Evaluating Power in Development Programmes

Usefulness of Discourse Theory

By Rachel Simon-Kumar

SINCE the mid-1990s, there has been a growing interest in, and use of discourse theories within development studies to understand contexts of power inequalities between individuals, groups and institutions. Banded together, several genres of scholarship which can be considered 'discourse theories' have emerged – post-development, post-positivist policy analysis, critical/sub-altern theorisations, post-structuralism, post-modernism and their feminist variants, among others – all of which draw some, if not the main bulk, of their core ideas from the perspectives derived by Michel Foucault (1926-1984) and his social/linguistic/philosophical analyses.

This article summarises the fundamental tenets of discourse theory, and in particular, the conceptualisation of power within this framework. The article then goes on to examine the relevance of a discourse theoretical framework in applied work, and specifically in the evaluation of development programmes.

What is discourse and discourse theory?

Discourses and discourse theories fall within those approaches that see the world as being socially constructed. That is to say, social relations are considered to be artifices of society, rather than naturally pre-given. Gender and class structures, and the host of roles derived from them, are typical examples of relationships that are socially constructed.

Discourses are considered to be the "series of rules" (Fischer 1995) that hold these constructions together and

Foucault takes to the streets.

shape the way people think about their world. The rules, as it were, are not conscious or easily identifiable. Nonetheless, they structure the way people develop values, beliefs systems, and norms that influence their everyday actions. Many theorists think of discourses as the unspoken codes of a society

– those who are conditioned in it understand their social context better than those who are alien to it.

To understand why some people are afraid of death, while others embrace it without fear or remorse is to unearth a range of ways that culture and society have developed ideas about death. Individuals adopt these social discourses as their own frameworks for belief and actions.

Discourses are set in time and place. Incest was normal in particular historical and cultural contexts; in today's world, it is seen as aberrant and criminal. Discourses are also constantly evolving. The discourses around smoking, for example, in the western world have been shifting away from perceptions of glamour to perceptions of irresponsible behaviour.

Discourses, however, are not merely isolated attitudes of an individual or

a group. What makes discourses an important social force to reckon with is that they are tied to institutional structures and practices. The unfavourable discourses around smoking are supported by a host of research studies, media highlights, government policies and educational campaigns. People believe and act in certain ways because society evolves structures that encourage individuals' beliefs towards particular discourses.

Discourse as a theory of power

Discourses carry with them power. Because discourses set the framework for society's values, and the structures that support it, those who control discourses have the option to control, exclude, reject, accept, criminalise, demonise and glorify some ideas and people, and not other. Discourses around marginalised groups – Maori, single mothers, migrants, homosexuals – determine whether they are favoured or not (including whether these groups have access to resources). Discourses which are well embedded give the semblance of "truth" – facts and processes support certain discourses and foreclose alternative paradigms. To control discourse is, quite simply, to exercise power. Social discourses, are therefore, always in contest and conflict – groups are seeking to establish their own meanings because that is where the seat of power lies.

Integrated within discourse theory, therefore, is a radical view of power. Conventionally, to think of power is to think of a dichotomy – where power is exerted from someone who has it onto someone who does not. Those who have power and those who don't are fixed in society, and power is visible in its violent expressions. Discourse theory, in contrast, points to power which is embedded in the everyday and the mundane. What many people consider "normal" is often the seat of deeply entrenched power.

Consequently, ideas about male superiority, or female weakness, when set in patriarchal institutions can be
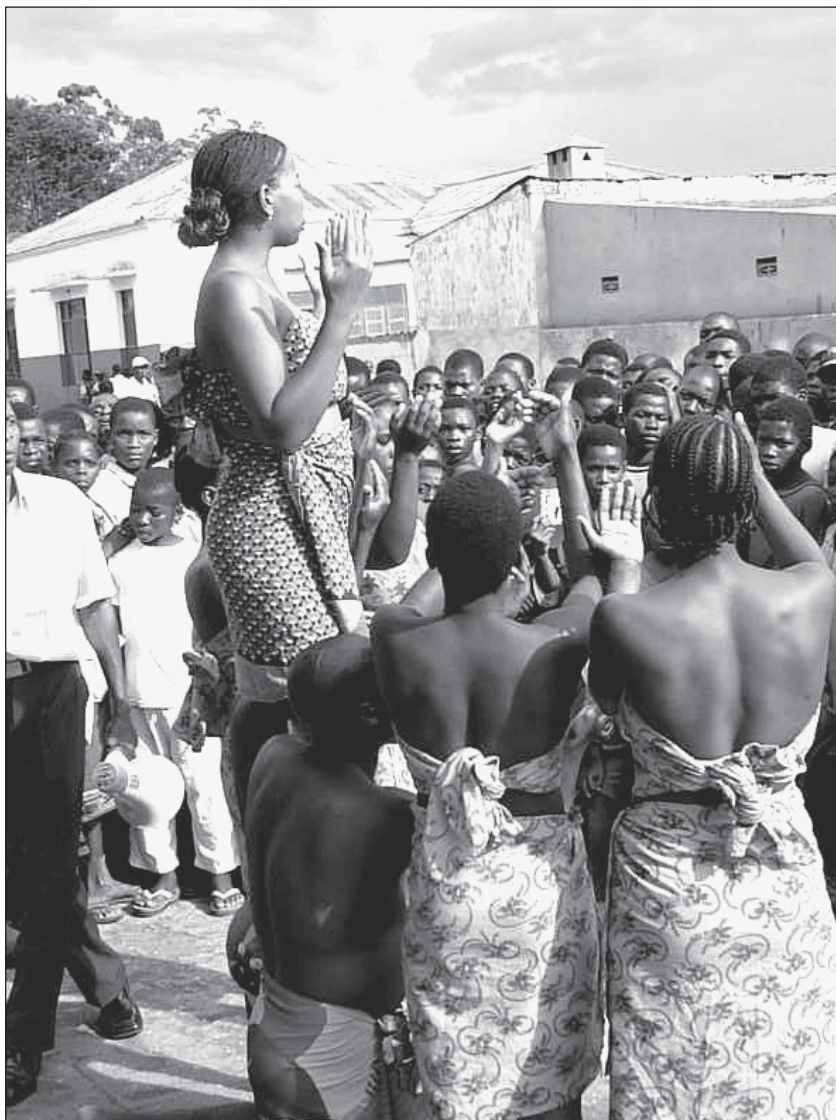

Photo: Pat Craddock

People's actions are guided by beliefs stemming from discourses validated by social structures.

strong determinants of power – mostly, because it can be unquestioned and taken as "truth". Discourse theorists assert that it is important to deconstruct the many "truths" that make up society in order to reveal power imbalances. By deconstructing claims of truth, it is possible to reveal the underlying rules of social discourse, and how power is established. Real social change is possible only when those structures of power are revealed, and the terms of discourse altered to empower the vulnerable.

Discourses in development

The ideas central to discourse and power have been applied to development issues for well over a decade. The foremost application of some of its core tenets has been in developing

a critique of development knowledges and theories. Authors like Escobar (1995), Rahnema (1997) and Crush (1995) claim that the very theories and knowledges that make up development logic (and which underpin development practice) are based on particular discourses/worldviews.

Premises that are touted as "truth" – for instance, that small families are prosperous or vaccines protect against diseases or that contraceptives empower women – are so ingrained in everyday development structures, that there is never a possibility that they are constructions rather than truth.

Everyone in the development field – from the strategic programme manager to the health provider and the recipient – act as if these are

incontrovertible truths, and accordingly tap into institutional structures that are set up to support them. Are these true – or, are these discourses a means for continued western ideological power over the Third World? Or patriarchy over women? Unless underlying discourses are critically examined, development interventions can *reproduce* not *remove* differences in power and inequality.

Studies also analyse development discourses "in the field" – how the various stakeholders interpret seemingly similar language. In one such interesting analysis, Macdonald (2003) analyses the discourses in the Kwa-Zulu Natal Land Reform Pilot Project in Natal, South Africa. The Kwazulu Natal Land Reform Programme was set up to redistribute land to the landless, the poor (especially women), and emergent farmers – in theory, a social justice rationale.

However, Macdonald's analysis of the language used by politicians and policy makers showed that the real underlying discourse was that of economic development. Despite the use of words such as 'justice' for victims, the dominant structures and practices of policy were focused on economic growth – so much so that there were regulations around what land could be used for even when redistributed. Despite the policy language around social justice, the inherent objectives were around nation building and the state's economic priorities.

There is now ample evidence that points to different discourses operating when stakeholders use terms such as "partnership", "participation", "ownership", "gender", "equality" and "rights" – tapping into deep-seated differences in worldviews and interpretations of development programmes. Sometimes dominant discourses determine how programmes are finally interpreted; sometimes, equally strong contrasting discourses can lead to conflict. Every stage in the policy process is influenced by contests between discourses and the interests they represent – from problem identification to programme design, implementation and evaluation.

Discourse theory and evaluation

Can there be any use for the precepts of discourse theory for practitioners evaluating development programmes?

Evaluations are conventionally conceived of as, "the systematic application of social research procedures for assessing the conceptualization, design, implementation, and utility of... programmes" (Rossi and Freeman 1993).The aims of evaluations are often focused – they seek to ensure that specific interventions deliver development products and create change in the long-term through changes in material conditions of individuals, groups and communities. Evaluations also seek to understand the terrain in which specific development programmes are being implemented.

Overtly, at least, there seems to be little theoretical or methodological 'fit' between evaluations and a theory of discourse and power, especially for development practitioners. Built into a typical evaluation framework is a premise that redistribution of material resources will also change, in due course, the terms of social relations and power. However, discourse theory suggests that social relations are shaped at a deeper level – of meanings and ideology – not just material resources. Methodologically, contrary to analyses of discourse, which examine language and text constructions, evaluations employ a broad spectrum of methods, both qualitative and quantitative, to examine efficacy of programmes.

Discourse analysis works well as a critique – its ability to contribute constructively to programme or policy-level is often questioned, particularly as it demands a drastic reconsideration of the terms on which power is established, rather than specific problem-solving. Discourse analysis focuses on social change, while evaluations focus on programme change.

Fischer (2003) suggests an evaluation framework that brings together both aspects – a technical and discourse analysis. He proposes a tiered approach or what he calls a 'first' and 'second' order evaluation. The first order evaluation in his framework has a programme oriented goal, while the second order enquires about the assumptions and beliefs underlying the policy or project. In the first order of evaluation, quantitative and qualitative methods are used to provide an empirical analysis whereas the method of use in the second-order would be social discourse analysis.

I couldn't find an example within development policy that undertook both levels of evaluation. In its place, I will outline research that I have been involved with to provide the possible contrasts of information that emerges when discourse is analysed.

In 1997, the Indian government instituted the Reproductive and Child Health Policy (RCH). The RCH drew on the paradigm of reproductive health and gender empowerment that was becoming globally accepted at the time. Evaluations, commissioned by the government and other agencies, have been undertaken over the years.

The information from various evaluations have informed the specific aspects of the programme's design, use or non-use of the services by women, the quality of services and impact of the changes provided in the RCH. Critical research by NGOs also questioned if there had been substantive programme changes despite the government's stated policy.

My research on the RCH was a second order evaluation – that is, an analysis of key discourses that informed the policy (Simon-Kumar 2006).

The analysis revealed that the core discourses underlying the RCH policy were those of neo-liberalism and fertility control. So, although the policy claimed to be women-centred, it was a particular take on women-centeredness that was favoured. Wom-

en-centeredness was encouraged so long as women conformed their reproductive activities to the state's agenda of population control. The discourse underlying gender sensitivity was in terms of conformity to the state's fertility agenda, not transformation of gender relations. The power of the state is in its ability to reinforce the message of fertility control as the norm for everyone, including women who thought they were being 'empowered'.

Conclusion

This essay was a cursory attempt to discuss the relevance of discourse and discourse theory – namely, the links between discourses and power – to development evaluations. Discourse theory has been used widely within development studies as a tool of critique, to question the knowledge foundations within development studies. There is less clear evidence of discourse analysis used as part of a broader learning tool along with formal evaluation techniques; yet, because discourses reveal deeply-held ideologies about worldviews, here is an area that holds potential to understand why some policies and programmes succeed – and why some don't.

References

Crush, J. (1995) *The Power of Development*, Routledge: London, New York.

Escobar, A. (1995) *Encountering Development: The making and unmaking of the Third World,* Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey.

Fischer, F. (1995) *Evaluating Public Policy*, Nelson-Hall Publishers: Chicago.

Fischer (2003) *Reframing public policy: Discursive Politics and Deliberative Practices*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.

MacDonald, C. (2003) "The Value Of Discourse Analysis As A Methodological Tool For Understanding A Land Reform Program" *Policy Sciences*, Vol 36, Iss 2, pp. 232-244.

Rahnema, M. (1997) *The Post-Development Reader*, Zed Books: London, New Jersey.

Rossi, P.H. & Freeman, H.E. 1993. *Evaluation, A systematic approach.* Sage Publications: London.

Simon-Kumar, R. (2006) *Marketing Reproduction? Ideology and Population Policy in India* Zubaan: New Delhi.

Weedon, C. (1987) *Feminist Practice & Poststructuralist Theory*, Basil Blackwell: Oxford (for an easy-to-read summary of discourse theory).

Rachel Simon-Kumar is a senior lecturer at the University of Waikato.

NZAID and the Evaluation of Development Assistance

By Penny Hawkins

WHAT'S been happening in evaluation since NZAID was established?

Since NZAID was established in July 2002 there has been an increased emphasis on the need for good quality evaluation. Over the past three years a programme of work has been implemented to improve the capability of the organisation to plan, commission and undertake better quality evaluations and to promote evaluative activities as an integral part of programme management and organisational learning.

An NZAID Evaluation Policy Statement was developed to provide a broad framework for evaluation along with a set of guidelines to support evaluation management. In addition to this an evaluation training needs assessment was undertaken for NZAID staff, and pro-fessional development opportunities designed to meet the identified needs are being rolled out. A key aspect of this endeavour to improve evaluation quality is the provision of ongoing advisory support to Development Programme Managers and other staff involved in evaluative activities.

To make the learning from evaluation useful for everyone requires an increase in the level of engagement with stakeholders throughout the evaluation process. In common with many organisations these days, it continues to be a challenge to allow sufficient time for these processes alongside everything else that needs to be done. However, despite this challenge, NZAID is committed to continuing to learn and build cumulative knowledge from evaluative activities and to share this knowledge as widely as possible. In line with this aim, another aspect of the evaluation work programme that's still under development is the publication of reports. The plan is for the NZAID website to include an evaluation section in the near future. See: **www.nzaid.govt.nz**

How does NZAID approach evaluation?

NZAID has identified three main purposes for undertaking evaluation:

Evaluation is carried out for accountability, learning, and improvement purposes. Evaluative information for accountability purposes is required to pro-