

POLICY AND POLICY MAKING: REFORMING POVERTY?

The Politics of Knowledge and Poverty: A Case Study of Recent Policy Reforms of the General Assistance Program in Washington State

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Substantial anti-poverty programs have experienced severe budget cuts in response to states' revenue shortfalls due to the Great Recession (2007-2009). In contrast to Institutional Rational Choice Theory which argues that policy makers base their decision on the costs and benefits assigned to the policy outcomes, Social Construction Theory argues that policy designs are the products of social construction and the power resources of target populations. Through the lens of the Social Construction Theory, my research examined the role of knowledge in shaping and transforming the General Assistance (GA) program in Washington State, an anti-poverty program providing income support for poor people who fall outside other federally-funded income support programs. Using qualitative content analysis of written and electronic documents of legislative activities, I investigated how scientific, professional, and political knowledge were used by policy participants to inform policymaking from 2009 through 2011, during which the GA program was substantially revised and eventually eliminated. Research findings show that GA-recipients were stigmatized as undeserving poor with multiple medical and behavioral problems. This negative social construction influentially led policy reform to an elimination of cash benefit and a conditional housing service for the unemployable poor. This study suggests that the stigma attributed to poor people negatively affects the policy choices and consequences. Future advocacy work and research should consider challenging the negative social construction of the target population as well as offering convincing evidence on positive social outcomes of anti-poverty programs.

Poverty wages and the 'Fight for 15': Reimagining fast food through feminist economic geography

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Over the past year, fast food workers have staged protests across the United States and the world to demand a \$15 an hour livable wage and the right to unionize without reprisal. These demands have arisen from the reality that one in five households with a family member working in fast food lives below the poverty line and approximately half of all front-line fast food workers are recipients of various forms of welfare. At the same time, fast food companies and their CEOs report record profits (Allegretto et al., 2013). Fast food worker labour politics disrupts scholarly and popular imaginations of fast food that focuses attention on the alternative/local food movement or fast food's contribution to food deserts and the so-called obesity epidemic. These foci have foreclosed upon rich opportunities to examine the complex gendered and racialized dimensions to fast food, food labour, poverty, precarity, and social reproduction. In this paper, I propose feminist economic geography as a framework through which to examine these issues. As I will argue, feminist economic geography is particularly well positioned to tackle these questions through its emphasis on a multi-scalar analysis that highlights people, labour and places outside of the formal, waged economy; its blurring of the distinction between production and social reproduction; and, its methodological focus on marginalized voices, agency, and resistance.

The Role of Framing and Communication in Policy Publications on Poverty and Economic Security

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Although much research has been devoted to understanding poverty and economic insecurity in the United States, relatively little work focuses on how such information can be effectively translated to affect policy change. Contrary to the approach taken by many researchers, the facts rarely “speak for themselves” when it comes to value-laden issues such as poverty. How poverty is understood by the public, and framed by society, shape what policies are conceived, how they are designed, and whether they are widely supported and adopted. Representations of poverty are socially constructed within the confines of existing beliefs about the causes of poverty, who is poor, who is deserving of aid, the role of government, and so forth. Increasingly, evidence demonstrates the power of such beliefs in shaping public attitudes toward the poor and determining the course of policy debate. For research translators, it becomes essential to take these attitudes into account, particularly when conveying information that may conflict with prevailing beliefs. This study examines how poverty and economic security issues are framed in recent, policy-oriented publications produced by top-level think tanks and research institutes. The organizations included are recognized as having policy impact, and represent a range of political and value orientations. Using qualitative content analysis, this paper describes how poverty issues are represented in these publications. Subsequent author interviews explore how personal, institutional, and societal factors intersect to shape authors’ writing. Implications are drawn for how poverty and economic security research could be more effectively communicated to policy audiences.

Illustrating Poverty in Constitutional Litigation

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While the U.S. Constitution guarantees no socioeconomic rights, the realities of socioeconomic disadvantage—what it means to live in poverty or to be low-income—arise in various contexts in constitutional litigation. One of these contexts is when courts must apply a balancing test—typically balancing the state’s reasons for regulating a constitutional right, e.g., the right to vote, the right to have an abortion, against the weight or significance of the burden that the regulation places on those who seek to exercise that right. In these contexts, federal courts are sometimes forced to grapple with the lived, day-to-day realities of poverty, e.g., how hard would it be for a poor person to get to the Department of Motor Vehicles to get a photo ID; how difficult would it be for a poor, rural woman to get an abortion when regulations targeting abortion providers force the closure of clinics so that she must travel 200 miles from her home to reach one? My paper will look at cases in which courts have examined and assessed such regulations’ burdens on the poor, and it does so in an effort to assess the strategies that are most successful in eliciting judicial empathy for the lives of the poor.

Suburban Poverty, Drug Policy, and the Relational Politics of Place: The Case of Surrey, Canada

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Despite evidence that low-income and service-dependent groups are increasingly located outside inner city areas in Canadian and US cities, there has been little attention paid to the territorial and relational politics associated with *suburban* and *city-regional* geographies of poverty. Drawing on recent fieldwork in Surrey, a rapidly changing suburb of Vancouver, Canada, this paper examines the management of addiction and low-income health and social services through local policymaking. The relational politics of place and policymaking shape suburban and city-regional geographies of poverty and the institutional spaces of survival where street-involved drug users may access life-saving 'harm-reduction' supplies and services (e.g. clean needles, overdose kits, counselling). Examining policy responses towards illicit drug use provides a particular lens to explain how suburban poverty is managed and how institutional spaces of care and survival for stigmatized groups are produced and contested.