The dynamics of policy formation
Making sense of public unsafety

av

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Abstract


Every policy problem has inherent value dimensions. It is on the basis of values that a state of affairs is perceived as undesirable, and thus acknowledged as a problem. This makes the process of defining and negotiating the meaning of a problem an essentially political process. Despite this, bureaucracy and expertise have a strong, if not increasing, influence over the formation of policy problems. An objectivist knowledge view predominates within the public managerial realm, which obscures the political dimension of problem formulation, while policy problems tend to be approached as a matter of efficiency.

This thesis provides an account of mechanisms that shape and constrain the way a particular policy problem is understood and addressed. It analyses how policy actors make sense of particular problems, by drawing on different discourses (scientific, institutional, popular or media). The empirical case of this thesis is the formation of public safety policy in Sweden. The understanding of the problem of unsafety within Swedish policy is shown to be intrinsically related to the research field of fear of crime. The two are mutually dependent and exert an ideational path dependency. The ideational constraints on the understanding of unsafety are further affected by the institutional setting. It is argued that the appointed institutions and the emphasis on local level have a part in fostering individualist explanations and solutions, while obviating structural interpretations of the problem.

The thesis finds that when governing complex policy problems there is a need to pay closer attention to how the problem is defined and how its meaning is constrained. It is crucial to make transparent the values inherent in definitions of problems as well as in research claims. By acknowledging the entwinement of policy and research the policy formation process may become characterized by greater reflexivity, and the possibility of resolving wicked problems may enlarge.

Keywords: Policy formation, wicked problems, sensemaking, safety, unsafety, fear of crime, policy change, discourse, ideas, interpretive, policy transfer

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