

A Postmodernist Model for Examining Educational and Social Policies

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Abstract

Policy Archaeology is a recent development in policy studies which provides a very useful framework for examining educational and social policies. I believe that this model is helpful for better understanding the origins of policies and the forces that shape policies. Those teaching a variety of courses in educational foundations, multiculturalism, and special education could use this model.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how policy archaeology, an application of Foucault's archaeology, can be used to examine educational and social policies—in particular policies impacting persons with disabilities. The paper will begin with a brief overview of policy archaeology and its benefits in examining educational and social policy issues of marginalized peoples. Next, I will apply policy archaeology by considering several educational policies. This will provide the basis for discussing ways this model could be helpful in teaching classes in educational foundations, multiculturalism, and/or special education.

Foucault's Archaeology provides the analytical framework for policy archaeology. Archaeology, as a method of historical analysis, was influenced by at least two major developments in the early part of the twentieth century. One was the shift from linear scientific investigation modeled after Euclid and Newton to the field theory in science associated with Einstein. The other centered on Saussure's linguistic studies which, among other things, "raised the question of whether there were laws that would be applicable to all languages" (Major-Poetzl 1983, 97). Foucault borrowed some ideas from these studies, rejected others, and in the end created a new paradigm in order to help understand how a discipline has developed norms of validity and objectivity. I intentionally used the word paradigm to describe archaeology because it created the same sorts of controversy and debate that Thomas Kuhn described regarding paradigm shifts in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Furthermore, Kuhn's work is far more familiar in the United States than Foucault's and thus Kuhn may serve as a reference for comparisons and illustrate some of Foucault's ideas.

Much of the controversy surrounding Foucault's development of archaeology was that it challenged two influential concentrations in the field of history--the history of ideas and the *Annales* school. Foucault rejected many of the cherished beliefs of these historians. For example, he refused to accept the notion that the function of history was to chart the continuous slow march of progress through the ages. He also opposed the belief that it was

possible to assign causality to an event or to track an action or idea to its origins. One of the major tenets of the *Annales* school was the study of *la longue duree* (great length) as the foundation for the loci of the activities of any individual or social subject..."(Gutting 1992, 229). The history of ideas, instead of tracing events, mapped out the chronological development of an idea. In these cases continuity was emphasized while ruptures or discontinuities were minimized. Embracing such a view leads to the assumption that there is a "causal force between great men, great civilizations, or great events or, alternatively assumes a meaningful continuity founded in a transcendental Logos" (Lemert and Gillan 1982, 10,11). Foucault wanted to eliminate the fundamental role of the human subject as a central focus of history. Instead, he wanted to work "between the extremes of empiricism, wherein the visible exhausts signification, and idealism, wherein the hidden idea explains away the visible fact" (Lemert and Gillan, 45). Therefore, "archaeology is suspicious of objects. It aims 'to dispense with 'things' and seeks to examine 'the space in which various objects emerge and are transformed' to describe 'systems of dispersion'" (Major-Poetzl 1983, 5). This analytical approach sets archaeology apart from other historical methodologies. See the following works by Foucault for a detailed treatment of archaeology: *The Birth of a Clinic* (1963), *Madness and Civilization* (1965), *The Order of Things* (1966), *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969).

Policy Archaeology is a recent development in educational policy studies that provides a methodology for analyzing educational and social policy that goes beyond traditional policy study's framework which is restrictive since it accepts or presumes a commitment to the larger liberal worldview in which it exists. In contrast, this methodology argues for a different approach to policy studies, one that opens up new territory, one that establishes a new problematic and, thus, one that serves to alter and expand the policy studies area. Policy archaeology is useful to my research because it expands the analysis of educational policy studies by asking questions that promote the investigation of groups and issues that have traditionally been ignored or taken for granted by policy researchers. For an introduction to policy archaeology see: James Scheurich. "Policy Archaeology: A New policy Studies Methodology," in *Journal of Educational Policy*, 9:4 (Fall 1994): 297-316.

Four arenas of investigation:

Arena I: In the education/social problem arena, the focus is on the study of the social construction of specific education and social problems. The basic assumption that a certain social problem is an empirical given or is a natural occurrence is questioned.

Arena II: The focus is on the identification of the network or grids of social regularities across educational and social problems. The regularities: 1) constitute both categories of thought and ways of thinking, 2) constitute the set of conditions in accordance with which a practice is exercised or the conditions that make it possible for a social problem to emerge, and 3) can change and new ones can emerge. Four social regularities that I use for the blind are vision, disability, governmentality, and professionalization.

Arena III: This arena concentrates on the study of the social construction of the range of acceptable policy solutions. The focus here is the study of how the range of possible policy choices is shaped by the grid of social regularities. Without this type of analysis it is easy for policy researchers to believe that the policies they create are based on objective methods of investigation.

Arena IV: The concern is with the study of the social functions of policy studies itself.

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