

ADDICTION CLASSICS

Making visible the politics and ethics of alcohol policy research

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Running head: Alcohol policy research

Word count (main text only): 2,496

Declaration of interests: This article developed out of the intellectual work accompanying research funded by Australian Research Council Discovery Project DP110101720. The National Drug Research Institute at Curtin University is supported by funding from the Australian Government under the Substance Misuse Prevention and Service Improvement Grants Fund. There are no other conflicts.

Acknowledgment: I am extremely grateful to Suzanne Fraser for helpful comments on an earlier version.

Abstract

Although research on alcohol policy has produced a huge international literature, alcohol policy research itself – its cultural assumptions, methods, politics and ethics – has rarely been subject to critical analysis. In this article, I provide an appreciative review of an exception to this trend: Joseph Gusfield's seminal work *The Culture of Public Problems: Drinking-*

Driving and the Symbolic Order. I first outline Gusfield's argument that the 'problem of drinking-driving' is constructed as a 'drama of individualism' centring on the 'killer drunk' rather than as, say, a problem of transportation or urban planning. The 'culture' of drinking-driving research and policy emphasises alcohol as *the* problem and locates the source of car accidents in the moral failings of the individual motorist, rather than in social institutions or physical environments. In the second part of the article, I highlight the book's remarkable originality and foresight in anticipating later trends in critical policy analyses, and argue that it should be regarded as a classic and as required reading for those working in alcohol, and indeed other drug, policy research. That it isn't, or at least that its many insights go largely unacknowledged, says much about the ongoing tendency of alcohol and other drug policy research, despite its claims to multidisciplinaryity, to rely on a narrow range of research approaches and to marginalise or ignore sociological criticism of its methodological and political foundations. I close the article with a challenge: When will the rhetoric and myths of objective, scientific 'evidence' and 'evidence-based policy', so trenchantly critiqued over many decades, finally give way to an acknowledgment of the politics and ethics that are inevitably entangled in all research and policy?

Key words

Joseph Gusfield, alcohol policy, alcohol research, drinking-driving, politics, ethics, critical analysis

Introduction

Research on alcohol policy has produced a huge international literature. Taking the encyclopedic review offered by Babor and colleagues [1] as a guide, the following list can be generated: epidemiological studies of alcohol's contribution to the global burden of disease,

disability and death; studies mapping the consolidation of alcohol production by a small number of global corporations; the scientific evidence for alcohol prevention and harm reduction strategies and interventions; studies of policy making processes at the local, national and international levels; and evaluations of the effectiveness of policy strategies and interventions. But what if alcohol policy research – its cultural assumptions, methods, politics and ethics – were itself subject to analysis? What would such an analysis look like and what kinds of questions might it ask? What conclusions might it draw and what would be its value? In this article, I explore these questions through an appreciative review of Joseph Gusfield's *The Culture of Public Problems: Drinking-Driving and the Symbolic Order* [2], a seminal piece of scholarship that has profoundly influenced my work. In the second part of the article, I highlight the book's remarkable originality and foresight in anticipating later trends in critical policy analyses. In this increasingly bibliometric age, the 2,049 citations garnered by the book in Google Scholar (14 October 2016), not far behind the 'alcohol policy bible' produced by Babor et al (2,660 citations), suggest that it should be regarded as a classic and as required reading for those working in alcohol, and indeed other drug, policy research. That it isn't, or at least that its many insights go largely unacknowledged (a state of affairs noted by Gusfield himself in a 2006 interview with *Addiction* [3]), says much about the ongoing tendency of alcohol and other drug (AOD) policy research, despite its claims to multidisciplinary, to rely on a narrow range of research approaches and to marginalise or ignore sociological criticism of its methodological and political foundations. So what does Gusfield argue and why is it significant?

Gusfield's argument

The Culture of Public Problems grew out of Gusfield's earlier involvement in a study of 'drinking-driving' in California, in which he interviewed and observed drivers, police, court

officials, social workers, researchers and policy-makers. His overall thesis is that the ‘problem of drinking-driving’ is constructed as a ‘drama of individualism’ centring on the ‘killer drunk’ rather than as, say, a problem of transportation or urban planning. The ‘culture’ of drinking-driving research and policy emphasises alcohol as *the* problem and locates the source of car accidents in the moral failings of the individual motorist, rather than in social institutions or physical environments. The book is divided into four parts: an introductory chapter outlining Gusfield’s approach to public problems; a second section comprising three chapters focusing on the science of drinking-driving; a third section comprising two chapters focusing on legal responses to drinking-driving; and a concluding section of two chapters summarising the book’s argument and justifying Gusfield’s analytical stance of ‘sociological irony’.

The introduction opens by defining the book’s focus: how and why driving under the influence of alcohol came to be seen as a public problem. The naturalness of public problems cannot be assumed:

Human problems do not spring up, full-blown and announced, into the consciousness of bystanders. Even to recognize a situation as painful requires a system for categorizing and defining events. All situations that are experienced by people as painful do not become matters of public activity and targets for public action. Neither are they given the same meaning at all times and by all peoples. ‘Objective’ conditions are seldom so compelling and clear in their form that they spontaneously generate a ‘true’ consciousness. [p.3]

Public problems are instead, Gusfield argues, socially constructed and the task becomes to describe and account for the related historical, cultural and structural processes that produce

problematizations and the solutions inhering within them. How such conceptions emerge, the cultural assumptions about action and causation they contain, the institutions charged with (or claiming) responsibility for solutions, the relationship between changing theories of causation and institutional ownership of problems, and the means by which alternative definitions and solution are rendered unthinkable (sometimes explicitly, at other times unrecognised), are central questions in understanding how public problems take shape and change. As Gusfield observes:

The structure of public problems is then an arena of conflict in which a set of groups and institutions, often including government agencies, struggle over ownership and disownership, the acceptance of causal theories, and the fixation of responsibility. It is here that knowledge and politics come into contact. [p.15]

In the second part of the book, Gusfield examines how research conceptualises drinking-driving as an individual act of problematic alcohol consumption. In Chapter 2, he analyses science as ‘rhetoric’ in that it involves persuading audiences of its merits and validity, and obscuring alternative conceptualisations. The rhetorical process involves two forms of selection and interpretation: the ‘cultural organization’ of knowledge found in the ‘linguistic and logical categories used to think about auto accidents’, which define and shape the causal and political responsibilities involved [p.31]; and the ‘social organization’ of knowledge, which determines ‘what facts are collected, how and by whom, as well as how they are processed and transmitted’ [p.32]. Gusfield identifies two main aspects: that car accidents are understood as preventable and that individual drivers impaired by alcohol are the causal agents (rather than, for example, car design, road conditions, urban planning, speeding, fatigue or inexperience). Here, to use the dramaturgical terms employed by Gusfield, the

individual 'agent' rather than the 'scene' becomes the focus of concern and policy attention [p.45].

In Chapter 3, Gusfield traces the processes by which ambiguous, partial, qualified and inconsistent observations about car accidents are transformed into authoritative and unimpeachable scientific statements of dramatic significance, in which the drinking-driver becomes the major focus of attention. He explores these processes through a careful analysis of 'the social history of a dramatic fact' (the increasing magnitude and certainty of estimates of the number of 'alcoholics' in the US), the 'isometric fiction' of blood-alcohol levels (that a specific BAL is equivalent to impairment), generalized conclusions made on the basis of unrepresentative arrest data, the singling out of alcohol as the primary (even sole) causal factor from the range of possibilities, and the frequent semantic slippage from 'association' to 'causation'.

Chapter 4 continues the critical examination of drinking-driving research with a close analysis of an influential article. Employing the techniques of literary analysis, Gusfield attempts to disrupt the epistemological fiction of the 'windowpane theory' of scientific reports – that language is 'only a medium by which the external world is reported' [p.83] – by arguing that such reports 'create or construct the very reality they seek to describe and analyze' [p.84]. He traces the various devices of form, content and rhetoric used by the author of the chosen article (e.g. the technical structure, language and style; use of the third-person; focus on individual drivers; and recasting of the 'social drinker' as the pathological, immoral 'drunk driver'), which serve to obscure the 'moral choices by which selection and adherence are developed' [p.108].

In the third part of the book, Gusfield turns his attention to the symbolic, ‘mythic’ aspects of legal responses to drinking-driving, seeking to go beyond utilitarian analyses of law as deterrence. In Chapter 5, he shows how ‘the [moral] contrast between drinking-driving and other traffic offences is essential to the communicative status of the “killer-drunk” message’. Gusfield argues that while the ‘Law’ (expressed in statutes and other judicial texts) singles out drinking-drivers as a special case of moral deviance and not other conditions that might also contribute to accidents, the ‘law’ (the day-to-day activities of participants in the judicial system) treats it as a mundane offence to be settled via negotiation amongst interested parties.

Chapter 6 continues the analysis of legal structures as myth. Rather than focusing on the utilitarian question: ‘What does [the Law] tell us to *do*’, Gusfield asks the question: ‘What does it tell us to *be*’ [p.146]. He argues that drinking-driving laws ‘constitute a moral drama which states the public definition of moral conduct in American life’ and ‘create an identity for the moral person and a counteridentity of deviance and guilt’ [p.148]. Furthermore, these laws symbolise ‘public commitment to the centrality of work, safety, and individual responsibility’ and mark alcohol as a ‘symbol of risk and danger and its control a mark of morality and social responsibility’ [p.148]. The drama of drinking-driving takes on such symbolic and public significance because it threatens the separation of sobriety and drunkenness, safety and danger, social and antisocial behaviour, and altruism and hedonism central to the organisation of contemporary capitalist society [pp.156-57].

The book closes with a final section comprising two short chapters. Chapter 7 restates Gusfield’s main arguments: that drinking-driving science and policy create an ‘orderly account’ of the moral ‘conflict between self-control and self-indulgence’, and locate

responsibility in flawed, immoral individuals. That this is so is the outcome of political and ethical choices rather than of ‘objective’ conditions.

The final chapter (Chapter 8) has particular resonance for readers of *Addiction*, as it opens with Gusfield’s account of being ‘berated’ by Griffith Edwards following a presentation at an international alcohol conference in California in 1974. According to Gusfield, Edwards accuses him, as well as other sociologists presenting social-constructionist arguments at the conference, of ‘having our fingers in our ears so that we needn’t hear the suffering’; in ‘positioning ourselves “above the battle”, were we denying the experiential reality of alcohol problems, of alcohol addiction or, in this case, of drinking-driving’ [p.186]? In the remainder of the chapter, Gusfield’s defends the value of ‘sociological irony’, of ‘seeing something from the viewpoint of its antithesis’ [p.190]. He is careful not to dismiss alcohol’s role in car accidents but that ‘the system of asking questions excludes alternative ways of asking’, excludes other variables and their potential interactions and effects, and singles out alcohol as ‘*the cause*’ [p.187]. Identifying the role of cultural assumptions about alcohol and individual responsibility is important because ‘[e]very perspective [on public problems] is a way of *not* seeing as well as a way of seeing’ [p.187].

Gusfield acknowledges that his approach – treating ‘science as if it were art’, ‘law as if it were myth’ and ‘both as if reality were theater’ [p.190] – incurs ‘resistance and anger’ (from Griffith Edwards as well as others cited in the book) because it demonstrates:

that the assumptions taken for granted by the scientists or lawgivers are not, as claimed, in the nature of reality but are instead matters of choice, functions of the linguistic, epistemological, and ideological paradigms with which they have approached material.
[p.190]

The value of such an approach, however, lies in ‘creat[ing] the possibility of alternative worlds’ in which ‘things could be otherwise’, including the possibility that ‘new and alternative lines of action’ can be imagined [p.191], and that the political and ethical choices obscured by the rhetoric of science and myths of policy can be exposed and debated.

A classic?

The Culture of Public Problems should be regarded as a classic for many reasons. Drawing on influential scholarship emerging across the social sciences in the 1960s and 70s, in which science and policy are conceptualised as distinctly cultural enterprises [4-8]), Gusfield lays bare the political and ethical choices obscured in alcohol science and policy. The book is path-breaking in its early recognition of the far-reaching potential of these emerging approaches and theorists, and in its pursuit of novel arguments, many of which are still being pursued and extended.

The book also anticipates several trends evident in later sociological analyses of AOD policy, even if its social-constructionist theoretical framework (in which meanings, myths and discourses are conceptually distinct from a pre-existing reality, which Gusfield defines as ‘the world of fact, independent of the minds that understand it’ [p.192]) has been overtaken by the ‘ontological turn’ (in which socio-material realities are understood as constituted in practices, including those of science and policy, rather than as pre-existing them [9-13]). For example, Gusfield highlights the relationship between alcohol policy research and wider structural and cultural processes. His argument that the contours and concerns of drinking-driving research and policy derive at least partly from moral tensions arising in modern, industrial society anticipates later work on drug policy as inscribing neo-liberal values of autonomy, independence and rationality in the governing of drug users [14-26]. In Gusfield’s insistence

on the importance of institutional definition and ownership of public problems, he anticipates later studies of the National Institute on Drug Abuse's aggressive proselytization of the 'brain disease' model of addiction [27-30]. And his analysis of scientific research as a form of rhetoric, and identification of the literary techniques and tropes by which uncertain and ambiguous observations are transformed into unassailable 'evidence', is echoed in several recent critical works [31-35].

Gusfield's work also anticipates themes evident in the critical analysis of AOD policy inspired by Carol Bacchi's [36, 37] poststructuralist 'What's the problem represented to be' approach [31,34-35, 38-41]. Why specific phenomena come to be defined as problems, the crucial role of research and policy in constituting these problems (rather than responding to pre-existing problems), and the ways in which the constitution of problems ('problematizations' in Bacchi's terms) makes visible and possible certain solutions but forecloses others, are all questions that similarly occupied Gusfield. Other recent critical work [32, 42-58], animated by theoretical developments in science and technology studies [10-12] and feminist science studies (e.g. by Donna Haraway, a trained ethologist [9], and Karen Barad, a trained physicist [13]), similarly draws attention to the politics and ethics of AOD research and policy, and the implication of supposedly objective science in these political and ethical processes. Why is the 'problem' cast in this way and not that? How could the phenomena under examination be seen 'otherwise' (incidentally, an expression used by Gusfield that also appears in this later work) and what new opportunities would these alternative problematisations make possible? These later works, while covering some of the same ground, go much further than Gusfield's social constructionism makes possible because they identify and problematise not just the symbolic meanings, discourses and practices of

research and policy but also draw attention to their constitutive role in *materialising* the phenomena under consideration [see also 59-62 on the law].

One striking, if frustrating, conclusion that emerges from re-reading the book, and considering its arguments in light of more recent critical analyses of AOD research and policy, is how little has changed in the 36 years since its publication. Much AOD research and policy continues to engage in the troubling practices identified by Gusfield almost four decades ago: to fudge issues of causation, claim objectivity and political and moral neutrality, ignore limitations and caveats, and opt for certainty over complexity, ambiguity and caution. When will the rhetoric and myths of objective, scientific ‘evidence’ and ‘evidence-based policy’, so trenchantly critiqued over many decades, finally give way to an acknowledgment of the politics and ethics that are inevitably entangled in all research and policy?

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