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# DISCOURSE, SUBJECTIVITY AND THE POLICY REALM: RECONCEPTUALISING POLICY WORKERS AS LOCATED SUBJECTS

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# ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a radical reconceptualisation of policy workers. It does this by identifying and disrupting the pervasive discourses around the policy realm, policy workers and policy both in the academic literature and amongst a specific group of policy workers, South Australian women who have worked in the policy area of gender and education between 1977 and 2004. Traditionally, understandings of policy workers assume a structure-agency dichotomy: policy workers are either pawns to the bureaucracy or they are agents fighting against it. In either case, policy workers are conceptualised as humanist agents, separate and distinct from the policy realm in which they work. In contrast, this thesis argues for an understanding of policy workers as located subjects, formed through and in the policy realm in which they work. That is, it argues for an understanding of the ways in which discourses around and in the policy realm shape the subjectivities of policy workers. A concern with subjectivity directs attention to the thoughts, ideas and practices of policy workers, how they understand their place and role in the policy realm and how they perform policy work.

The thesis identifies two hegemonic discourses circulating within and around the policy realm – the logic of agency and the logic of rationality. Combined, these logics constitute policy workers as 'rational agents': people who believe they *can* (logic of agency) *objectively identify and solve* policy problems (logic of rationality). These discourses affect the ways in which policy workers perform their work, impacting upon substantive policy outcomes. Policy workers, as 'rational agents', perform policy work that:

- misses the impact of deeply-held shared values in the conceptualisation of policy problems;
- evaluates policies against their stated objectives instead of recognising their broad and discursive effects on people and social relations; and
- underplays the role of policy language, concepts and concerns in shaping policy goals and outcomes.

The thesis identifies, both in the literature and in practice, the presence of sub-dominant discourses that constitute policy workers as located subjects and policy as discursively constructed. It develops these understandings, arguing that reconceptualising policy workers as located subjects may produce substantially different and more beneficial types of policy practice and outcomes – outcomes that take account of the ways in which policy problems are constructed and the subsequent impacts on people and social relations.