

**Struggling with the state I am in:
Researching policy failures and the English National Health Service**

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Abstract

This article examines the tensions between failing when researching policy and researching policy that itself will inevitably tend towards failure. Putting geographic scholarship on policy mobilities into dialogue with recent attempts to reclaim academic failure, I discuss the emotional struggles that can punctuate the geographies of researching, mobilising and critiquing public policy. Supported by diary material as a fixed-term contract policy researcher studying health and care reforms in England, I reflect on failure when working within and beyond the spaces of the local state. With growing pressure on academics to impact policymaking, I emphasise the unsettling 'betweenness' of policy mobilities researchers unable to get to grips with power whilst becoming attached to, and part of, policies under investigation. Consequently, I suggest precarious academic researchers are, in more ways than one, occupying uncertain positions within accelerated worlds of fast policy as public intermediaries unable to talk about failure. The article concludes by outlining why this matters in the present crisis.

Introduction

To paraphrase Gillian Rose (1997), this is an article written from a state of failure. But it is also an article about the state and failure. It is an attempt to make sense of my inability to get to grips with power as a policy researcher on a fixed-term contract working within and beyond the spaces of the local state. As I shall discuss, it was not just my efforts to fully know my positionality that were bound to end in some kind of failure (Rose, 1997). Rather, as it is impossible to ever have total control of any particular project, governance is necessarily incomplete (Malpas and Wickham, 1995). And given the structural complexity and turbulence of the social world, it follows that policy will, in different ways, always be at risk of failing (Jessop, 2003). As such, this article considers the struggles of feeling unable to talk publicly about the inevitability of failure when becoming an intermediary entangled within the 'prosaic' state spaces of policy (Painter, 2006).

Amidst an intensification of anxiety within metrics-driven universities (Berg et al., 2016), it is now hard to avoid the pressure on academics to become 'policy relevant' (Staehele and Mitchell, 2005; Ward, 2005). True, there is growing recognition of the complicated relationships between policy studies and the emotional/affective dimensions of studying policy (Clayton et al., 2015; Horton and Kraftl, 2009). But, as universities re-structure to

become responsive to the latest policy cycles, more often than not, it is academics on temporary contracts hired to work the spaces of policy research. Concurrently, attention is now turning towards the influence of academics themselves becoming intermediaries within global circuits of 'fast policy', a phenomenon understood as the accelerated conditions of policymaking characterised by the global circulation of predominantly neoliberal policy models, knowledge and expertise (Peck and Theodore, 2015). This has prompted policy mobilities researchers Temenos and Baker (2015: 841) to ask: 'what role do institutions, such as universities, play in the transfer of policy ideas and promoting best practice models? How is our own work implicated in the mobility and immobility of certain policy ideas? How do researchers' engagements with elected officials, policy practitioners, activists and the like see them embroiled in the very process under investigation?' I take up these questions in this article, paying attention towards how emotions registered within my research practices as a fixed-term contract policy researcher occupying a decidedly uncertain position.

Over the past few years, I have been researching health and social care reforms in England. Although a geographer, I was based as a post-doctoral researcher within government funded research units in public health and business schools. Working from within the sites and spaces of the English National Health Service (NHS) and local government, I spent time researching the practices of local state bureaucrats, hospital managers, elected officials and others involved in politically high-profile place-based initiatives. As a universal public healthcare system, any change to the NHS is always politically contentious. Yet rarely did I make explicit the political dimensions of the policies I was researching. Whilst a post-doctoral researcher, I began my own smaller project studying the resistances of activists mobilising against similar ongoing reforms across England. Emotional declarations were ever-present throughout all the research projects: "I love the NHS", a statement seemingly made for suit lapel badge or protest banner alike, a statement both NHS chief executives and health campaigners could seemingly agree on. Yet the swelling surge of anger among protesters marching across London against the UK government could hardly have felt further from the mundanity of hours I spent in boardrooms, hospital executive suites and town halls (Anderson, 2009). Although no-one ever told me, I felt an intense pressure to self-govern, even conceal, my emotional-political self throughout. In fact, the dilemmas of moving across these

seemingly separate worlds of policy became increasingly unsettling.

The aim of this article is to contribute an account of the emotional struggles that can punctuate the geographies of researching, circulating and critiquing public policy. Rather than choosing between either researching the technocratic or political spaces of policy, I build on attempts to move beyond accounts of being situated ‘between heroic immersion and critical distance’ (Keith, 2008: 320). To do so, I discuss how I became a public intermediary influencing – in however minor a way – circulating policies as they were starting to gain traction. Working within and beyond the spaces of the local state, I may well have sought to adopt the stance of the ‘romantic public ironist’ *self-reflexively standing apart* from my participatory practices suggesting success is possible whilst anticipating failure (following Jessop, 2011). Yet where the ‘success’ of policy becomes associated with its global mobility as ‘exemplars’ and ‘models’ to emulate (McCann and Ward, 2015), when working at universities keen for the policies under investigation to become successful, talking about failure isn’t so easy. Especially when you’re seeking a secure job. Inspired by scholarship discussing the emotional complexities and distresses of (not) making a difference through participatory research (Klocker, 2015), I seek to demonstrate the unsettling ‘betweenness’ of policy researchers unable to get to grips with power whilst becoming attached to, and part of, policies under investigation.

The article is structured as follows. I first discuss fast policy and the mobility of policy failure. Emphasising the tensions between studying policy and emotion, I turn to consider the methodological challenges concerning distance, power, and the reflexive stance of the ‘romantic public ironist’ anticipating failure. At which point I outline my two contrasting policy ethnography approaches. I then discuss the unsettling connection between failing as a policy researcher and the failures of fast policy. With anxiety and the pressure of time weighing heavily upon fixed-term contract workers, I conclude by outlining why not being able to talk about failure matters in the present crisis.

Fast policy and the mobility of policy failure

‘Failure’, insist Malpas and Wickham (1995: 37), ‘is an ubiquitous and central feature of social life ... [y]et much sociological inquiry focuses not on failure but on success’. Drawing on Foucault, they argue it is impossible to ever have complete or total control

over any given object of governance, such that incompleteness renders failure inevitable (Malpas and Wickham, 1995). Policy, for instance, can be understood as dynamic and unfinished, ridden with tensions and contradictions with the possibility of unintended consequences, even subversion. The growing complexity of the world makes various attempts at governing susceptible to the risk of failure, such that Jessop (1998) argues, through different modes of co-ordination, and in a variety of ways, markets, states, governance, even meta-governance, all tend towards failure. However, policy failure is not random. Rather, perpetual policy reinvention has become closely tied to successive rounds of predominantly neoliberal policies *failing forwards* (Peck, 2010).

This raises the question, then, as to how we might define ‘policy failure’. Policy failure may appear self-evident, yet is rarely conceptualised (McConnell, 2015). It is often positioned in opposition to what it is not, namely, ‘policy success’. Accordingly, Marsh and McConnell (2010) observe how policy failures may get defined through the inability to achieve the stated aims of policy initiatives that may be shaped, for example, by changing public perceptions, time delays and unexpected outcomes. We might subsequently ask, therefore: policy failure, for whom? This latter point is useful as it forces analysis towards how policy is politically contested and discursively mediated. Nonetheless, framing policy failure in terms of the struggles to achieve stated aims only takes our analysis so far. For, we have already seen, incompleteness and failure is inevitable as policy becomes enmeshed within wider assemblages of socio-material relations (Malpas and Wickham, 1995).

In fact, the aims of policy are often far more mutable and heterogenous. Here, burgeoning scholarship on policy assemblages, mobilities and mutations proves instructive (McCann and Ward, 2012). Critical geographers, urban scholars and others have been examining the uneven geographies of policy paying attention to circulating policy models and knowledge becoming embedded in places elsewhere (for instance, McCann and Ward, 2013; Robinson, 2015; Temenos and McCann, 2013). Accordingly, ‘failure’ and ‘success’ can be understood as relationally situated within the mobility of policy saturated with power and ideology:

The study of how and why certain policies are mobilized and become best-practice models for policymakers elsewhere is the study of ‘successes’—at least as defined within dominant policymaking circles...Neither success nor failure is absolute. One does not make sense without the other. Rather, success and failure are relationally constituted in politics and in policy-making (McCann and Ward, 2015: 828).

Under accelerated conditions of fast policy, the search for the latest ‘quick fix’ policy solution is facilitated through comparisons and rapid learning from places associated with ‘exemplars’ and ‘models’ to emulate (Peck and Theodore, 2010). At their peril do places become associated with policy failure mobilities and circulation as ‘worst practices’ (Lovell, 2017).

It is not profoundly shocking, then, that local state managers might not want to talk about incompleteness and failure, but instead promote their ‘success stories’. But where does that leave those researching policy? Indeed, a rather sizeable gap can exist between what state institutions may say about policy and the effects of policy according to critical state theory perspectives (Painter, 2006). Accordingly, Peck (1999) distinguishes between shallow and deep policy analysis. The former refers to policy being evaluated largely on the terms of the stated policy aims, whereas the latter refers to theoretically ‘unorthodox’ critical investigation of the political tensions, contradictions and inevitable failures of policy. An antagonistic separation between normative political science and critical theory starts to become apparent. Yet until the recent surge of interest in policy mobilities, attention to the prosaic practices of policy formation, implementation and translation often remained the ‘under-theorized preserve of business schools’ (Painter, 2006: 761). Well, a lot of my time was spent in a business school, evaluating policy on the terms of the stated aims on the one hand, and trying to critically examine the spatial politics of policy on the other. I was hoping to occupy simultaneously the position of both analytical insider and outsider.

Reflexivity, policy intermediaries and the public irony of failure

This returns us to the questions posed in the introduction concerning the work of academic policy researchers as intermediaries translating and mobilising policy

(Temenos and Baker, 2015): how exactly are the practices of policy researchers assembled into the policies under investigation? And what are the political implications? If we follow policy mobilities scholarship recognising that the ‘success’ and ‘failure’ of policy ‘cannot be taken for granted, but, must instead, be approached critically through theoretically informed empirical investigation’ (McCann, 2017: 1819), then as England (1994) reminds us, the research process is always personal; what we are researching is our relationship with the researched. And I knew whatever happened, any talk of policy failure would be challenging.

Accepting inevitable incompleteness, Jessop (2017: 197) draws upon the notion of ‘public romantic irony’ in a move ‘to recognize the risks of failure, but to act as if you can succeed’. By avoiding the traps of fatalism, stoicism, opportunism or cynicism, the ‘only possibility open for political ironists is to stand apart from their political practices and at the same time incorporate this awareness of their ironic position into the practice itself’ (Jessop, 2011). In the spirit of Gramsci’s ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will’, emphasising the latter clause over the former, the ambition here is to encourage dialogue with those involved in governing, to be future-orientated and hope for success, knowing full well that failure is likely. This approach hints towards the possibility of *standing apart* from our practices, reflexively incorporating this into our actions, whilst recognising the limits. However, when your university employers have a stake in the policies under investigation, even the most prosaic policy situations can prove rather unsettling. As I shall elaborate, it can be hard for precarious academics to reflexively *distance themselves* as they become public intermediaries within the worlds of fast policy, translating and becoming attached to the policies they study.

This points towards a different kind of ‘failure’. Reflexivity has long been an important feminist strategy rejecting the claim of disembodied researchers as neutral observers detached from their research practices (England, 1994; Haraway, 1988; Katz, 1994). Recognising the production of knowledge is partial and situated, the ‘god trick’ view from nowhere is fundamentally challenged (Haraway, 1988). Thus, feminist geographers have sought to address questions of positionality through examining the uneven power relations between researchers, the researched and research context (McDowell, 1992). This *betweenness* is undoubtedly complex, as Katz (1994) asks: ‘Where are the

boundaries between ‘the research’ and everyday life; between ‘the fieldwork’ and doing fieldwork; between ‘the field’ and not; between ‘the scholar’ and subject’. In fact, rendering fully visible and knowable the landscapes of power and difference may instead require ‘transparent reflexivity’ (Rose, 1997: 311). This relies on either being able to delineate clear power relations between the researcher and researched or making impossible claims to be fully immersed as if occupying the same position. Despite our best attempts to fully know how we are situated, we are surely bound to fail. Rather than mapping power between a two-dimensional ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ or ‘centre’ and ‘margins’, Rose (1997) proposes a different spatial configuration of power understanding research performances as constitutive, rather than reflexive. Building on the possibility of simultaneously occupying multiple insides and outsides, Rose seeks to pay attention to the gaps and slippages in research practices, working with and through the uncertainties and contradictions.

Anxiety and uncertainty register within Fuller’s (1999) efforts to integrate as a committed yet critical ethnographic researcher working in a credit union in Hull, England. When caught in a situation of being neither an insider nor outsider, rather than shying away from trying to make a difference, notions of movement and renegotiation are adopted working through discomfort rather than resorting to inaction. In a similar vein, Keith (2008) appeals to a move beyond choosing either ‘heroic immersion’ within urban politics or finding ‘critical distance’ from within the technocratic workings of local state bureaucracy by foregrounding the importance of producing different kinds of knowledge to shape political processes. Yet, wrestling with the emotional uncertainties of not achieving the hopes of participatory action research can itself become a struggle. In discussing the distress in realising how our research practices may, potentially, do more harm than good, Klocker (2015) considers the unintended ethical and political consequences of participatory research when seeking to make a difference. Interrogating the conflicting and contradictory emotions that punctuate research helps Klocker articulate the unsettling challenges of doing ‘impactful’ research. In this way, paying careful attention to how emotions register within our research helps us come to terms with failure and not always achieving what we might have hoped we would, whilst simultaneously understanding why this may have happened.

My research sat at the intersection of two different kinds of failure. In one sense, as policy is incomplete and up for political negotiation, it will always be at risk of failing. But in another way, there will always be shortcomings and uncertainties inscribed into our critical academic practices whereby we never quite know the powerful ways in which we are situated in relation to our research work. As I shall discuss for the remainder of the article, when working within and beyond the spaces of the state as a policy researcher, I could never quite pin-down how I was becoming attached to the policies I was following. In fact, occupying uncertain spaces of policy research as an intermediary struggling to talk about failure is where the emotional difficulties of research can become most acute.

Policy ethnographies and research methods

Over the last few years, I have been researching health and care policies following two approaches that are similar and yet rather different. The first has been through government-funded post-doctoral research examining the latest turn towards place-based health and care integration across England. These were the jobs that covered my rent. Research involved spending hundreds of hours observing and interviewing NHS and local government officials, clinicians and others involved in the assembling of policy. As collaborative interdisciplinary research, the projects sought to foster dialogue and generate ‘impact’ and we would often hold progress meetings with managers leading developments feeding back our analysis in ‘real time’.

Yet our relations with partners would never be entirely clear. We were independent academic researchers, yet it became apparent how we presented health policy analysis would matter. Whilst I hadn’t anticipated it, in a minor way, I became something of an intermediary translating and circulating learning about policies that would go on to gain national, even international, attention. And whilst my university employers were not formally involved in the governing of health and care, changes would have an impact and there was a clear push for policy initiatives to become ‘successful’. Separate from my meeting observations and research interviews, I decided to keep a diary throughout, providing the material drawn upon in this article. I hadn’t necessarily intended to do so for research, even less so for exploring questions of failure. But as I grew aware of the significance of becoming entangled within the policies being studied, it seemed important to keep track of my experiences as a researcher.

The second research approach was inspired by insights from my post-doctoral research. This would be my own project funded by a learned society rather than a government-funded health agency. If my post-doctoral research helped gain an understanding of how policies were being ‘arrived at’ (Robinson, 2015), my own research focused explicitly on the politics of mobile health and care policy examining where ‘integrated care’ policy models were coming from. I increasingly focused on the resistances of campaigners mobilising against health policy, in what Temenos (2017) calls the ‘everyday proper politics’ of policy mobilities.

Campaigners sought to slow down the rapid uptake of local integrated care reforms promoted in recent years by UK government and a whole cast of transnational management consultancies and health think-tanks. The research involved interviewing doctors and community health campaigners scrutinising the latest reforms. Counter to the ‘prosaic’ state spaces of town halls and civic offices, I attended protest marches, paid attention to online activism and observed judicial reviews forced through by campaigners. Despite these worlds of policy being closely intertwined, it felt they had to be kept very separate. For the remainder of the paper, I discuss my unsettling betweenness as a policy researcher and the role of failure.

Uncomfortable failures as a policy intermediary

I had hoped to combine a commitment to critical analysis with academic expertise when studying health and care reforms. To my mind, I thought this meant speaking with authority about policy, whilst always being prepared to question the authority of the policy elites speaking with me (see further, Bondi, 2004). I failed. Finding myself in a situation of being at the forefront of both policy implementation and activism, I felt immensely conflicted as to what I could say publicly. I had really wished I could connect up my insights from the boardrooms with the protests on the street. But I struggled to find my voice to do both. Because our main research work benefitted from access to politically high-profile policy initiatives, I simply felt *too close* to it all to articulate what I thought I should have.

Proximity creates a problem. Painter (2006: 770) has previously called for geographers to undertake ethnographic research into the inner workings of the state apparatus as a strategy for unearthing what he refers to as the prosaic geographies of stateness: ‘to disclose the mundane, but frequently hidden, everyday world of state officials, bureaucratic procedures, meetings, committees, report writing, decision making, procrastination and filing’. Our research was very much along these lines. I found myself dressed in smart clothes sitting alongside chief executives silently writing up notes of their meeting discussions. For fear of drawing attention to myself walking in, I would always arrive to meetings early in search of the chair in the corner of the room. Attendees were always aware of our research and from time to time meeting chairs would introduce me by name. This might sound like I was something of a privileged insider. And in some respects, I was. I occasionally observed government ministers and I was able to travel with some managers between meetings in their cars. Yet trying to prise apart my role as an applied policy researcher from myself as a critical geographer proved incredibly tough. And in any case, I was there to observe, not participate.

That’s not to say the research was all political high-drama. Far from it. I cannot overstate the mundanity of observing hours of technical discussion over governance arrangements and new forms of contracting. I became fluent in the language of NHS acronyms, feeling at once ever more removed from actual care practices. Nonetheless, in my diary I wrote of how I felt incredibly close to something important: of closed meetings with politicians, observing heated meeting exchanges and being directed ‘not to minute’ sensitive topics. I knew I wasn’t there in a capacity to *minute* what was going on, as if I was producing a lifeless technical record. Yet I could never quite pin-down what my role was. I began to write more frequently about my growing sense of uncertainty:

‘I’m beginning to find my relationships with the NHS and local authority managers quite uncomfortable. In many ways, existing relations have been really quite friendly, despite them not really quite sure what we’re doing – despite me not really knowing quite what we’re doing – they’ve gradually become happier with my presence in high-profile meetings, including me in confidential emails and circulating confidential papers’.

I began receiving seemingly endless draft policy documents, meeting papers and other materials shared in confidence — remaining in confidence — after months of building up trust with the chairs of meetings, as well as the local government and NHS staff tasked with circulating invites and agendas.

As research went on, such privileged position of access felt more problematic, as if I was somehow failing to grasp what was actually going on. To help make sense of the politics of it all, I tended to revert to explaining issues as a matter of different *perspective* to managers:

‘given the political sensitivity of the policy initiative, [NHS and local government managers would likely be] keen to ensure that there was ‘broad alignment’ between what we saw in our research, and what they saw was happening. Combined with the funding body and the stakeholders, I have increasingly felt that my research risks being ‘co-opted’ almost whereby we have to mitigate what are ultimately highly-political dimensions of change – future issues that could potentially arise in terms of estates sell-offs, workforce changes, of hospital bed closures. This in part seems to relate to the positioning of the research as an ‘evaluation’ alluding to a more objective, apolitical study of a set of policy measures’.

Centre-led austerity politics became inextricably linked with health and care policy in England, yet always seemed beyond the parameters of what we could examine. As a geographer I was hoping to pursue the theoretically unorthodox *deep* policy analysis encouraged by Peck (1999), yet sitting in the glass tower offices discussing findings with the research team and most senior managers leading the place-based reforms, I felt bound by the narrower focus on the stated policy aims. I had hoped to occupy, and be informed by, both positions. Unable to reconcile two different modes of analysis, I ‘internalised’ this dilemma.

From time to time, research encounters left me unsettled. At first glance, the most disconcerting appear pretty unimportant. Unlike the grandeur of the municipal executive chambers surrounded by paintings and ornate furniture, I also observed ‘engine room’

meetings in rather cramped, inconsequential rooms in town halls where ‘mid-level’ bureaucrats were tasked with working up policy papers. Less formal than boardroom meetings, these tended to drag on. After some back-and-forth disagreement in a meeting had turned to the evidence for what scale is best to organise services. A senior manager stopped the discussion and looked at me: “Well, seeing as we have the University [...] in the room, why don’t we ask them...?” A painful few seconds passed. I wasn’t there to contribute, was I? Thankfully (for me), conversation moved to the transnational management consultancies increasingly commissioned for providing policy expertise (Prince, 2012) – usually at great cost. Indeed, a consultancy firm was commissioned soon after to undertake such policy work.

But the question of how I was representing the university I was working at lingered. What was the significance of my silence? And not just within meetings. But as someone becoming entangled within the policies I was studying. Over time, I would become a familiar face. I had found myself sitting alongside managers, chuckling away at their jokes, being terribly polite, white, male and middle-class like they mostly were. I was increasingly asked for my thoughts on policy. After a more contentious executive meeting, an unfamiliar manager pulled me to one side: ‘you’re in an incredibly powerful position, you know?’ I’m not sure if this was intended as a threat in the way it sounded. Somehow I had become one of few people regularly moving through the multiple sites and situations of rather obscured place-based policies taking hold across England (Marcus, 1995). But whilst ethnographically ‘studying through’ the tensions and contradictions of policy, if I was in a position of power akin to what Marcus (1995: 114) describes as the ‘circumstantial activist’, it certainly didn’t feel like I was exercising it.

Away from meetings, feelings of guilt grew as I couldn’t make sense of everything, either to myself or the public. I rationalised my public inaction as personal failure. To mitigate this, I always returned to the narrow framing I felt the research had to be analysed. My closeness and my inability to *distance* myself became the source of frustration:

‘I’m finding that as our research gets increasingly drawn into the policy process, any sense of ‘critical distance’ gets distorted. It raises questions over the role of the University [...] in the making of [policy], even if in a minor way’.

I knew the notion of distance was problematic (Rose, 1997), but continued to imagine differences in power in terms of proximity: if only I could get further from state managers, then I would be free to be more critical! Far from learning to negotiate my role as a multi-(re)positioned researcher (Fuller, 1999), my anxieties only intensified as I became closer to the elites I studied. It also became apparent that many of those managers involved held a deep commitment to place and to the NHS, rather than being ruthlessly neoliberal as so often assumed by health campaigners.

So, in a funny sort of way, being denounced by a local authority chief executive during a heated executive level meeting re-assured me of my place as an unwelcome guest. Unlike my usual attempt to sit in the corner of the council chambers, today I was ushered towards a seat next to one of the managers I recently interviewed, right in the middle of the long table. Conflicts over finances bubbled up throughout the meeting with the atmosphere growing tense. A powerful chief executive made a key intervention with few words asserting remarkable authority as to how things should proceed: disputes *must* be resolved promptly, it was vital to demonstrate unity in public. He then turned towards me and questioned my presence. I stopped writing. I knew I should only be listening. I felt the silent sympathy of the senior managers next to me. Was I a potential risk, someone who might undermine the apparent coherence of the policy programme? I would go on to later write:

‘It was almost easier to be belittled by [the local authority Chief Executive] in the governance meeting when he bluntly stated that he didn’t know what we’re [the university research team] doing here – thinking you [the Chief Executive] and me both – as at least it felt that he was making his presence felt, ensuring I was aware of the power dynamic. Yet, when speaking with [another NHS manager] yesterday, I couldn’t help but have sympathy for her concerns over the uncertainty over our relationship with them as ‘research subjects’ – her words – and a responsibility to be open with our work. I find not being able to talk openly about [policy] a real problem’.

I sometimes joked about facing an identity crisis as a critical geographer undertaking

evaluative research, at times listed in meeting minutes as an ‘observer’, at others as a participating ‘attendee’ as if I had influence on what was going on. But when I moved to present emerging findings at conferences, I struggled to find uncontroversial words: ‘please don’t tweet anything I say as I’m still researching’. I had remarkable access to politically important research and could seemingly not do much about it.

The silences of the research filtered into my research with activists. Politically, I was sympathetic to the concerns of the campaigners I spent time with. Certainly, at times, I would disagree with them, sometimes quite substantively, or at least with elements of their claims. Strengthening ties over time, I would mention my main research work. Without fail, it gained attention. Standing outside the Royal Courts of Justice in London, I was asked: ‘What is going on? We can’t find out much, at all’. Well, what could I say? I was neither an insider nor outsider; I didn’t quite know where I was.

Translating the failures of fast policy

If failure gets talked about in health policy circuits, it tends to be about newsworthy ‘scandals’ and ‘never events’ or growing waiting lists at so-called failing hospitals. More removed, perhaps, can be the failures of governance as relationships breakdown between partnership organisations. The quiet burial of the latest attempt from UK government to further embed market logics into the organisation of the English NHS at a time of massive cuts to local authority budgets provided the context for all my research. For the activists, failure meant directing their anger towards the government, captured by the refrain: ‘the NHS isn’t failing; *the NHS is being failed*’. Unlike most health policy commentators who tend to position themselves beyond politics, the activists explicitly framed policy failure in ideological terms. Rightful concerns over the growing influence of private companies, increased rationing of services, and the erosion of worker pay and conditions through the potential transfer of NHS workers to subsidiary non-NHS companies (as just a few examples), sat alongside more popular demands for increased public funding. There was an entrenched tension between policy commentators interpreting the very latest reforms as the *rolling back* of market mechanisms in light of their failures, and campaigners interpreting the turn to ‘integrated care’ as the further *rolling forward* of neoliberal political agendas through the adoption of transnational health care models. Well, which side was I on?

The public were always going to struggle to keep up with the latest health policies. I was getting paid to do it and I certainly was! There was growing expression of the worrying lack of transparency and accountability within policymaking (Hammond et al., 2017), which in some places even involved paying for media consultants to help ‘turn down the noise’ (Health Service Journal, 2017). The extra-legislative dynamics of fast policy, operating outside of conventional routines and parliamentary scrutiny, typified healthcare reform across England (Peck and Theodore, 2015). I therefore felt I had a responsibility to translate emerging research findings, to sift through and give shape to the complex acronyms and technicalities of contracting arrangements to render meaningful and accessible policies being embedded locally. But I failed. Still grasping at the illusion of being a ‘critical’ geographer, I was absent. I apologetically made my excuses when declining requests from campaigners to write about policy reforms:

‘It’s incredibly uncomfortable having to not say what I really think – and I’m not sure if I know what I really think, even, as I’ve been avoiding pursuing what this research would look like as a ‘critical geographer’ – for me it’s increasingly raising questions over how dependent we [the research team] are upon staying ‘on side’. I feel that I can’t even tweet in case one of the [case studies] see the ‘real’ political, angry me’.

‘Policy translation’ note Clarke et al. (2015), ‘operating as it does on the borders between different epistemic territories is caught up in this endless struggle between uniformity and multiplicity’. I embodied this tension, negotiating at once the need to talk up dominant boosterist policy narratives of ‘exemplars’ and ‘front-runners’ (McCann, 2013), whilst hoping to talk back, to present counter-narratives, to open up the possibility of articulating different kinds of policy talk. My inactions felt like acceptance of the apparent technocratic neutrality of it all:

‘It leaves me feeling hyper-conscious over what I say, and more often than not, not saying anything at all. My role feels to be about legitimising, providing a university stamp of approval on the changes. There’s little else I can do. Raising anything negative, about, say, the potential for hospital downgrades,

or bed closures or selling of estates and that'll be our project over. It probably doesn't help that I find myself feeling that maybe I'm more dissenting, in a natural state of wanting to question the policy process, rather than implicitly supporting it. This is difficult to overcome'.

It was not just consultants and think-tanks who act as 'depoliticised' intermediaries in the circulating and embedding of policy. This included me now. I was also doing the policy work of rendering 'political claims technical' (Larner and Craig, 2005: 419).

I encountered what Etherington and Jones (2016: 373) refer to as 'state projects that are imaginative, even dazzling at times, though deeply implausible when unpacked in reality'. Accordingly, they advocate academics working from within the state to amplify the inherent failures and contradictions of policy, countering depoliticisation by always emphasising there are always alternatives (Etherington and Jones, 2018). For what I should have been saying over and over was that austerity and appeals to self-care were only going to risk intensifying deeply entrenched structural health inequalities endured by people in some of the poorest, most marginalised places. Due to my unstable employment, or otherwise, I was instead quiet.

Perhaps more embarrassing than being berated by a local government chief executive was knowing that our reports would in some uncertain way shape the public narrative surrounding the ongoing place-based reforms. I feared anything other than total control over the narrative would be a failure. I should have recognised this would have been impossible:

'I am acutely aware of how my/our analysis helps produce the narrative around integrated care systems ... following the first 'share' [of one of our public reports] – which is something I never wanted to do in the way we did – I made some last minute edits based on feedback to alter the way in which we report the changes taking place. It felt like it was 'strategic' to not cause any trouble over the reports ... It all gets so blurry'.

Through a chain of back and forth emails, we discussed how the case study research findings were to be presented. As a research team we had landed on some form of relative compromise. In any case, perhaps I was over-emphasising the influence our reports would have?

Ironically, just as one of our reports were due to be published, enthusiasm and momentum for integrated care policies was beginning to drag as it became difficult to maintain the improbable speed required for reforms to take shape. 'We may have been over optimistic' read an article featuring a research informant. The report was picked up soon after by the *Health Service Journal*, *The Economist*, and misinterpreted by *The Guardian* newspaper, but by then policy trends had already begun to move on. After months of worrying, I was beginning to feel maybe I actually could provide insight into policy and its inevitable failures. And then my contract ended.

Conclusions

The aim of this article has been to foreground the emotional struggles that can punctuate the geographies of researching, mobilising and critiquing public policy. I have sought to articulate how failure registers when caught in the unsettling 'betweenness' as a policy researcher. With growing pressure on researchers to impact policymaking, I have sought to emphasise how precariously-employed policy researchers are, in more ways than one, occupying increasingly uncertain positions as public intermediaries within accelerated worlds of fast policy unable to talk about failure.

Anxiety, guilt and frustration can all rupture attempts to partition emotion and reason within our research practices (Bondi, 2005). Emotions are integral yet often hidden from how we conduct research (Punch, 2012) and so rather than smoothing over the failures, I have focused instead on how I struggled to get to grips with power when researching policy. The idea of distanced power relations may hold certain appeal in helping locate discomfort in research: a search for *critical distance* or needing to get *up close* to policymaking. But I suggest this can conceal more than it reveals, theorising difference as if power can be more-or-less easily mapped. Thrown into the prosaic state spaces of policy (Painter, 2006), becoming attached to, and part of the very policies I was studying, I never quite became analytical 'insider' or 'outsider'. I wasn't performing the role of the

detached observer one-step removed from power, but instead failing through the power-laden spaces of mobile policy. And where the 'success' or 'failure' of policy is produced through its mobility and immobility (McCann and Ward, 2015), as an intermediary influencing narratives about policies under investigation, I could not cause too much friction. Seeking to avoid talking about the politics of policy failure, I embodied a kind of 'politics of anxiety' (Bok, 2020) and made myself absent.

Working within and beyond the spaces of the local state, I have sought to demonstrate the challenges internalising my sense of failure rather than perform the 'spin-doctor' speaking 'words that work but policies that fail' (Jessop, 2011). Whether on behalf of colleagues or the hope of more stable working conditions, I struggled to publicly articulate how policy is incomplete and inevitably tends towards failure. In studying the accelerated worlds of policymaking, Kuus (2015) appeals for *slow research*, rather than a search for evermore conceptual or methodological novelty. This is not a naïve appeal to the idea of the detached researcher, but rather recognising the vital ethnographic analytical insights gained by occupying ambiguous spaces of policymaking. Researching fast policy is, however, increasingly at odds with the intense pressures of city halls, governmental departments and universities seeking the latest policy solutions yesterday (Kuus, 2015). And the pressure of time can weigh heavily upon fast policy researchers. It is hard to be future-orientated in your outlook – counter to Jessop's (2011) romantic public irony – if you've got three months left on your job contract.

As Temenos and Lauer mann (Temenos and Lauer mann, 2020: 6; original emphasis) insist, 'policy failure *reveals*'. Since leaving the prosaic state spaces of policy research, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has gone on to further expose the injustices of growing structural inequalities and the brutal realities of those living increasingly precarious lives. Looking out from England, the politics of austerity combined with state (in)action in response to unfolding crises appears to have contributed to disproportionately high numbers of deaths among working class and racially marginalised people. Slow to act, UK central government has been quick to blame academics involved in the immediate response to the pandemic whilst undermining local health and care systems through massive centralisation and public health outsourcing to private companies. In what may likely come to be seen as the biggest public health

disaster in decades, it is becoming acutely apparent that academics are at ever more risk of being enlisted in mobilising policy narratives whilst being unable to talk publicly about failure.

So might there be, as Sjøvoll and colleagues (2020: 6) ask, ‘potential for resistance in writing successfully about failure?’ I am certainly sympathetic, although we might be cautious of efforts reclaiming professional failure (although, see further Harrowell et al., 2018). There is a risk that uncritical talk of failure evokes heroic narratives of the highly individualised ‘resilient’ academic (Clare, 2019). It is important, then, as Rose (1997: 319) suggests, that we might learn to ‘inscribe into our research practices some absences and fallibilities while recognizing that the significance of this does not rest entirely in our own hands’.

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