chapter 34

In Pursuit of El Dorado

Notes on an Encounter with Youth Policy in Terra Incognita

Judith Bessant

Youth Policy and Reflexive Practice

The value of reflexivity for comparative policy studies and more specifically for youth policy may become clearer if we ask: what is the purpose of the policy? As an academic practice, comparative policy study entails a comparison of countries and their policies. Typically comparative youth policy analysis has been carried out by researchers working within clearly delineated disciplinary frames. Economists, sociologists, Marxist and feminist scholars, historians and political scientists all research in this area with each relying on different assumptions about the field and appropriate methods for carrying out the analysis (Castles 1998; Charles and Campling 2000; Esping-Anderson 1996; Rein, 1984; Rosner 2003). As a result we have seen an expanding literature over past decades that offers well-tried and tested analytical, “theoretical” and methodological frameworks for comparing countries and their policies (Aspalter 2002). The purpose of all this work has been to make sense of the ways countries develop and implement policy.

For Weick (2001) a more developed understanding of sense-making has implications for “empirical,” taxonomic and “theoretical” work which constitutes much of our comparative policy analysis. He refers to “a narrative” or “sequence” which unfolds and becomes clearer as people engage in “ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make sense retrospectively while enacting...order into those circumstances” (2005, 409). From this perspective, sense-making in policy-making is about the “interplay of action and interpretation” (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld 2005, 409).

It is an observation, rather than a criticism, that academic scholarship in the study of policy, rarely engages sense-making understood as Weick describes it. Instead, traditional scholarly approaches tend to be more characteristic of the observer (van Manen 1997). Bourdieu (1990) described academic work, the discourses it generates and that are rewarded within fields dominated by the academic habitus. Such observations serve to remind us that most academic research is generally seen as not requiring reflection on, or direct contribution to, action or practice (exceptions include policy texts designed to inform policy practice). Rather, academic researchers tend to prefer a more abstracted
relationship with the field of action, often mediated by significant data. These observations inform this chapter which considers whether an ethnographic style of comparative sense-making has value in the field of 21st Century comparative policy analysis where the intention is to inform policy practice.

The occasion for asking about reflexive practice and its relevance to comparative policy relates to a youth policy-making project I undertook in a ‘developing’ country referred to here as El Dorado. I was invited by the United Nations (UN) and the government of El Dorado to develop a national youth policy, a project that began ‘on site’. Apart from preserving some anonymity which respects confidential sources, my naming of El Dorado also signals a semiotic intent.

El Dorado is a small nation in South America. Like Haiti a large portion of its population, some 40 per cent, live in poverty as defined by the UN. It is a society divided along clear ‘racial’ lines. It is home to people of African descent whose ancestors were part of slave shipments. There are also Hindu and Muslim Indians, descendants of indentured labourers shipped to El Dorado to replace African slaves when they were emancipated. Finally there is a small but growing population of indigenous Ameridians. These ethnic divisions are replicated in the political domain. The two main parties are the Popular Democratic Party whose constituents are the affluent Indian community while the People’s Congress supporters are poorer Africans. No official data on Ameridian voting patterns exist. While both political parties claim a common ‘left-wing’ agenda, they are rivals. After decades of totalitarian Marxist government that came to an end in the 1990s, democratic elections took place but were fraught and characterised by high levels of ethnic violence. ‘Electoral’ tactics included the practice of recruiting local boys and young men into death squads who were given the task of killing or intimidating political opponents.

El Dorado is dominated by young people with 50 per cent of its population under 25 years of age. While the official line is that most children receive some primary education and significant efforts are being made to increase school retention, many children, especially boys, do not complete primary education. Illiteracy and innumeracy are major issues as is the high rate of HIV-AIDS infection. Child abuse and neglect is widespread. There is one small university, a few technical colleges and a small number of secondary schools. There is a booming sex industry and the country has long been a conduit for cocaine from the south to north America.

If the name ‘El Dorado’ provides anonymity and was the name given by successive European conquistadors, pirates and adventurers to the ruler of an imagined city of enormous wealth located somewhere to the east of Peru and Venezuela, then the search for El Dorado was the incentive for many unsuccessful expeditions by Spanish and English adventurers (Grann 2010). Coote