

Tracing the emergence and changing meaning of ‘resilience’ in public policy discourse in the devolved UK: A Research Design

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Abstract:

‘Resilience’, with its connotations of adaptability and endurance, pervades the UK policy lexicon. Originally a core concept in psychology, ecology, and organisational management, the term broadly refers to a subject’s ability to withstand or quickly recover from adversity. In the contemporary devolved UK, this term, and broad and vague sets of ideas associated with it, can be found woven through policy debates on issues as disparate as local flood-preparedness and individual health and ‘wellbeing’. Yet, in many cases, the use of the term remains idiomatic. This means that, rather than having a clear and congruent meaning across policy sectors, the term has been articulated into a broad policy philosophy – one which, while no one can oppose its core idea, can mean a great many different things to different people and is difficult to translate into effective and coordinated public action. Specifically, this the metaphor of resilience is being used to construct a mode of ‘adversity citizenship’, where individuals’ and communities’ capacity to withstand hardship is used to construct narratives of need and deservingness in the context of increasingly squeezed public services. In order to better understand what, if anything, is meant by ‘resilience’ in the context of policy, this paper sets out a research design for analysing its use (and abuse) across the devolved UK. Adopting an interpretive lens, the aims of the project will be twofold: firstly, to trace a discursive genealogy of the ‘resilience’ idiom across Wales, England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the UK; and secondly to explore the role this idiom has played in constructing and justifying policy responses to various issues across the devolved UK. The expectation is that, in light of the efforts made by the different parts of the UK to showcase their diverse policymaking ‘styles’, we capture varying versions of an ‘adversity citizenship’ that seek to reinforce each territory’s narrative of devolved exceptionalism.

Introduction

To some extent policy divergence has always existed across the nations of the UK as each has been subject to distinctive historical, social and political influences. However, prior to 1999 they exhibited fundamental political unity. Since then, devolution brought about the transfer of an important range of areas of policy competence to sub-state levels in the UK (Keating and McEwen, 2005: 413). It gives the devolved governments room to develop policies that are suited to the specific requirements of their jurisdictions. Nevertheless, the extent to which there has been substantive policy divergence as a result of devolution is contested. The complexity of many policy areas, which sees them span ministerial and administrative remits, entails that policy responsibility for certain issues remains territorially nested or overlapping. Divergence is further inhibited by the need to coordinate national public service regimes (eg. National Health Services) within the UK's single internal market. Finally, the capacity and willingness of the different governments to address common issues in their own unique ways are further structured by their experience of frequently comparable policy problems, costs and opportunities (Keating, 2002: 3; McEwen, 2005: 539). This is magnified in the context of cross-cutting and complex problems, which span policy sectors and, in many cases have shared or cross-border implications.

As a result, apart from a few notable and eye-catching exceptions, policy across the devolved UK tends to feature more commonality than difference. What has differed, however, has been the development of distinctive 'styles' of making and delivering policy. These styles incorporate varying visions of what the purpose of policy ought to be and how it should be undertaken, as well as characteristic modes of deciding, designing, and delivering services that might otherwise look quite similar. The crafting and pursuance of these styles is therefore a constitutive act: it has the power to communicate and give organised existence to shared beliefs about social and political ideals. The normative and interpretive assumptions that underpin each nation's putative 'style' become intersubjectively shared as a result of deliberative practices. How certain words, symbols, and images are used in the construction of territorially distinct policymaking 'styles' is therefore of central importance for gaining a more nuanced understanding of whether and how policy has diverged in the UK since devolution. Seemingly self-evident terms, such as 'wellbeing', 'choice' and 'prevention', pervade contemporary British political discourse and shape entire policy agendas (cf. Bache & Reardon, 2013; Clarke, 2005; Cairney et. al, 2016). Yet the meanings and values communicated in policy discourse is far from self-evident. Rather, they mobilise varying and sometimes opposing assumptions

about, among other issues, the role of the state, the deservingness of different social groups, and the justification for re/distributing resources.

Consequently, this project aims to contribute to the critical and interpretive scholarship on policy, which sees it as a form of discursive governance. Thus, the varying representations of political and social reality communicated in policy debates are examined for evidence of the power relations they invoke, sustain, or challenge. Specifically, we are interested in charting the evolving meaning of the term 'resilience' in British policy discourse. This is because, far its original and very precise psychological, organization and ecological meanings, the term increasingly appears as a broad metaphor promoting the development of an 'adversity citizenship': a society made up of individuals and communities capable of withstanding hardship without needing state support. To the extent that the various national policy styles communicated across the UK promote distinctive visions of what constitutes an ideal balance between citizens' and the state's rights and responsibilities, we expect to find nationally distinctive narratives of 'resilience' in policy discourse across the different territories. This paper therefore sets out the main conceptual, methodological and analytical pillars of a critical discourse analysis of 'resilience' in British policy debates since devolution.

Devolution and the emergence of policy 'styles'

The ostensible political rationale for devolution in the UK was to allow the different home nations to decide and design policies that more closely matched the interests and needs of their communities. Unsurprisingly, then, the emergence of new policy debates and political dynamics in each jurisdiction has resulted in the development of highly visible divergence in policy in certain sectors (Greer, 2009: 78; MacKinnon, 2015: 47). From the Scottish Government subsidising university tuition fees, to the implementation of an opt-out organ donation regime in Wales, policy distinctiveness focuses a great deal of political and media attention. There are particular sectors in which there is rather more policy divergence, including health and education (Smith, et al 2009). However, in many cases, distinctive policies developed in one part of the UK have gone on to be adopted elsewhere, underlining the potential for devolved policies to lead the way in setting policy trends but ultimately leading to gradual reconvergence in certain sectors. This is the case, for example, with the introduction of free medical prescription in Wales in 2007, which was subsequently taken up by Northern Ireland and Scotland in 2010 and 2011 respectively. Overall, the extent to which devolution has truly delivered 'particularly Scottish or indeed, Northern

Irish or Welsh solutions to problems' is questionable (Mooney and Poole, 2004: 477).

Originally, the focus of comparative political analysis of the devolved UK focused on evaluating the extent to which there was substantive divergence or convergence across certain sectors and between the different nations. The broad conclusion, after ten years of devolution, was there were relatively few examples of truly distinctive policy outputs – that is to say singularly designed solution to identified policy problems. Consequently, a second wave of devolution scholarship concerned itself with exploring whether the new politics and institutions created by devolution had generated, if not a wide variety of truly distinctive policy outputs, then perhaps novel modes of debating, designing, and delivering policy outcomes. Indeed, devolution has offered the devolved nations the opportunity to develop distinctive policy *styles*. These styles refer to the emergence of different characteristic modes of imagining, talking about what the purpose of policy ought to be and how it should be undertaken, as well as the subsequent patterns of decision-making, policy design, and implementation activities undertaken in accordance with these beliefs and norms (Greer and Jarmin, 2008: 161; Cairney, 2008: 350, Cairney, 2011: 209). Comparing policy styles across the devolved UK give a starker image of divergence and distinctiveness.

The British Policy Style

Thus, the term 'British policy style' refers to the manner in which the UK Government at Westminster makes and implements policy. This style is particularly associated with a strong government that either imposes policy from the top-down or, at the very least, sets strong direction for policy agendas and has increasingly resorted to managerial techniques drawn from the private sector to assess and impel performance from service delivery partners (Cairney, 2008: 364).

The Scottish Policy Style

By contrast, the 'Scottish policy style' draws attention to the Scottish Government's reputation for a consultative and cooperative style in making and implementing policy in devolved areas of competence (Keating, 2005: 461). the 'Scottish approach' to policy and policymaking refers to the Scottish Government's reputation for developing and delivering policy in a consultative and cooperative manner, setting broad aims and outcomes and encouraging local community planning partnerships to develop place-appropriate paths towards achieving them (Cairney et al, 2016). At its core, this means working with voluntary groups, unions, professional bodies, the private sector and local

and health authorities, to assemble information and cultivate support for its policy aims. This approach goes beyond development principles, indeed it extends to policy delivery. Consequently the Scottish Government has produced a broad national strategy and a set of priorities supported by the 'National Performance Framework', while trusting organisations, such as local authorities, to meet its aims in the local context by collaborating with a wide range of bodies in the public, voluntary and private sector 'Community Planning Partnerships' to produce a collection of shared aims relevant to their local area (Cairney, Russell & St. Denny, 2016: 333).

The Welsh Policy Style

In Wales, successive Labour-led governments have sought to highlight the country's putative custom of adopting more 'traditionally' socialist values and policies than in England (see Drakeford, 2005; Moon, 2013). Moreover, due to its more limited legislative competence and budgetary authority, style of policymaking most commonly associated with the Welsh Assembly Government (WG) is one centred on strong local and sectoral network which cooperate and form partnerships to co-produce and deliver locally-responsive services (Mitchell, 2003: 39; Greer & Jarman, 2008: 184; Birrell & Heenan, 2013: 766).

The Northern Irish Policy Style

The Northern Ireland executive in Belfast was established at the same time as assemblies were established in Edinburgh and Cardiff. However, the devolved administration in Belfast was, and indeed is a special case, as its executive functions on the basis of power-sharing in the core executive, allied to specific processes designed to promote inclusion of all parts of the society via their representatives. To operate a devolved government in Northern Ireland there must a consensus on major policy proposals which rely on legislation. Therefore they develop a policy style of required consensus development which differs from the Scottish and Welsh models of partnership and consultative and cooperation (Birrell and Heenan, 2013: 765; Birrell, 2012: 12; Laugharne, 2003: 112). Nevertheless, this power-sharing consensus can sometimes break down, leading to the collapse of the executive and assembly and an absence of policymaking – though public administrations continue to deliver existing services and programmes.

The policy metaphor of 'resilience'

Variations in party politics, issue salience, and policy style has led to the emergence of territorially differentiated ways of representing and

communicating policy ideas. For instance, Morphet and Clifford argue that, while spatial planning policy – that is to say policy concerned with the optimal distribution of people and activities across a territory – was remarkably similar across the devolved UK, the terminology and discourse surrounding the issue featured notable differences (2014). Not least of all, while the term ‘spatial planning’ was used in Wales and the UK to discuss this policy issue, the term was not used in Scotland (Morphet & Clifford, 2014: 514).

The notion that language, symbols, and ideas are not objectively self-evident is not new. Meaning is crafted, interpreted and partially reproduced by actors as they undertake action in the social world. Social action, in this sense, is based on social meanings (Fischer, 2003: 49). The term ‘discourse’ refers to this ‘ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices’ (Hajer & Versteeg, 2005: 175). The meanings encoded in discourse are never fixed. Over time, actors: combine, dismiss, re- or mis-interpret existing ideas. While some dominant or widely-shared meanings will be altered over the course of generations, others are upended more swiftly (Fischer, 2003: 49).

It should therefore not be taken for granted that the meanings communicated in policy discourse are either immutable or identical across social groups. In the context of the devolved UK, the territorial distribution of different dominant interpretations of policy-related terms and images can therefore act as a lens through which to capture divergence in vision and representation of what it means for policy to be ‘made in’ one part or another of the country. Moreover, the phenomenon whereby policy-related terminology and language takes on different meaning across the UK, or between agencies and government departments, is further exacerbated by the development of a culture of ‘wicked’ problems. These problems are defined and constructed in such a way as to foreground their complexity, intractability, and essentially contested nature (Head, 2008: 102; Head and Alford, 2015: 714).

In this project, we are interested in exploring the evolving meanings associated with one such policy-related concept, that of ‘resilience’. Throughout the 19th century, the term was primarily used in the context of naval engineering to refer to the structural ability of materials used on warships to withstand challenging conditions (cf. McAslan, 2010). Over time, its use was stretched to refer more broadly to the capacity of individuals, organisations, and ecosystems to prevent, mitigate, or recover quickly from hardship and trauma (Grotberg, 1995). With regards to individuals’ resilience, two strands of research emerged. The first was concerned with physiological resilience, that is to say the ability of the physical

body to withstand and recover from disease and injury. The second was psychosocial research interested in individuals' capacity to endure and bounce back from experience of severe stressors. In particular, the end of the Second World War heralded intense focus on the resilience of individuals who had experienced events of extreme violence, including the bombing of Hiroshima (eg. Lifton, 1968) and the Holocaust (eg. Krystl & Niederland, 1968). In addition, from the 1940s onwards, lifecourse approaches to understanding the social determinants of health sought to unpick the effect of experiences in earlier life on later wellness and wellbeing (Boon, Cottrell and King, 2016). Thus, the goal of fostering resilience in adult populations has led to the proliferation of policy programmes tackling children and young people's wellbeing across a wide breadth of cross sectoral engagement spanning the fields of education, social work, and health (Ager, 2013: 488). Over time, a focus on the resiliency of groups, rather than individuals, also emerged, with a particular focus on the ability of communities (eg. Fleming and Ledogar, 2008) and organisations (eg. Meyer, 1982) to prevent, adapt to, or withstand challenges from their social and physical environment.

Finally, a third strand of resilience research emerged from the 1970s onward to looks at the ability of ecosystems to remain stable and sustainable in contexts of environmental change (Walker and Cooper, 2011: 143). To begin with such discussions departed from an understanding of ecological resilience as a "measure of the persistence of systems and of their ability to absorb change and disturbance and still maintain the same relationships between populations or state variables" (Holling 1973: 14). In this sense, early ecological conception of resilience concentrates on the extent which populations or communities are likely to face extinction (Brand and Jax, 2007). From the 1980s onwards, organisational research increasingly adopted this ecological perspective on resilience, focusing on the ability of businesses and public infrastructure to absorb shocks – be their economic, demographic, or environmental – and continue or quickly resume serving their primary functions (Folke, 2006: 253; Brand and Jax, 2007).

By the 1990s, the concept of resilience was in very good currency within the scientific community and was seen as one of the most significant areas of research within sustainability science (Brand, 2009: 305). In more recent times, the concept of resilience has become a commonly used term in various subjects across the social sciences disciplines, including psychology, urban planning, economics, geography and political science, particularly in the study of public policy (Walker and Cooper, 2011: 143; Lorenz, 2013: 7). The advent of a putatively 'evidence-based' policymaking has consequently seen concerns over

‘resilience’ enter political debates, as decision-makers attempt to configure policy and public services to enhance and foster resilience across their constituencies and jurisdictions.

Moreover, recent debates on how to respond to global threats, that is to say those policy problems that do not respect the borders of sovereign nation states and concern individuals and communities the world over, have complexified the role that policymakers at the national level can take towards mitigation and adaptation. This is the case, for example, with climate change, economic crises, such as recessionary shocks similar to those occurring in Britain in the 1980s (Martin, 2011: 4), and the rise of international terrorism (Coaffee and Murakami Wood 2006; 512; Coaffee and Rogers 2008: 103). In this context, resilience has begun to take on a broad meaning, encompassing the comprehensive adaptive and recovery potential of individuals *and* communities *and* organisations *and* ecosystems (MacKinnon and Driscoll Derickson, 2013: 254, Hill et al., 2008; Swanstrom et al., 2009: 10).

Thus, Walker and Cooper (2011: 144) suggest that, in this context of ever expanding usage, the concept of resilience has taken on so many different meanings as to become ‘a pervasive idiom of global governance’. Its connotations of adaptability and endurance have proved so abstract and flexible that the term can be used to discuss anything from international finance and civil defence, to the infrastructure of urbanised areas (MacKinnon and Driscoll Derickson 2013: 254). In this sense, ‘resilience’ has gone from being a somewhat precise scientific term to one which can more generally stand in as a metaphor social and ecological ideals. As a metaphor, ‘resilience’ communicates an intuitively appealing policy goal: the dedication of resources to fostering the ability of individuals and communities to cope more independently with events and adversity. In this way, ‘resilience’ represents both a normative and strategic conception of what an ideal society looks like. Normatively, it is a society that adapts to changes in a manner that promotes growth and cohesion. It is a society that requires little input or support from the outside in order to achieve and sustain its goals. Strategically, this is important because of the limited nature of time, energy, and resources that state actors can dedicate to supporting individuals. For every effort to prevent, adapt, and recover from adversity that is taken on privately by the resilient individual or community, an equivalent effort is economised by the state.

In this way, there are strong aspirational assumptions about the citizenship of the future. If social citizenship refers to individuals’ membership of, and opportunities within, a society as structured by their rights and obligations *vis à vis* others and the state (Harrison, 1995: 20-21), then the type of social

citizenship communicated in policy discourse by the notion of 'resilience' is one in underpinned by two assumptions: firstly the notion presumes the omnipresence of adversity; secondly it emphasises the desirability of independence from state intervention. In other words, resilience forms the central tenet of a form of 'adversity citizenship', in which duties, obligations, and opportunities are structured as a result of social responses to emerging difficulties.

Consequently, since the notion of 'resilience' now pervades UK public policy discourse, this project is interested in understanding what, if anything, it means. It will therefore adopt an interpretive lens to conduct a discourse analysis of 'resilience' in policy documents across the devolved UK. The aims are threefold:

- Firstly, to trace a critical genealogy and geography of the 'resilience' idiom across Wales, England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the UK.
- Secondly to critically examine the different models of 'adversity citizenship' communicated in the different territories.
- Finally, to confront the different types of 'adversity citizenship' advanced across the UK to the representations of policymaking 'styles' as communicated by each respective country.

Methodology

This paper seeks to answer three questions:

1. What policy problem(s) is 'resilience' supposed to be the solution to?
2. Has the policy-related meaning of 'resilience' changed over time or across the different regions of the UK?
3. What can this tell us about the policymaking styles of the different jurisdictions, especially with regards to the governance of social citizenship?

To do so, the paper adopts an interpretive approach which focuses on exploring the meaning and symbolism woven through policy-related discourse and interactions across the devolved UK. Interpretivism does not assume that meaning is self-evident. Rather it posits that the meanings with which we make sense of the world are continually (re)created in a highly fluid and context specific manner (Della Porta & Keating, 2008: 24; Mason, 2012: 56). In this sense, interpretivism is concerned with capturing how "one generates meaning and is able to understand another's meaning" (Yanow, 2007: 407). To do this, interpretive researchers scrutinise actors' acts, speech, and the artefacts they

create in an attempt to, first, decipher their individual and social significance in terms of the “values, feelings or beliefs they express” and, second, understand “the processes by which those meanings are communicated to and ‘read’ by various audiences” (Yanow, 2000: 14). The subjective and social meaning mediated through performance and discourse not only reveals actors’ assumptions and understandings about the world, but also contribute to structuring individual and collective behaviour and expectations. Interpretive policy analysis therefore contends that policy-related discourse, action, and outcomes cannot be understood without paying close attention to the meaning, symbolism, and values that underpin them.

One particular area of focus for interpretive policy analysis concerns the discursive and social construction of policy ‘problems’. Subjective and social meaning, mediated through discourse, not only reveal policy actors’ assumptions and understandings, but also contributes to structuring policy-related action and outcomes by driving individual and collective behaviour. This is because discourse frames and communicates partial and subjective understandings of what constitutes a policy ‘problem’, who is responsible for its emergence and resolution, and what the most appropriate ‘solutions’ are. Policy discourse, in this sense, represents the currency with which ideas and values held by one actor are shared and exchanged with others with a view to impelling and guiding political action. Subsequently, discourse analysis will be employed to map what policy ‘problems’ resilience is proposed as the answer to. In keeping with the interpretivist assumption that there is no single or self-evident meaning, the goal is to draw out the different interpretations of ‘resilience’ that exist in policy discourse across the UK, as well as map the different communities of interpretation that cluster around particular ways of understanding ‘resilience’.

Moreover, the often veiled and implicit normative dimensions of shared beliefs and meanings is of particular interest to policy discourse analysts. The aim, then, is not just to record actors’ ideas as they appear in speech and text, but to explore the power dynamics they create and reinforce. The key here will be to critically examine who stands to benefit or lose from the development of adversity citizenship. The territorially specific politics of adversity citizenship will then be confronted to the representations and aspirations communicated by each nation’s putative policymaking style. Thus, where a certain nation’s ‘style’ emphasises social-democratic aspirations, such as socio-economic equality, the question will be to assess the extent to which its construction of adversity

citizenship enhances or undermines these goals. Similarly, where a policymaking style emphasises the need to roll back state intervention and for individual and communities to be delegated more responsibility for achieving certain outcomes, we will assess the extent to which the dominant narrative of adversity citizenship supports or challenges these goals.

Next steps: Data collection and analysis

We have already collected thousands of policy documents produced by the governments of all four nations, covering the period from 1998-2017.

This data will be coded in NVivo using codes derived according to a grounded theory approach to qualitative data. Grounded theory emphasized the emergence of theory from data, rather than resorting to the top-down imposition of a theoretically predetermined conceptual framework on the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2012: 37). Coding according to grounded theory involves exploring data and developing conceptual codes in three phases:

1. Codes are inductively generated from the direct observation of the data to identify patterns and salient elements.
2. Axial coding refines and develops these original codes and the conceptual information they contain in a dynamic process that iterates between data and theory.
3. Finally, selective coding is performed by narrowing the analytical focus to explore the relationship between particular codes.

Throughout the process, coding will be undertaken according to Glaser's method of constant comparison, whereby the extent to which each new piece of data fits with existing observations is systematically assessed, and existing concepts and themes are constantly compared to each other in order to generate ever finer-grained codes.

Once this has been done, the observations will be analysed using a 'metaphor identification procedure' (Group, 2007) to draw out different possible idiomatic uses of 'resilience' in policy discourse. Insights from this analysis will be used to inform a conceptual typology of 'adversity citizenship'.

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