy problem is addressed through network-based arrangements, and multi-agency partnerships (cf. Gilling 1994; Hughes 1998; Van Swaaningen 2005). The primary aim of the coordination is to transmit knowledge, and thereby influence the work of related authorities and other partners.

The formation of safety policy in Sweden is located at different institutional levels. At the national level, the National Crime Prevention Council (BRÅ) exerts influence, generally along the lines of the global trend (Lidskog and Persson 2012). There is an emphasis on community-based policing and risk management strategies such as situational prevention (2012). BRÅ has knowledge dissemination as a central assignment, and has a strong connection to the legislative authorities through its evaluative function (Statskontoret 2011). The UK Home Office is a frequent source of information for BRÅ, which contributes to the influence of the global trend on Swedish safety policy. The Home Office Crime Prevention Unit has built up a bank of knowledge on good practices, mainly concerning situational prevention, which legitimizes and consolidates the situational approach (Gilling 1994). Meanwhile, (feelings of) unsafety have received increased attention as a policy problem at the local (municipal) level, incited by the numerous public questionnaires that measure how (un)safe the inhabitants feel (cf. Lee 2007). Several municipalities include (feelings of) unsafety as a performance indicator, and it is included in SALAR's yearly benchmarking of all municipalities. As 'the problem' has received attention, and its quantification has affected the municipalities, local interpretations of the situation and reactions to it have developed in relation to local contexts (Persson 2013). However, local actors are generally dependent on economic resources, as well as knowledge (such as good practice examples) from national authorities. Thus, they are subjected to both economic and ideational steering mechanisms, which limit the self-determination of local policy practitioners (cf. Hughes and Gilling 2004).

Strategies for reformation

As the new millennium began, the focus on unsafety as a policy problem increased (cf. Van Swaaningen 2005, 291). In Gothenburg, Sweden's second largest city, a local council was founded in 2001 that used a social prevention approach to promote safeness. Feelings of unsafety had been sensed to be an up-and-coming policy issue by the political leader (a Social Democrat). A secretariat answering directly to the municipal board was established, and was titled Tryggare och Mänskligare Göteborg [A Safer and More Human Gothenburg] (TMG). TMG had the explicit assignment to work closely with academics and use knowledge to influence a broad set of local authorities. They describe themselves as a think tank that uses knowledge not to write a manual for how to act, but to 'throw a monkey wrench in the works' (interview) – to get people to rethink the issues. They agreed with criticism of the current focus on security measures and risk management, and in particular of its expression in local communities, where the expanded role of the police had them serving a function that, until the welfare cutbacks in the 1990s, had been the province of social workers.

TMG was given a strong mandate and broad freedom of action, and its legitimacy was strengthened by a prestigious council including the two leading politicians (from the political majority and the opposition), the county police commissioner, the director of the regional correctional administration, the regional manager of BRIS, the head of the Department of Diversity in Gothenburg, professors representing Gothenburg University and Chalmers and representatives of the housing sector (Jordan 2006). TMG worked strategically to challenge the prevailing approach to unsafety (based on police interventions and situational crime prevention). Determined to avoid reproducing the mainstream views, they deliberately sought cooperation with independent, critical researchers through a twin network within Gothenburg University. The same care was applied when choosing the receivers of their message/knowledge, and they put a large amount of time into networking and strategic planning. They emphasized the crucial aspects of timing and directing the message/knowledge to people who are receptive to that particular perspective. When releasing a new body of material, they have tactically waited until the issue receives publicity from an external event or another actor; this creates a demand for knowledge and understanding, and opens a 'window of opportunity' for reaching out (Kingdon 2011; Zahariadis 2007).

By hiring civil servants with a background in research, and holding regular meetings with their academic partner, TMG strengthened its capacity to follow the development of critical research within their policy field. An external factor working in their favor was that crime prevention research at Gothenburg University was performed at the Department of Sociology, and was therefore less influenced by the control theories that dominate contemporary criminology (Garland 2001, 15). One of the first events organized by TMG was a university course on crime prevention for practitioners (e.g. police officers, social workers, people within the housing sector) which later was expanded to become a regular part of the curriculum. Central themes were humanizing the offender: alternative interpretations of anti-social behavior; stimulating a holistic perspective and ways to promote an inclusive society (interview).

TMG's knowledge resources and their extensive network (within academia, local authorities, the housing sector, civic organizations) made its ideas reach far. They were regular speakers at national conferences and represented Sweden in the European network EUCPN together with a representative from the Department of Justice. Hence, their alternative ways of understanding (feelings of) unsafety – as related to social justice and cohesion and not primarily to crime – exerted extensive influence. Meanwhile, one of the key civil servants working with public safety policy at the SALAR, became convinced of the importance of changing how the problem of unsafety was conceptualized. Referring to how safety is understood in policy, she argues that 'the map does not correspond to reality somehow. So you have to redraw the map' (interview) to reduce the current prominence of 'flashing-lights-and-sirens agencies' (interview). Having the role of initiating much of the internal work, and responsible for tasks such as choosing themes and inviting speakers to conferences, as well as choosing consultants and researchers for evaluations, she was in a strong position to influence the formation of safety policy in Sweden.

These policy actors were crucial for shifting the focus of the policy debate, which resulted in a growing focus on (feelings of) unsafety as opposed to crime and risk. By shifting the focus from security issues to a more holistic perspective on safety, and making 'feelings of unsafety' the central issue, the dominant discourse of the policy field was dislocated and a renegotiation of the policy field became possible. (Feelings of) unsafety became an unsettled concept, which opened up the discourse. The conferences that were held represented an explicit attempt to shape the discourse and to expand and resettle the boundaries and problem definitions of the field.³ In a policy field dominated by statistical knowledge (e.g. crime statistics), quantitative research based on large-scale victim surveys, and effects studies (cf. Lee 2007), critical social science was now taking its place on the stage. Critical social scientists were invited to problematize and reformulate the understanding of (feelings of) unsafety, in particular within the context of conferences, seminars and reports organized by SALAR and TMG.

The policy discourse

In this section, the discursive formation of safety policy is considered, in particular as it played out at the two national conferences (SALAR 2009, 2010). The aim is to analyze the effects of the strategies employed by the actors on the national policy discourse, and to identify mechanisms of change and continuity within the policy formation process. The focus is therefore on the discursive level. The strategies and intentions of the actors are set aside and the (re)articulations of meaning are illuminated. This shift in focus enables the identification of other processes and mechanisms that are central to the dynamics of change and continuity. It may help us understand why different ideas or claims succeed or fail in influencing the policy development. A dominant discourse (in this case the risk and security discourse) does not necessarily need strategic actors. Through its exclusive position, it operates unconsciously. The effect of this, as will be shown, is that assumptions within the discourse become locked and are difficult to change or work around.

Constraints on the definition of unsafety

As has been noted, it was the lack of correlation between (measured) fear and risk, and in particular the differences exhibited by different groups/categories of people in this regard, that made 'fear of crime' a politically influential concept (Lee 2007). The risk/fear paradox (in Sweden referred to as: trygghetsparadoxen [the safety paradox]) has stimulated continuous academic debate and contributed considerably to its political impact. Within the academic world this paradox has been questioned in terms of how fear of crime has been operationalized, that is to say, how the questions have been formulated and how the phenomenon has been measured (Vanderveen 2006; cf. Björkemarmen 2007 for TMG). The paradox has been rationalized using theories of vulnerability and structural discrimination (Hale 1996). However, within the national policy discourse the risk/fear paradox functions as a metaphor implying a definition of unsafety as being a mere feeling, irrational and distinct from 'actual' unsafety (which would be the statistical risk of exposure to crime). This metaphor gains strength from the general association between emotions and irrationality, a link that is especially strongly made in relation to women (de Beauvoir 1986; Lee 2007). When transformed into a metaphor within the discourse, the research finding is turned into a fact or, in the words of Latour (1987), into 'a black box'. This means it is no longer open for questioning or further refinement, thus constraining the discourse.

The risk/fear paradox has a further dimension within the Swedish policy debate. There seems to be agreement among policy actors that the actual crime-levels in Sweden do not reflect the alarming situation depicted in the general policy storyline (reference deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process). For this reason 'feelings of unsafety' are treated as the actual core of the policy problem, and the disproportionate relationship between risk and fear is extended to characterize the population as a whole. The following quotation is an illustration of how the 'general risk/fear paradox' is expressed:

You know very well that the police can provide us with good knowledge, with statistics showing that crime hasn't increased, it's very low. But people still feel very unsafe. So, what do we have to do to be able to change that? Because it is not good that people feel unsafe even though they don't actually have any reason to. So we have to get in there somehow and make sure things change, maybe by providing information. It's often extremely important to inform people, tell them what reality is like. (SALAR 2010)

In this statement, the feelings of unsafety are contrasted with knowledge, statistics and 'reality'. The solution is to restore rationality through information. Thus, as in the academic debate, the binary opposition between fear of crime (feelings of unsafety) and risk is connected to other binary oppositions, rational/irrational, objective/subjective and reason/emotion (Lee 2007, ch 5). These binary oppositions charge the concepts with meaning through their affinity with surrounding discourses, such as gender stereotypes.

In the attempt to give (new) meaning to a concept or phenomenon, surrounding discourses function as a context, from which the actors draw cues (Weick 1995). When policy actors try to make sense of the risk/fear paradox, a heightened awareness of risk in contemporary society (i.e. the risk discourse [cf. Beck 1992]) is invoked. Risk awareness is perceived as a state of mind that

may have ‘false’ sources (reference deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process). One of the civil servants argues: ‘We see a greatly increased focus on threats, risks, vulnerability, disaster scenarios, pandemics and so on /.../ and this creates fear, it creates (feelings of) unsafety’ (SALAR 2009). This causal story is compatible with the idea of unsafety as a mere feeling, and thus as something difficult to control or change; hence it strengthens that position (cf. Hajer 2006, 71). If the emphasis on risk causes (feelings of) unsafety, talking about ‘the problem’ may be counterproductive, a logic expressed in the following quotation:

If you talk a lot about safety, then you might awaken a sleeping bear. /.../ The more we make a big deal about it, the more we risk planting seeds of worry in them, and they might start to wonder if they’re missing something, if there’s reason to feel more unsafe or insecure than they really feel. (SALAR 2010)

Within the Swedish policy debate, the view that crime-related unsafety is an (irrational) emotion is further supported by a chain of arguments holding that the state has been too caring and overprotective, and that the individual and collective ability to handle crises has therefore been weakened. The rationale (which is prevalent in contemporary society) is that the provision of safety erodes individual responsibility and initiative:

Working with and discussing safety issues [means] /.../ running the risk of becoming too, how should I say, caring, in a sense. That you risk depriving individual people of their personal responsibility, something each and every one of us carries with us. Partly to ensure our own safety, but also to make sure that we don’t cause others to end up in unsafe situations. (SALAR 2010)

This line of argument, that an overly caring state may make its citizenry passive and create a culture of dependency (cf. Gilling 1994, 252), can be discerned in neoliberal views on the welfare state. Here, it serves as an explanation of the fear/risk paradox, namely that if you are not used to handling risks you become overtly fearful. However, such an assumption is contradicted by statistics showing that crime-related insecurity is lower in countries with a high degree of social expenditure and decommodification (Hummelsheim et al. 2011).

These two examples illustrate that the process of making ‘new’ sense of the ‘unsafety problem’, thereby giving it a new meaning, implies an interplay with other discourses. My point is also to illustrate how these cues from surrounding discourses end up unintentionally supporting the risk/fear paradox. Actors may add perspectives to the policy debate, but they cannot control their function in the policy discourse.

The consequences of separation

By detaching (feelings of) unsafety from crime risk, the actors intended to make possible a wider definition of safety (interview, SALAR 2009). Trying to make sense of (feelings of) unsafety without referring to crime and risk implies breaking with the policy’s legacy. A range of problem definitions becomes possible, including economic security, existential stability, social security

and social ties. The following quotation illustrates how structural explanations become a part of the story.

[W]e have greater social problems than the average municipality has, and we still have a lesson to learn when it comes to adjustment. We have too many people who have suffered from the structural changes that are taking place [from an industrial society to a service society]. Slightly higher unemployment, and with that comes social exclusion and parents who can't manage to take responsibility for their children, and all that. And that breeds greater unsafety. (SALAR 2010)

Emphasizing structural causes of feelings of unsafety implies moving from negative to positive freedom, as defined by T.H. Green (Ball and Dagger 2004, 70). Handling unsafety is defined in a conference speech as 'strengthening cohesion and liberating people's opportunities in life' (SALAR 2009). Another consequence of the intentional detachment of unsafety from crime is that safety-promoting aspects are recognized as opposed to crime-preventive aspects. In particular, trust and social capital are emphasized as critical resources.

However, the detachment of (feelings of) unsafety from crime risk involves new challenges. The alternative causal stories involve a different range of policy institutions and thus, different policy actors. The disconnection from crime (or emergencies) also implies a disconnection from the institutional setting, which includes responsible policy actors and a set of policy solutions. The connection of (feelings of) unsafety to crime, and in particular to the risk/fear paradox, is what gave the issue its political essence and its position on the policy agenda (Lee 2007), as well as its institutional setting. As a consequence, reformulating the problem of (feelings of) unsafety is easier at the more general level of policy talk, than at the level of policy practice (Brunsson 1989), embedded as it is in institutional settings and their particular schemes of interpretation (March and Olsen 1998).

Two layers in the policy reformation debate

Within the policy debate a discrepancy can be identified between how unsafety is defined in general arguments about the nature of the problem on the one hand, and arguments concerning interventions (with implicit statements of the nature of the problem) on the other hand. Though they are intertwined, I will refer to these as different layers of the policy formation debate: a problem-defining level, in which an understanding of the problem or phenomenon of unsafety is sought and related to the societal development; and an operative level of discussion concerned with organizations and interventions, including discursively reformulating existing interventions as preventing unsafety or creating safety. The discrepancy between these levels reveals an inconsistency in the policy discourse and points to weaknesses of the reformulation attempt. At the problem-defining level, the definition of (feelings of) unsafety is wide. Central concepts and methods of inquiry are problematized, and the same major concerns are articulated that have been directed at the fear-of-crime research. However, the broader definition of unsafety (directed at social justice and cohesion) disappears at the operative level of discourse. The connection between crime risk and unsafety reappears in particular when it comes to rationalizing (feelings

of) unsafety through information about crime risks, which is a recurring theme. There is also an emphasis on CCTV, free lines of sight and other substitutes for the watching eye, which implies that unsafety is primarily related to calculated or perceived crime risk. There are examples of suggested interventions aiming to enhance social capital and trust. However, these are generally not directed at social inclusion, empowerment, or just institutions, but concern physical planning, such as the creation of meeting-places to stimulate social capital, or the installation of physical landmarks in segregated neighborhoods to put them on the map and enhance place identity.

Hence, reconceptualizations at the problem-defining level do not seem to be carried over to the operative level of discourse. Inconsistencies between them do not receive attention or cause conflicts. Policy actors tend to follow the definitions of the different levels as they shift between them. To take an example, in a conference speech (SALAR 2010) the above-average level of unsafety in a municipality was explained with reference to long-standing structural challenges that had led to higher unemployment than in many other areas. The higher unemployment was argued to cause social exclusion, as well as a higher level of street violence. These circumstances, taken together, were argued to fuel (feelings of) unsafety. When the speaker then went on to consider interventions, the definition of unsafety changed.

... if you don't sort things out and know exactly what makes people feel unsafe, then you don't know where to do the interventions. And we don't have unlimited strength, energy, or resources. And we want it to be effective. We want results. And of course it's a problem if 80- year-old Agda – it's a cliché, but I'll say it anyway – goes around worrying about whether she'll be punched in the face. (SALAR 2010)

When the perspective shifts to solutions, the fear/risk paradox again begins to constrain the line of argument. The problem is reduced to people's fear of crime, and in particular to the interpretation that the fear some groups experience in particular contexts does not seem to correspond to the actual risk levels. Having started with a societal analysis that treats unemployment as the underlying problem, the speech then concludes by recommending that people be informed about real and exaggerated risks in relation to particular sorts of crime, as a means to lower the aggregate level of experienced unsafety.

The quote is also illustrative of the managerialist influence on the operative level of the policy discourse (cf. Hughes 1998, ch. 5). The importance of results and effective interventions is emphasized. While at first sight these may seem like neutral and commonsense requirements, a focus on distinct causes and clear results imposes the requirement that the (intended) effects of the interventions not only be measurable, but be so after a relatively short period of time (Gilling 1994). Such rationality favors interventions of a situational character over interventions with a social or structural focus where experimentlike evaluations are impossible. The managerialist rationality may also explain the extensive policy transfer of interventions that have 'proved' to be effective, such as 'the broken window theory' and 'zero tolerance' (Van Swaaningen 2005, 292).

The failure of the reconceptualization of (feelings of) unsafety to be carried over to the operative level may be explained by the influence of the implementing institutions on the policy discourse. The discourse is bound by the institutional settings in which interventions are designed and implemented, and in relation to the problems that are categorized and interpreted by the actors

(cf. Weick 1995, 53). The initial meaning of the policy problem has determined the relevant institutions. These institutions then reinforce the understanding of the problem by proposing interventions related to their broader assignment and institutional rationality (Gilling 1994, 251). However, the failure could also be argued to reflect an inability to present an attractive, coherent and comprehensible alternative story about the problem of (feelings of) unsafety that might reposition the institutional responsibility to other authorities or levels. Critical research tends to problematize and point to complexity, while storylines and discursive closure have the opposite function, namely reducing complexity (see e.g. Hajer 1995). Therefore quantitative and effect-oriented research approaches are attractive to sensemaking processes, as they tend to offer causal statements and proposals for action (Stone 1989).

The closure of the policy discourse

In recent years, a closure of the policy discourse has become apparent. The alternative storylines that opened up and influenced the policy debate have silenced. TMG has lost much of its mandate and is under reorganization. Two civil servants argue that the concept of (feelings of) unsafety has lost political significance, or at least is losing its formative potential to shape policy (interviews). The opportunity to reshape policy based on a reformulation of (feelings of) unsafety, seems to have passed. Though several of the local councils now have ‘safe’ or ‘safety’ in their title instead of ‘local crime prevention’ (e.g. Trygga Eskilstuna [A Safe Eskilstuna], Trygg i Danderyd [Safe in Danderyd]), which could be taken to indicate a change in the policy discourse, an overview of the work being done shows no considerable change from the earlier emphasis on crime and risk management. The latest safety policy conferences arranged by SALAR (2011–4) focused on cooperation between local authorities and the police, crisis communication, and how to deal with threats and violence against politicians. In the annual inaugural speech of the cabinet on 18 September 2012, unsafety was exclusively associated with crime and the legal system. Still, we should not jump to the conclusion that the activities and knowledge production over these years have had no effect. They may have affected the ideas of individuals, as well as related discourses. The strategies applied and the critical research drawn upon may have long-term effects, by shaping the ideational context of future policy formation processes (cf. Weiss 1979: Enlightenment Model). In addition, the possibility remains that the policy discourse could open up again for reasons such as external pressure (Edwards and Hughes 2012, 453) or changes in related discourses.

Concluding discussion

Fear of crime emerged as a policy problem in the mid-1960s (Lee 2007), and has since become an established policy problem. It has generated extensive criminological research, as well as widespread policies, such as community safety and local crime prevention (e.g. Crawford 2009). As Lee (2007) lucidly illustrates with the ‘fear of crime’ feedback loop (see introduction), the policy field (including the understanding of ‘the problem’) has an intrinsic relationship to the research on fear of crime. Both the policies and the related research have been subjected to

persistent criticism. However, the reformation of public safety policy in Sweden, which reflected such criticism, did not endure. In this paper, I have investigated the strategies used by the central actors, and how their strategies affected the policy discourse. In doing so, I have identified factors that constrained the intended policy reformation (cf. Torfing 2009, 75). The analysis shows how the policy problem's past constrains the possibility of achieving an altered understanding of the problem. Hence, there is an ideational path-dependency (cf. Pierre 2009) of the policy, one differing from the more common understanding of path-dependency as based on longstanding national or institutional policy practices (see e.g. Schmidt 2011, 109).

According to how path-dependency is generally understood within policy research, the formation of policy is constrained or shaped by choices made in the past. This case has shown that a critical mechanism underlying such lock-in effects is the intertwining of policy and research, which may lead to ideational path-dependency in problem conceptualization and policy development. The interrelationship between policy and research may constrain policy change and learning through the same mechanisms by which a research field is constrained, e.g. the increasing-returns of conceptualizations and large data-sets, and the black-boxing of established results (Latour 1987). Within the policy discourse, the idea of a risk/fear paradox (the 'productive' puzzle of the research field) has the function of a central metaphor. The black-boxing of the paradox constrains the policy discourse and prevents the reformulation of (feelings of) unsafety as a policy problem. Attempts to make 'new' sense of the policy problem by drawing cues from other discourses (cf. Weick 1995) (such as the risk society discourse), end up feeding the risk/fear paradox, and thereby the connection to crime. Thus, another constraint on the reformation attempt is made up of the connections between the idea-complex of the policy and surrounding discourses, which are articulated when actors intentionally and unintentionally draw on different discourses to make 'new' sense of the policy problem.

The notion of path-dependency originates from economic theory and the concept of increasing-returns (Pierson 2000). Increasing-returns is a mathematical concept, but can in policy terms be said to mean that a path can start from a random decision, but the farther down the path you go the stronger the support for that particular path, in terms of reduced costs, established institutional settings, institutionalized behaviors and so forth. In the case of safety policy in Sweden, not only discourses, but also the institutional settings play a part. A reformulation of (feelings of) unsafety that concentrates on social structures would imply the involvement of another set of actors, as well as actions. The storylines that upheld the policy problem as it was adopted also determined the legitimate institutional setting for dealing with it, which also affects what actors take part in the policy formation process. A problem-formulation that does not suggest interventions that are within these actors' institutional capacity has no basis for implementation. In addition, a reformulation of the policy problem that lifts it out of that institutional framework deprives it of its political legitimacy. Thus, once again, the initial formulation obstructs problem reformulation, this time through the actors and institutions appointed to handle the problem.

While we have come far in explaining change, as well as stability and continuity, the dynamics of change and continuity and the micro-mechanisms of incremental policy change still need further examination (Torfing 2009; Schmidt 2011). One way forward, as suggested in this paper, is the careful study of policy formation processes. The (re)formation of a policy is not necessarily best

described as a struggle between different interest groups or coalitions (cf. Sabatier and Weible 2007), though the outcome (e.g. policy change) may be portrayed as such. In immature policy fields, where the problem is contested and knowledge production is part of the governing process, policy actors seldom have clear objectives (Zahariadis 2007). In such cases, conceptualizing the policy formation process as a sensemaking process (Weick 1995) may be more illuminating. This study does not provide any general answer to why policy change does or does not occur, nor does it claim to give a conclusive explanation of the policy development in Sweden. Its more modest contribution is that actors may influence policy, intentionally as well as unintentionally, by making connections to surrounding discourses and knowledge claims, and thereby strengthen or change the dominant way of understanding a policy problem (cf. Hajer 1995, 2006). It has also pointed to mechanisms of ideational path-dependency that constrain the reformulation of a policy problem. The results indicate that mechanisms of policy change and continuity can be identified in the entwinement of policy and research. However, this case study covers a limited period of time, and is restricted to the national policy discourse in Sweden. To gain a deeper knowledge of such mechanisms, more extensive empirical studies are needed.

Within many policy theories there has been a tendency first to identify change and then to explain it. Such a retrospective approach runs the risk of overstating the importance of decisive events and overlooking underlying incremental processes (De Vries 2010; Schmidt 2011). A discursive approach allows us to identify cases where the policy discourse has created an opportunity for reformation, to follow that process and to investigate cases of both successful and failed policy change. Another important contribution of a discursive approach to policy formation is that the interrelationship between different discourses (in different policy fields or countries, or between research and policy, the global and local, etc.) becomes evident. Hence, understanding policy change as a change in meaning leads to other questions such as: How can the boundaries of a particular change be identified? The general approach to policy change is to take the perspective of a country, its institutions and policies. Ideational trends may then be a reason for policy change. However, if we take the perspective of a policy ideation, other mechanisms will emerge. Webs of meaning tend to transcend policy fields and national borders; therefore not only the effects of a dominant ideational trend, but perhaps more importantly its discontinuation, could be considered instances of policy change.

Notes

1. In the Swedish public safety debate the term otrygghet is used instead of fear of crime. The same general questions are applied to measure the phenomenon (both in research and policy), however the terms used to signify it differ. The word otrygghet is most closely translated as unsafety, though with an emphasis on feelings of unsafety. I therefore write (feelings of) unsafety to get as close as possible to the meaning of the word. The problem of (feelings of) unsafety as it is generally depicted in the policy debate comes close to the problem of fear of crime. However, the term is wider and allows for a broader set of connotations.
2. Other conferences are also doing this but have an emphasis on sharing experience and knowledge from different projects or methods.
3. Another coalition with the primary aim to put safety and security issues on the political agenda was also interested in renegotiating the policy field. Primary representatives of this coalition were safety managers or coordinators at municipal authorities. By sharing a common organization, situation reports, problem descriptions and priorities, they attempted to better equip and package safety and security issues for the agenda-setting process (SALAR 2009). The two coalitions coincide in their aim to define and demarcate safety policy

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