

Beyond Networks? A brief response to ‘Which networks matter in education governance?’

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Goodwin’s commentary on and critique, in this issue, of my 2008 paper in this journal (Ball 2008) is both pertinent and constructive and indeed I agree with almost all of it. Goodwin makes the point that the distribution of power and capabilities within policy networks was not properly addressed in my paper and that as a result I may tend to over-estimate the looseness of such networks and under-estimate the continuing prominence of the formal-legal powers of the state in processes of governance. He also suggests that the existence of, and work done, by the networks I describe should not in themselves be taken to be indicative of a shift from government to network governance. These concerns raise very proper and important questions and pose major challenges for empirical policy network analysis. However, I would want to say that my 2008 paper represents a first foray into the issues and problems of a grounded analysis of network governance in education. Many of the points made in Goodwin’s reply are ones I am engaged in a current ESRC funded project (RES-062-23-1484) on philanthropy and education policy.

I have two substantive responses to the points made by Goodwin. One is, to put it very simply, that many of the counsels offered are more easily said than done. In simple terms the problem is one of specifying what the arrows in a network diagram mean. There are significant interpretative and analytical problems involved here. That is to say, it is very difficult to map empirically ‘the structured relationships of power’ (p.x) within policy networks. How do we access and then ‘measure’ or calculate differential resources and capabilities embedded within the asymmetries in power relations? How do we relate these to the use of power and the different interests and goals of participants? (A focus on specific events or crises maybe one way forward). I believe that we have no existing research methods for addressing these tasks. Among other difficulties, almost by definition, network relations are opaque, consisting in good part of informal social exchanges, negotiations and compromises which go on ‘behind the scenes’ (e.g. the role of Andrew Adonis in the Academies Programme). How are these to be mapped and characterised? There are also concomitant conceptual and empirical problems arising from the (in)stability and short-term existence of some networks and network relations. Again almost by definition, network forms of governance are not fixed, and may contain some fleeting, fragile and experimental components. How do we capture changes in participation, capabilities and asymmetries over time? This ~~ere~~ is both an analytical and representational problem ~~here~~. The representational problem arises in as much that network diagrams are very inadequate and misleading devices for representing networks. Concomitantly, how do we operationalise the concept of power here? The empirical analysis of relations of power begs rather hoary but none the less important questions about how we conceptualise power, as indicated in the example given by Goodwin of agenda restrictions (p. x). There are also issues involved here in the

complex relationships which exist between governance and governmentality. That is, the deployment within new forms of ‘regulated self-regulation’, through networks, of new techniques of governing and the constitution of new kinds of ethico-political subjects such that the effects of governance is being achieved through the construction of new kinds of social relations (see below). Furthermore, despite the validity of Goodwin’s question about the distribution of power and capabilities in relation to network ‘hegemons’ (p. x), it would be a mistake to assume that all governance networks are structured in the same way and that all such networks have a single core or focus, as the reply notes (p. x). While all of this undoubtedly leaves us with the need to accept a degree of ‘messiness’ in the organisation and conduct of network relations, I did not intend to suggest in my paper that all networks are ‘formless’ but neither are all networks tightly integrated. Before we settle for conceptual assertions about how governance networks work we need to identify and research more actual networks with such issues in mind and compare between them. An argument can also be made that there are two separate but obviously related projects of analysis involved in all of this. One is more abstract and involves a mapping and analysis of the changing form and modalities of the state. The other is more modest and is the attempt to map and specify relations of power in the workings of specific policy networks in relation to particularly policy objectives – which may or may not constitute examples of network governance.

The second point I would make is that the reply actually does not go far enough. I have found it useful in my ongoing work to think about the structured relationships within policy networks as heterarchies rather than (or as encompassing the notion of) networks. Heterarchy is an organizational form somewhere between hierarchy and network that draws upon diverse horizontal and vertical links that permit different elements of the policy process to cooperate (and/or compete) whilst individually optimizing different success criteria. That is, it replaces or combines bureaucracy and administrative structures and relationships with a system of organization replete with overlap, multiplicity, mixed ascendancy, and/or divergent-but-coexistent patterns of relation, which operates at and across ‘levels’ (local, sub-national, national and international). All of this involves an increased reliance on subsidiarity and ‘regulated self-regulation’ but typically involves deconcentration rather than devolution. So that one of the characteristics of heterarchies (and one that is certainly evident in my current research (see Ball (2009))) is that different kinds of power relations may exist between the same elements at the same time. Various different kinds of such relationships and asymmetries are currently in play in policy heterarchies; like partnerships, contracts, inspection, competition, performance management and regulation, sponsorship, consortia, matched-funding, consultation etc. Actors and organisations in a heterarchy may play different roles, use different capabilities and exercise different forms of power, at the same time. Again this poses both considerable analytical and representational problems for researchers but at least begins to ‘fill out’ some of the conceptual thinness inherent in the notion of a network.

Such a conceptualization of network relations also points up the considerable challenges of coordination for the state and its agencies that are involved in forms of network governance and we have to be alert to the fact that these may require capabilities which are not well developed within all parts of the central state – witness the National Audit Office concerns over the DCSF’s management of the Academies

Programme. It is important that we do not under-estimate the powers of the state but also important that we do not in abstract over-estimate them nor treat the state as an undifferentiated whole. The move to use forms of network governance in some areas of state activity may involve a loss of power in some parts of the state, at the same time as there are gains in other parts. If the gains are bigger than the losses (to use power very crudely) then the state may overall have greater powers than before. Even so, although we may want to argue about the overall significance of the deployment of forms of network governance it is difficult to deny that the form and modalities of the state have changed as a result of such deployments and that those changes need to be mapped and understood. The overall task is to make sense of the particular 'mix' of governance strategies that is in play at any point in time.

The most important point to come out of all of these problems is that the complexities involved in the analysis of heterarchical governance require that empirical research and conceptual development be done together rather than separately. We need conceptualizations of networks and network governance that can be properly operationalised in research studies and a set of tools and techniques for network analysis and representation that allow us to address those conceptualizations sensibly. We certainly need more examples of the actual practices of policy networks and network governance in different settings and in relation to different parts of the state.

References

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