Connotation in Drug Policy Discourse

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Commentary

The impetus for this essay was the publication of an advance, online version of "*Narrative Subscription in Public Policy Discourse*" in Critical Policy Studies. This journal's coordinator took note of the article and invited commentary from the author. The main point of the article is that signs, symbols, ideographs [1] and narratives are inherently connotative and suggestive rather than denotative and fixed. For example, terms such as drug abuse do not always point to an objective fact or to reality itself. The term carries with it symbolic imagery, value judgements, and affective tenor. Public policy narratives are not typically logical and objectively factual in the scientific sense. In societies where pluralism flourishes, policy goals will be contested and facts will be disputed. Narrative analysis is a mode of inquiry that gives researchers access to the crux of policy disputes; the study of policy narratives also provides a method for hearing the other side.

When a drug is made illegal in the United States, it is often associated with some otherized group. When opium was first made illegal in San Francisco in the late 1890's, it was associated with Chinese immigrants. Laudanum, white people's favorite mode of ingesting opium, remained legal, but the smoking of opium became illegal. Similarly, when cannabis was first made illegal in the United States it was assigned the Spanish-language name marihuana (rather than cannabis or hemp) and linked to Mexican immigrants [2,3].

The racism that underlies much of drug policy deserves attention. The extremely high incarceration rate in the United States, disproportionately African-American, can be explained in part by the conduct of the so-called war on drugs [4]. This harmful effect of the war on drugs is an urgent matter of concern, but what I want to focus on here is the way that language and symbolic associations inform the discourse that enables such policies.

Stereotypes link a stigmatized drug to a cultural out-group, but symbolic associations are not limited to racial stereotypes. Language itself works this way. Consider the difference between the term habitué, which was used to describe American opium-using Civil War veterans in the latter part of the 19th century, and the contemporary term drug addict, a more harshly judgmental term. The two terms point at the same phenomenon, but evoke different emotions, values, and symbolic meaning. Similarly, the term drug addiction carries with it connotations that are less judgmental than the term drug abuse. Even more importantly, drug addict has different meanings in different drug policy narratives. In the Abstention Narrative (neatly summarized as "Just say no") drug addicts are unwholesome criminals who should be put in prison. However, in the Harm Reduction Narrative drug addicts are people with a health problem, and one can perhaps stop things from getting worse by providing them with clean needles [5].

How does one come to subscribe to one narrative or another? Affect and identity are key determinates [6]. I alluded above to a feature of a Nativist Narrative that links otherized immigrants and minority groups to a stigmatized drug, and then advocates criminal penalties. If one grew up in a racist household, or if one participated in groups where racist explanations circulate, these attitudes and feelings may influence someone to subscribe to the Nativist Narrative. One can unsubscribe to a narrative when one no longer identifies with it, or when the emotional resonance diminishes.

There are other narratives competing for dominance in the drug policy discourse. Allied in opposition to criminal penalties are the Compassionate Use Narrative, the force behind the legalization of medical marijuana in most American states, and a Fairness Narrative that questions both the imbalance between a drug's actual dangers and the associated prison sentence, and the class-and race-based patterns evident in arrest and incarceration rates. There are other narratives circulating in the discourse that I need not describe here, except to say that all are evolving, some have not yet cohered, and others are losing their importance.

In public policy discourse, it is difficult to isolate and preserve a completely denotative, objective meaning. Biologists come close to doing this by using Latin terms to name plants, but the poets and spin-masters operating in arenas of public policy discourse are adept at smuggling symbolic associations into their policy proposals. Think here of ideographs such as partial birth abortion or acid rain. The welfare queen ideograph of the 1980's morphed into the "*end welfare as we know it*" policy narrative a decade later, and subsequently was enacted into law. Acid rain helped pass legislation requiring a reduction of the sulphur content of coal used as fuel. The question is which kinds of symbolic meanings will encourage someone to support a policy narrative? The answer from social psychology is that group identification plays a role:

"Large N, macro-level survey research does not readily lend itself to context-specific knowledge discovery. Survey researchers consistently construct groups based on sex, race,

and ethnicity not necessarily because there is a relevant referent group behind the typology, but because the data are relatively easy to collect. Much more difficult to discern is which referent group a person has in mind when answering any question on the survey instrument [6]".

Groups require/forbid particular practices and group members share conventions and understandings. In other words, who was I with – not physically, but what cultural sub-group was I with mentally when, for example, I subscribed to the notion that acid rain was real? I cluster the acid rain imagery with claims about greenhouse gas emissions, global climate change, and depletion of the ozone layer. I identify with the scientific origins of the claims related to these concepts. Someone else, not necessarily from the fossil fuel industry, might eschew these same claims, dismissing them as exaggerated hyperbole. Hence narrative competition plays out on a field of political contestation, with some of us rooting for one side, and some of us being great fans of the other side. Identity and affect are thus brought to bear in public policy discourse.

Policy narratives gain subscribers by appropriating symbolic connotations (that is, ideographs) and tying them together using a story line. The hope for rational drug policy is not thereby obliterated, but instead depends on the proportion of the culture's population that identifies with secular, scientific inquiry and derives emotive resonance from the practices therein.

References

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