THE ADDED VALUE OF ANTHROPOLOGY TO THE STUDY OF POLICY
A SHORT ARGUMENT

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Introduction

Policies have a pervasive effect on both individuals and society (Shore and Wright “Policy. A new field” 4). They shape our conduct as well as the ways we construct ourselves as subjects. A common assumption, both in mainstream policy science and among the general public, is that policy making is a rational process in which politicians evaluate several policy options and choose the one that addresses the problems at hand in the best way (Shore and Wright “Conceptualising policy” 4–5). Reality, however, as is argued by a growing number of social scientists, is much more complex and diffuse (among others Hall; Shore and Wright; Stone; Kingdon; Fischer; Schmidt). Understanding how the intricate process of policy making exactly works is vital, because policies are the means through which state power is produced and populations are governed (Feldman).

This paper discusses what an anthropological approach can contribute to the study of policy. It starts with a short overview of common approaches in policy science. Then, it gives an explanation of what an anthropological approach consists of and makes the argument that anthropology is indeed of added value. The case of Dutch immigrant integration policy is discussed next to illustrate this argument and, furthermore, to set out the plans for my PhD research. The paper concludes with some general remarks.

Common approaches

Mainstream policy science is grounded in a positivist tradition, aiming to explain policy development through universal theories (Hall and Taylor). These rational approaches explain policy development by studying how the power and structure of institutions determine policy decisions and outcomes. The neo-institutionalist and interpretative turns in policy science in the 1980s and 1990s caused scholars to pay more attention to the variety and complexity of political change (Żischer; Schmidt; Shore and Wright “Conceptualising policy”). The aim of these alternative approaches is to provide a more detailed account of institutional change and continuity by examining the interaction between actors, structures and ideas, with specific attention to issues of framing and discourse.

Problems, for example, are not ‘just out there’, but need to be defined first (Hall; Benford and Snow; Fischer; Kingdon). Social conditions are perceived as problematic, depending on the assumptions and rationales that are provided by a – taken for granted, but highly normative and selective – policy frame. Policies thus never form a clear choice of rational solutions put forward by neutral bureaucratic knowledge. This type of knowledge consists instead of simplifying, rigid and linear qualities that are imposed on, but can never fully grasp, complex and fluid peoples, processes and events (Hall; Scott; Heyman). In this way, policies express the ideas a government has about the society it aims to shape and policies therefore give meaning to the world (Fischer; Yanow).

Besides being normative, policy outcomes are often the result of struggles between different actors. Policy development is not a linear path of civil servants executing the plans of politicians, but a messy process in which several different organisations participate (Stone; Kingdon; Fischer; Heyman; Hoag; Shore and Wright “Conceptualising policy”). Mechanisms
and processes that lead to policy outcomes are therefore unpredictable and ambiguous rather than rational and straightforward.

An anthropological approach

Despite the rise of a neo-institutionalist and interpretative tradition in policy science, the experiences and opinions of people who are actively involved in institutional developments are not often the subject of study (Wedel et al.; Shore and Wright; Schmidt). What is missing is an anthropological approach that studies the viewpoints of individual actors and tries to understand how people make sense of the world. Such an approach focuses on how policy makers attribute meaning to the society they aim to intervene in, as well as to their work. On the other hand, an anthropological study problematizes frames and discourses that are taken for granted, thus balancing between insider and outsider accounts.

Central in an anthropological approach are the ways in which people engage with policy and what they make of it (Shore and Wright “Conceptualising policy”). It focuses on the role that individuals have in larger institutional developments. Because policy creates links between actors, institutions, technologies and discourses it is analytically productive. On an organizational level, moreover, an anthropological approach can elucidate the messy and opaque processes through which policy develops and provide detailed knowledge of how a policy is formed in the interplay between various actors in a policy network. It, furthermore, has an eye for conflicts and power relations in the network of actors.

As Verlot puts it, if we want to understand policy making we have to look “at policy makers as persons . . . rather than depicting them as a homogenous group in institutions creating a uniform product” (347). This entails having an interest for how policy makers are framing changes in society and at the same time are changing the frames through which they observe society. Because policy makers work together in structured contexts, an in-depth study of policy making elucidates how shared discourses about problems and policy solutions become legitimized, institutionalized and formalized in a system of governance (Shore and Wright ”Policy. A new field”; Reinhold and Wright). It sheds light on how a new governing discourse is made authoritative.

The case of Dutch immigrant integration policy

A telling example of a (evolving) system of governance is immigrant integration policy in the Netherlands. In this section, the case of Dutch integration policy and how it can be studied anthropologically is discussed. Firstly, a short overview is given of Dutch post-war immigration patterns and consequent policy reactions on the national level. Secondly, important developments during the last decade are highlighted. Thirdly, possibilities for an in-depth approach are given.

The first group of immigrants that is discerned in literature as well as in policy are inhabitants from former Dutch colonies; from Indonesia in the 1950s and from Suriname and the Dutch Antilles in the 1970s (Entzinger; Bruquetas-Callejo et al.; Doomernik). Labour migrants recruited from the Mediterranean (most notably from Turkey and Morocco) came in the 1960s and 1970s. This was followed by family reunification in the 1980s, when the labour recruitment programmes had already come to an end. The labour migration that was thought to be temporary turned out to be permanent. Later to arrive were asylum seekers, who have primarily been coming since the 1990s. A new point of interest for policy makers in the Netherlands is how to deal with contemporary migrants from within the EU, most notably from Eastern Europe, who are difficult to control because of EU regulations. Some of them are staying temporarily and travel between places, while others are settling on a more permanent basis.
Governmental reactions to immigrants and their integration have been volatile. Policy frames that have been changing every decade testify to the intractability of the policy problem (Scholten). The content and underlying rationales of integration policy have been changing and political reactions have evolved into intense debates, a tougher, hyper-realistic political discourse, and increasingly restrictive policies (see among others Prins; Entzinger; Bruquetas-Callejo; et al., Uitermark; Duyvendak and Scholten). Integration policies have seen several paradigm shifts; all in all, four different phases of integration policy can be discerned.

Firstly, the 1970s’ ad hoc policy responses to migration (the Netherlands still did not consider itself as an immigration country in this period) changed to increasingly restrictive immigration policies during later decades (Bruquetas-Callejo et al.; Doomernik). The first coherent integration policies on the national level were developed in the early 1980s. The overall aim has since been the participation of newcomers – and later also of the 2nd generation – in society by providing the right circumstances for them to build-up a life here. The means through which participation is thought to be achieved, however, have been changing about once every decade. First, the focus was on the emancipation of ethnic or cultural minorities. In the early 1990s, the aim changed to social-economic participation of individual immigrants as citizens. Finally, after the turn of the millennium, integration has been predominantly framed as a problem of social-cultural adaptation.

Especially the last ten years have been epitomized by a politicization of migrants and their integration, which implies that the topic has become less isolated from macro-politics and plays a prominent role in electoral politics (Bruquetas-Callejo et al.; Scholten). This caused a shift in the primacy of integration policy making from technocratic and academic policy makers to politicians. Moreover, the institutional context has seen various developments, such as centralization and later decentralization, a linking with the policy field of immigration, and various organizational settings. Besides, there is a growing influence of the European Union on the development of integration policies in member states.

However, integration policy making in the Netherlands is not only characterized by change; there is also continuity of existing policies addressing for example education, housing and employment of immigrants and their descendants (Bruquetas-Callejo et al.). Furthermore, dominance of a policy frame at a given moment does not mean that some actors might think along other lines. All in all, the world of policy making is complex and diffuse and to outsiders it is unclear how processes exactly evolve.

In recent years, there has been a growing academic interest in the development of integration policy in the Netherlands (see the references mentioned above). This research has elucidated the different reactions, the development of policies and policy frames, the specific discourses in which migrants and their integration have been discussed, and the effects and overall use of integration policies. Less common, however, is a study of the perceptions and reflections of people that are involved in the process of policy making. This holds for policy making in the Netherlands in general, but is specifically interesting for a field of policy that is highly contentious and has been characterized by a period of strong politicization. It raises questions about how this affects policy making and how their own perceptions relate to the dominant political frame.

What can be concluded from this overview is that migration raises important political questions about its causes and impacts, about how best to steer it in order to realise social and economic goals and about who is allowed to be part of the national community. This sparks debate, causing different policy narratives or knowledge claims to thrive. Dutch integration policies are characterized by uncertainty, a volatile political and social context and several disrupting changes. An anthropological study can contribute to the analysis of these developments by focusing on the competing knowledge claims, their origins and how individuals relate to them. Despite the large number of studies addressing Dutch integration
policy, little detailed knowledge exists about the process of policy making, the actors that have been involved and the continuity and change of policies.

The goal of my PhD research is to explicate the field of (national) integration policy making in the Netherlands and assess in detail the roles of the various actors that have been involved in the past fifteen years. It pays attention to both the reflections of policy makers on their work and the policy they develop, as well as to the ways in which they normalize ideas and values about migrants, integration and society. Another important aspect is the technical and bureaucratic organisation of policy making, in combination with the network of involved actors (Shore and Wright; Wedel et al.; Feldman).

The methods by which data are gathered, are analysis of documents and secondary literature, and conducting (semi-structured) interviews. The major shortcoming of my research is that it is very difficult to use the method of participant observation, which is the key feature of doing anthropological fieldwork. Because of the political sensitivity of the work of policy makers, obtaining access is problematic. However, I circumvent this problem by reconstructing cases that took place in the recent past and interviewing people who are no longer involved in policy making and might speak more freely. In addition, I take the wider network of both governmental and non-governmental actors into account. While this could already yield interesting results, possibilities for participant observation may increase when building up more rapport with informants.

The process of policy making is elucidated by studying it through the eyes of policy makers. By familiarizing myself with their worldviews, a better understanding of actors’ opinions about society can be acquired. This research unravels where their knowledge about society comes from, how it is put to use and how it becomes institutionalized. It reveals the rationales behind policy decisions, addresses the shared policy language of ideas and values, and elucidates the ways in which individuals relate to those rationales. In this way, it is possible to assess how a governing regime comes into being and how policies serve as vehicles for political change.

Concluding remarks

To sum up, there are three reasons why an anthropological approach to the study of policy is valuable. Firstly, it maps in detail the process of policy making and the network of involved actors, illuminating many more aspects of a policy field than what has hitherto been done. Secondly, only by studying the process of policy making from the inside, through the eyes of the people who are involved, can we gain a full understanding of it. Mainstream approaches may be able to explain a fair deal of institutional development, but in the end institutions such as policy (or ‘the state’, ‘politics’, or ‘bureaucracy’, for that matter) are constituted in the coordinated work of numerous individuals. People make institutions, not the other way around. Therefore, people need to be the object of study. Thirdly, a central aspect of anthropology is studying how people interpret the world and attribute meaning to it. This is especially important when these people have the power to intervene in the world with the help of policy. In short, a detailed anthropological study provides an understanding of how systems of governance come into existence, how these construct subjects as objects of power, how values and norms are institutionalized and legitimized, and how power and governance are organized.

Works cited


