

Looking 'outside' to better understand the status of lived experience in social security policy research

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SPA Conference 2023, Nottingham

“Our conclusion is that the above **deeper contemplation of ‘lived experience’ provides new interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological connections and developments.** This can positively augment research, writing and engagement in policy making processes, not just to provide ‘thick description’ (Geertz, [1973] 2010), but as a basis for standpoint critique. In this way, **appealing to lived experiences can have a sharp, critical edge.** Methodologically, this can be associated with an **empathetic immersion in the lives and concerns of people** affected by and involved in policy processes and outcomes, including elite policy makers and influential context creators, managers and front-line workers as well as disempowered and oppressed groups. We have sought to establish ongoing interdisciplinary debate that begins with recognition that use of the notion of ‘lived experience’ is not self-evident and that building fuller understandings of what lived experience can involve or imply offers much potential.”

(Wright and McIntosh, 2018)

Looking 'outside' in two ways:

- Part 1 – purposive literature review.
- Part 2 – the 'research ecosystem'.

What is lived experience *doing* in social security policy research?

“The lived experience agenda positions the knowledge gained from ‘living through’ as a more authentic source of knowing that challenges formal, institutionalised expertise.” (Parr, 2022)

- Lived experience as creating new knowledge/ approaches/ answers. Linked to participatory/PAR traditions.
- Lived experience as counter point and/or rejection of ‘official’/ ‘top down’ accounts of policy.

(e.g. Bennett and Roberts, 2004; Patrick, Power, Garthwaite, Kaufman, Page and Pybus, 2022; Wright and Patrick, 2019; Wright, 2016; Summers and Young, 2020, and many more)

Part 1: purposive literature review

Political Science; Philosophy; Health; Development

- Lived experience AND methods OR research OR policymaking
- Participatory/ion AND methods OR research OR policymaking
- Co-production/ed AND methods OR research OR policymaking
- Deliberative/ion AND methods OR research OR policymaking

Key themes:

1. Inclusion
2. Power
3. Legitimacy

1. Inclusion

- Inclusion as an act of social justice.
- Changing who has ‘a seat at the table’, ‘giving voice’.

“the demand for social inclusion is paradoxical in that it both expresses a genuine desire to tackle the consequences of social inequality and yet at the same time could become coopted as a modern **form of moral and social governance which reproduces and legitimises the prevailing socio-economic order**. On the one hand it offers the promise of emancipation through the resolution of social exclusion and yet it simultaneously becomes another way in which the ‘mentally ill’ are subject to social, moral and economic regulation”
Spandler, 2007: 12

- Inclusion as a technology of governance (Voronka, 2015); participation as tyranny (Cooke and Kothari, 2001)
- Debates around representation. (e.g. Mansbridge, 1999; Beswick and Elstub, 2019; Leonardo, 2012)

2. Power

“By foregrounding voice (Bennett and Roberts, 2004; Frankham, 2009), participatory research demonstrates and makes possible the right of people in poverty to engage in an analysis of the situation they face, and to explore what might make a difference to their own lives and the lives of others (Bennett and Roberts, 2004). This is potentially transformative (Durose et al., 2012; Frankham, 2009), and has the possibility to go some way to **relocating where the power and expertise on representations and understandings of poverty lies.**” Patrick, 2019

- Reinforcing existing inequalities, discourses; participation as ‘subjection’, the ‘de-politicisation critique’ (Williams, 2004; Cooke and Kothari, 2001)
- Contextual nature of beliefs (O,Grady, 2022) (against ‘rock bottom truth’ accounts of power and knowledge)

3. Legitimacy

“Participatory approaches increase the effectiveness of research.... Participatory approaches produce a different kind of message – enriching knowledge about poverty.... Participatory approaches result in certain aspects of poverty being highlighted...” Bennett and Roberts, 2004:9-10

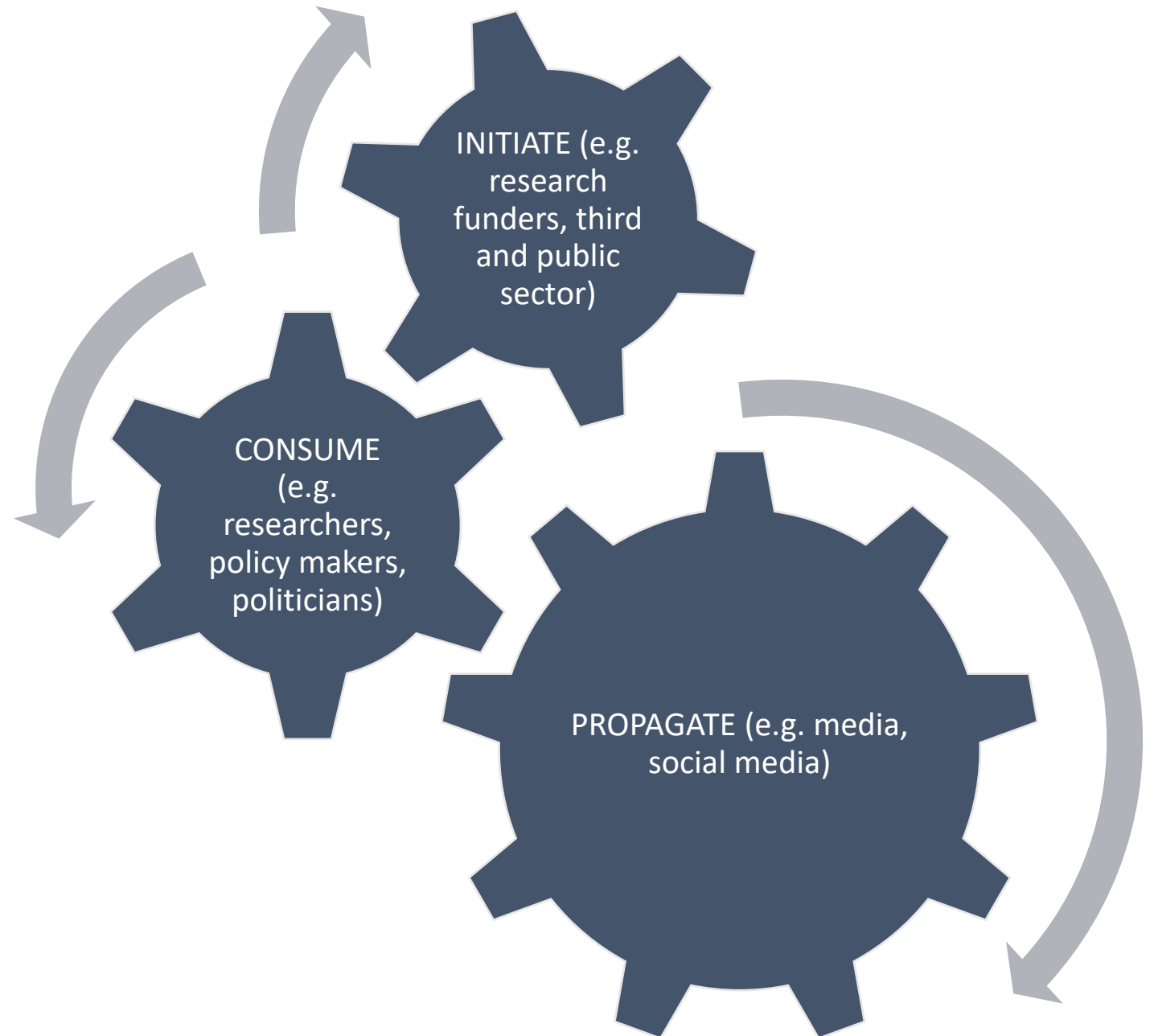
“Raymond Williams (1961) can also usefully figure once more via his concept of **‘structures of feeling’**. This concept involves tapping into **a set of experiences common at a particular time or place**, not reducible solely to an individual....This presents the prospect of social policy research that can discern a **‘structure of feeling’ across different communities or groups (for example, benefit claimants)**, and how these manifest in talk, behaviour and actions. Lived experiences link to cultural changes relating to understandings of social security and welfare, people on the dole, unemployed, claimants, benefit cheats, etc. (Wright, 2016).” Wright and McIntosh, 2019

- Epistemological claims about lived experience = experiential knowledge and collective forms of knowing (‘shared typical’).
 - Risks of essentialising lived experience. (Parr, 2022; Voronka, 2015)
 - Accounting for plurality and diversity.

“...we are drawing on notions of universally shared ‘lived experience’ in order to gain access and advantage within systems of knowledge production. We do so because we must, because it is often the only way that we can get in. Yet Spivak has argued that while it may be advantageous at times to reduce one’s self to an essence, we must always do so while “remembering the dangers in this” (Spivak, 1990b, p. 45). One such danger in universalizing heterogeneous bodies into essentialized identities in order to move action forward is that “essentialism appeals to the idea that there are fixed identities, visible to us as social or natural facts” (Scott, 1991, p. 791). It **reifies notions of normalcy and difference as embodied truths.**” (Voronka, 2015: 71)

Part 2: the research ecosystem

What do we mean
by the research
ecosystem?



Putting it all together... (in a deliberately provocative way!)

The current status of lived experience in social security policy research aims for inclusion and the subversion of power relations but without adequately challenging existing social orders. This has the danger of pacifying and containing lived experience within existing structures of research and policy, without realising and achieving the potentials of this approach.

There is a risk that lived experience is essentialised, forms of plurality are not adequately accounted for, and we have an insufficient epistemological account of lived experience in our sub-field.

This state of affairs is in part a product of the existing research ecosystem.

Points for discussion

- How do we avoid essentialised notions of lived experience?
- What tools and perspectives will help us to build a fuller epistemological account of experiential knowledge?
- How do we acknowledge and challenge the limitations of the current 'research ecosystem', and what this means for the status of lived experience in social security research?
 - In terms of the position of the researcher and participants.
 - In terms of how research is formulated, produced, analysed, etc.
 - In terms of how we communicate our research, and to whom.
- Where am I oversimplifying or misconstruing? What am I overlooking?

Thank you for your time and attention.

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References