The Role of Ideas in Policy and Institutional Change: A Comparison of the Open Functional Approach, Constructivism and Discourse Theory

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Most scholars engaged in ideational analysis agree that the availability of new ideas may cause existing welfare state policies and institutions to alter. This article considers the extent to which the open functional approach and constructivist approaches are able to explain the role of ideas in policy and institutional change. Notwithstanding their contribution to the study of the role of ideas in policy and institutional change, these approaches suffer from some shortcomings as they fail to view ideas as non-stable entities. In order to address these shortcomings, an alternative poststructuralist discourse theoretical explanatory model is presented. Applying this model to the case of the rise and fall of Dutch life course policy, the article shows how a discourse theoretical view of ideas as floating signifiers contributes to the study of the role of ideas in welfare state change.

**Keywords:** poststructuralist discourse theory; ideational analysis; welfare state; constructivism; David Howarth

The role of ideas in policy and institutional change has been highly debated in the policy and political science literature over the past decade. Most scholars engaged in ideational analysis agree that the availability of new ideas may cause existing welfare state policies and institutions to alter (Blyth, 2002; Cox, 2001; Hay, 2002; Schmidt, 2002). However, it is still not clear exactly how ideas relate to policy or institutional change. Recently, Barbara Vis and Kees van Kersbergen (2013) have criticised the expanding social constructivist literature on the role of ideas in institutional change (Gofas and Hay, 2010; Hay, 2010; 2011; Mehta, 2010; Schmidt, 2008; 2010a). According to them, these approaches to institutional change overlook ‘objective’ or ‘material’ factors that constrain the possible range of actions, such as increasing economic internationalisation, an ageing population and changing family structures. They advocate the open functional approach, which accords a (minimum) role to ideas in the explanation of policy and institutional change. In a nutshell, this approach understands the challenges that (welfare state) institutions face ‘as functional demands for policy change whenever the challenges can be shown to threaten existential social policy arrangements’ (Vis and van Kersbergen, 2013, p. 851). The logic of system survival demands that policy responses are in accordance with reference frames such as social order and efficiency. Yet, whereas different responses are possible despite these material constraints, the notion of ideas as causal beliefs suggests ways to address or to challenge these problems.

In this article, I consider the extent to which the approach proposed by Vis and van Kersbergen, and the social constructivist approaches that they contest, are able to explain the role of ideas in policy and institutional change. I also examine the extent to which a
poststructuralist approach may add to the study of the role of ideas in policy and institutional change. I argue, contra Vis and van Kersbergen, that the open functional approach – like the social constructivist approaches they criticise – does not isolate material as ‘objective’ factors from their discursive forms. Moreover, I concur with the lessons that we have learnt from Colin Hay’s interpretivist institutionalist approach to the role of ideas in policy and institutional change. First, an explanatory model that assigns a role to ideas only when a pre-existing material-based theory (i.e. the open functional approach) runs into difficulties does not sustain the objective of ontological and epistemological consistency. Second, along with Hay, I believe that uncertainty constitutes the human condition and that (therefore) ideas always matter (Gofas and Hay, 2010). On the other hand, I share the critique of Vis and van Kersbergen that Hay’s interpretivist institutionalism does not sufficiently explain why and how ideas affect policy and institutional change. Yet, in my opinion, this is not due to a neglect of ‘material’ forces that limit the role of ideas to causal beliefs, but is a consequence of Hay’s conception of ideas as stable entities.

Regarding the shortcomings of both the open functional approach and constructivist approaches in explaining the role of ideas in policy and institutional change, I develop an alternative poststructuralist discourse theoretical explanatory model that takes the radical contingency of objectivity (structures, agents, discourses) as a starting point. Applying this model to the case of the rise and fall of Dutch life course policy, which highlighted the need for a work–life balance within social security institutions in the Netherlands, this article shows how a discourse theoretical view of ideas as floating signifiers contributes to the study of the role of ideas in welfare state change. Additionally, the article considers how valuable insights from the open functional approach and discursive institutionalism can add to this analytical model.

The article is organised as follows. It begins by considering Vis and van Kersbergen’s defence of the open functional approach, including the limited role of ideas in policy and institutional change. There then follows an outline of constructivist approaches that accord a much greater role to the study of ideas and institutional change. The two approaches are assessed and an argument is presented for why we would need a third approach to the analysis of the role of ideas in policy and institutional change. The possible contribution of poststructuralist discourse theory in this respect is discussed, and the contours of a new analytical model based on a poststructuralist discourse theoretical ontology developed. Drawing on my own research on Dutch life course policy, an illustration of how this analytical model renders the role of ideas in policy and institutional change more intelligible is presented. Finally, the article concludes with the premise that the new analytical model is promising to the extent that it enables the researcher to conceptualise ideas as non-stable elements.

The Open Functional Approach
Barbara Vis and Kees van Kersbergen (2013) have defended the open functional approach for the study of policy and institutional change as an alternative to constructivist approaches. According to them, the latter approaches have tended to overlook the ‘material’ factors that constrain the possible range of actions. Vis and van Kersbergen agree with other ideational scholars (e.g. Béland and Cox, 2010) that the role of ideas in policy
and institutional change is limited: ideas should be viewed as causal beliefs that enable individual agents to connect things and people in the world. In other words, ideas matter mainly because they serve as cognitive roadmaps for change, suggesting how to address or challenge problems. Drawing on the open functional approach, they argue that policy and institutional changes in the modern welfare state are mainly dependent on material factors such as increasing economic internationalisation, an ageing population and changing family structures. As Vis and van Kersbergen (2013, p. 844) put it, these challenges to welfare states exist ‘irrespective of whether actors perceive these challenges as such or not, because welfare states’ continuation depends on their reform’.

In their opinion, material factors may limit the possible range of actions in various ways. First, problem pressures such as increasing economic internationalisation, an ageing population, mass unemployment, changing family structures and gender roles, and the transformation of lifecycle patterns may threaten existing systems. In other words, they constitute functional demands on the system which, when they are not met, may cause system defects. These problem pressures have to be met in specific ways in accordance with the ‘objective reference frames’ that are necessary for system survival. Examples of reference frames that place objective limits on a possible range of actions include the mobility of capital, social order, efficiency, profitability and competitiveness. In addition to the objective points of reference, Vis and van Kersbergen identify subjective points of reference that instead depend on political preferences.

So what happens if an existing system is threatened because of increasing problem pressures? First of all, the reaction can be that policy actors do nothing. However, as the functional demands of the system are not met, this means that the system will falter in the end. If policy actors do act, these actions are constrained by both problem pressures and reference frames. Still, actors can act very differently. To explain why certain measures have been taken, and why these measures have been successful, ideas as causal beliefs become relevant. They link the actual reform strategies that actors choose to the functional demands that make themselves felt in the context. Thus, according to Vis and van Kersbergen, in the end ideas explain which reform is chosen given the contextual constraints.

Vis and van Kersbergen criticise constructivist approaches, such as the ones defended by Vivien Schmidt and Colin Hay, because they do not take into account the way ideas are constrained by so-called ‘objective material interests’. According to Vis and van Kersbergen, this view tends to over-emphasise ideational explanations at the cost of looking at the way material factors constrain or enable reforms.

Yet, irrespective of the question of whether Hay and Schmidt ignore material factors in their explanatory accounts (in my opinion they do not)¹, it can be questioned whether we are able to isolate material as objective factors from their discursive forms. Vis and van Kersbergen insist on viewing internal and external challenges to the welfare state as real or material challenges that are unrelated to the ideationally informed perception of the actors. However, if we take a closer look at the open functional approach we will find some important points of agreement between this approach and constructivist approaches. First, Vis and van Kersbergen admit that interests are socially constructed. In their opinion, however, once constructed and embedded in the context, interests appear as so-called...
‘objective interests’. Second, the literature on the open functional approach does not seem to draw a strict line between objective (material) and subjective (constructed) points of reference. For example, according to Uwe Becker (2007), objective goals might become politicised and subjective goals might have existential necessary components. In other words, material factors can become more and more ideationally defined and ideational factors increasingly appear as material as they become more sedimented.

The question can be raised as to why Vis and van Kersbergen stick to words such as ‘objective’ and ‘real’. Why not simply say that interests appear as sedimented discourses that represent people’s perceived interests? It can also be questioned to what extent reference frames are real and objective. For example, according to Vis and van Kersbergen, competitiveness is an objective reference frame for capitalist systems. However, as Michel Foucault (2008) has argued, the notion of competitiveness has changed over the last centuries. Whereas for classical liberalism the construction of free spaces would encourage competitiveness, neoliberalism instead emphasises the need to construct competitive citizens to guarantee competitiveness. This also explains why the notion of personal human capital could be developed within a neoliberal conception of competitiveness and not within a classical liberal notion of competitiveness.

In sum, notwithstanding the contribution of the open functional approach to the understanding of dysfunctional systems, it does not seem to uphold the rigorous distinction between material and ideational factors. Therefore, the next section considers some constructivist approaches that Vis and van Kersbergen criticise.

Constructivist Approaches

For most constructivist thinkers, ideas play an important role in the process of policy and institutional change. Colin Hay (2011) has developed an interesting ‘interpretivist institutionalist’ analytical model in this respect. To understand this model we should first consider Hay’s concept of ‘institutions’. For Hay (2002), institutions are both the context within which agents think, speak and act, and the results from agent’s thoughts and words. Hence, the institutional context not only limits the actions of actors, it can also be altered by the same actors. Hay’s interpretivist institutionalist explanatory model also draws extensively on the work of Mark Bevir and R.A.W. Rhodes (2003; 2005), which views institutional change as the outcome of an interaction between dilemmas and situated actors.

To begin with the second concept – ‘situated actors’ – this term makes clear, according to Bevir and Rhodes, that an actor can never act independently of a certain contextual background, which includes, for example, the period within which an actor lives, the culture and society within which the actor is raised, the language that he or she speaks, their personality and their physical possibilities and limitations. A ‘dilemma’ emerges when a new idea is introduced, the consequence of which mean that old traditions and ideas are being looked at in a new way and traditional perspectives change (Bevir, 1999). According to Hay (2011), dilemmas may also arise from extra discursive factors arising out of dysfunctional institutions operating in a context that is based on predominantly traditional ideas. In both situations, situated actors start to act and institutions possibly transform.

So, how do new ideas affect existing policies and institutions? First of all, viewing institutions as both given and contingent, Hay endorses a much broader conception of
ideas than Vis and van Kersbergen, who hold that ideas matter mainly because they serve as cognitive roadmaps for change. The same is true for Schmidt’s discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008; 2010a), according to which interactive discourses giving expression to new ideas may affect the way new policy problems are being ‘reframed’. New ideas can even have an impact on a certain way of thinking during a certain period (i.e. ‘Zeitgeist’). This implies that institutional or policy change can never be the sole outcome of an intentionally acting actor who assembles isolated problems and solutions. On the basis of Hay’s work we can draw a similar conclusion. Then, if we assume that the thinking, the speaking and the acting of the actor is constitutive for the existing (dysfunctional) institutional context, it becomes impossible to distinguish strictly between the ideational construction of problems and solutions.

Indeed, assuming that uncertainty constitutes the human condition, Andreas Gofas and Colin Hay (2010) argue that ideas always matter. This does not imply, however, that they do not recognise the role of material factors in policy and institutional change. Dilemmas may arise from extra discursive factors out of dysfunctional institutions. In addition, Hay’s analytical model reveals that pre-existing (sedimented) discursive formations may put a limit on the possible range of actions. Furthermore, Gofas and Hay (2010) argue that materialist explanations of institutional change that only draw on ideational explanations when materialist explanations run out (such as the one put forward by Vis and van Kersbergen) should be rejected as they suffer from ontological and epistemological inconsistency. Hay circumvents ontological inconsistency by assigning an ontological equivalence to both material and ideational factors, suggesting that it is not possible strictly to distinguish (ideational) ideas from (material) interests. As he puts it, ideas serve as ‘cognitive filters through which actors come to interpret environmental signals and, in so doing, to conceive of their own interests’ (Hay, 2010, p. 69).

Yet, despite the fact that Hay’s interpretivist institutionalism assigns an important role to ideas in policy and institutional change, the explanatory model does not provide us with concrete tools to investigate the relationship between ideational constructions and institutional or policy change. As a result, the explanation of the role of ideas in policy and institutional change remains problematic.

The Need for a Third Approach?
To recap, whereas the open functional approach as defended by Vis and van Kersbergen does not explain adequately why it accords a limited role to ideas in the explanation of policy and institutional change – a position that for Gofas and Hay amounts to ontological inconsistency – social constructivist approaches, such as interpretivist institutionalism and discursive institutionalism, do not provide us with useful tools for explaining the role of ideas in policy and institutional change. In my opinion, there are different reasons for the absence of adequate analytical tools in social constructivist approaches. First, being a critical realist, Hay draws on a qualified naturalist ontology that assumes real intransitive objects with causal powers, such as structures, agents and institutions. These ontological assumptions prevent him from developing research tools that are able to grasp the mutual constitution of ideas, problems and solutions. Likewise, viewing discourse as the independent variable explaining institutional and policy change, as Schmidt (2010a) proposes,
observes the ongoing interactions between ideas, discourses, institutions and actors. In fact, the work of both social constructivists seems to resemble the open functional approach. All approaches, then, consider ideas to be rather stable products that may, under certain conditions, have an effect on material or sedimeted institutions, interests and so on. My contention is that these approaches insufficiently conceptualise ideas as non-stable elements in a discursive field in which a broader network of power relations is at play.

David Howarth, who is a representative of the Essex School of discourse theory, has dealt with these latter issues in his book Poststructuralism and After (Howarth, 2013). According to him, ideas must not be understood as ‘unchanging expressions of the mind, or the direct products of thinking, which are then seen to represent or even to constitute a world of externally existing objects’ (Howarth, 2013, p. 259). This picture of ideas would lead to the idealist view that ideas determine interest formations and social change. Instead, Howarth prefers the discourse theoretical framework, which considers ‘ways in which various linguistic acts and practices – speeches, statements, slogans, newspaper headlines and articles, declarations, jokes, questions and crucially their constant public repetition or reiteration – are turned into ideas and ideals’ (Howarth, 2013, p. 260). For him, ideas are, above all, floating signifiers that can be articulated together with other elements such as institutions and practices into new discursive formations. Putting the emphasis on the non-stable aspect of ideas, Howarth prefers a so-called ‘thick discursive’ discourse theoretical explanation of the relationship between ideas and social change over a ‘thin discursive’ explanation such as constructivist institutionalism.

This is not to deny that, for Howarth, Hay’s approach has improved earlier instrumental accounts according to which ideas were no more than ‘simply tools or resources at the disposal of instrumental social actors’ (Howarth, 2013, p. 255). He also likes the ontological commitment of Hay, which is obviously shared by discourse theorists. However, regarding Hay’s treatment of ideas as stable entities, Howarth maintains that Hay’s constructive institutionalism fails to provide a satisfying understanding of the relationship between ideas and interests and the impact it has on social structure and political agency. Thus, the next section considers the extent to which poststructuralist discourse theory provides tools for the analysis of the role of ideas in policy and institutional change.

**Poststructuralist Discourse Theory**

Poststructuralist discourse theory of the Essex School emerged with the work of Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985). To understand the discourse theoretical view on ideas, I will first briefly discuss the ontological underpinnings of discourse theory. The theory is based on Jacques Derrida’s language theory, which is in fact a radicalisation of Ferdinand de Saussure’s language theory. According to De Saussure, the meaning of words (signs) that are made up of a combination of specific sounds (signifier) and concepts (signified) is determined by its relationship with or differences from other signs. Derrida has radicalised De Saussure’s language theory to the extent that he deems that, with regard to language use, these signs may be posited in different relationships to each other. This means that a concept will always implicate other terms: each term leaves ‘traces’ in related terms. As a result, meaning is never fully present and enclosed within rigid boundaries. Stated otherwise, meaning is diffuse, ‘disseminated’ and open ended; it is in flux.
Understanding the world as being in flux begs the question how we are to make sense of stability. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) maintain that a discourse temporarily stops the instability in the meaning of the signs, without definitively fixating their meaning. Within a (stabilised) discourse a number of signs acquire their meaning from their relationship to the same privileged sign, which Laclau and Mouffe call the ‘nodal point’. This implies that the meaning of signifiers may alter as a result of the emergence of a new nodal point. Laclau and Mouffe thus perceive the social as a meaningful construct in which meaning can never be permanently fixed. Based on these assumptions, ‘discourse’ is conceptualised as the ‘structured totality’ that results from an ‘articulatory practice’ or the practice in which a relationship is established among signs such that their identity is modified (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 105).

Adopting the view that our world is in fact constituted by language does not mean that discourse theorists forego the materiality of the world; they only deny that materiality exists outside a discursive context. For example, discourse theorists do not deny the ‘falling of a brick’; the brick certainly exists. What is denied is that the brick exists outside ‘any discursive context of emerging’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 108). As Howarth (2013, p. 94) argues, ‘poststructuralists like Laclau and Mouffe accept the existence of things external to thought – a minimal realism’. In this respect, poststructuralist discourse theorists ‘are in fact realists both in the sense that they affirm the existence of a reality that is independent of thought ... but more importantly because of [their] commitment to the view that our conceptions of things and entities do no exhaust their meaning of being’ (Howarth, 2013, p. 93; emphasis in original).

Adopting the view that our world is in fact constituted by language does not mean that agency ‘disappears’. First of all, it should be noted that for discourse theory, as in constructivist institutionalism, subjects are conceived of as situated subjects that are constituted by the discourses within which they find themselves. However, based on Derrida’s ontology it is assumed that as these discursive structures fail to constitute themselves fully, they can never fully determine subjects. These fissures and gaps become visible in situations of dislocation that may have both a material and an idealistic character. In these dislocationary situations, subjects become active agents or political subjects [who] can no longer “go on” in performing their normal practices and regular routines’ (Howarth, 2013, p. 161). In these situations, subjects start to identify with new signifiers, which may eventually lead to (institutional) change. Howarth (2013) provides diverse examples of dislocationary events, such as an economic crisis or a military intervention. However, ‘smaller’ events can also have a dislocationary effect on subjects, such as a relationship crisis or the loss of a debit card.

To explain what drives a subject to identify anew, or, to put it in discourse theoretical terms, why subjects seek to identify with new floating signifiers, discourse theory leans on Lacan’s psycho-analytical thinking. Jacques Lacan (1998) rejects the idea that the human subject is a conscious, intentional and reflexive individual. For him, the subject must be understood as a desiring and split subject. Desire comes into existence through an experience of something that is lacking. According to discourse theory, this experience of the lack becomes visible for the subject in a dislocationary situation when subjects, in an attempt to cover over their lack, start to identify with new fantasies (Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Stravrakakis, 1999).
In my opinion, poststructuralism can make a relevant contribution to the analysis of the role of ideas in transformation processes. The poststructuralist discourse theoretical view on language, in particular, reveals that ‘rather than simply referring to a separate realm of pre-existing objects, the articulations of language make the experience of reality possible for us, that is, intelligible and meaningful by furnishing the criteria for identifying and individuating objects’ (Howarth, 2013, p. 289). This suggests that ideas such as linguistic expressions and identification with those ideas cannot be neatly separated from the meaning of discourses as structured totalities, institutions, practices and objects, as Vis and van Kersbergen would probably have it. Instead, we need a mode of explanation that is able to describe and explain the emergence, sedimentation and transformation of these ideas, structures, discourses, practices and so on, while recognising ‘the way in which ideas break with a neat separation of cause and effect’ (Tønder, 2010, p. 66).

The next section considers an analytical model that is based on these poststructuralist discourse theoretical conceptions.

A First Step towards the Development of an Analytical Model

This section examines three core elements of a new analytical model for the study of the role of ideas in policy and institutional change: the social logics or rules governing a specific discursive formation; the role of agency; and the relationship between agents, discourses, the ideational context and institutions. In terms of the first element, in order to understand the role of ideas in a specific discursive formation we should first identify the rules governing this discursive formation, such as the one that is visualised in Figure 1. The concept of ‘social logics’ developed by Jason Glynos and David Howarth (2007) is helpful in this respect. In a nutshell, social logics characterise a particular social practice or a regime of practices that can be analysed at the contextual level; they consist of ‘a system of rules drawing a horizon within which some objects are represented while others are excluded’ (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, p. 139). This definition already reveals that social logics (e.g., the logics of apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s) are constituted by power relations. Social logics do not, however, describe a unified discourse. Instead, the concept refers to a ‘regularity in dispersion’. This means that social logics consist of rules that describe both the patterns and the open-endedness of regimes of practices and discourses (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, p. 139; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 105). It should further be noted that transformation processes do not necessarily result in new social logics. In this respect, think of the institutional reforms that also took place within the apartheid system in South Africa. It is my contention that empirical research conducted within the framework of the open functional approach can be helpful for the identification of the social logics or rules of a specific discursive formation. However, it should be emphasised that the proposed analytical model does not view these rules as objective reference points, but rather as rules that can be deduced from a specific discursive formation.

The second element we should consider is the role of acting agents in this model. For discourse theory, agency arises after a dislocationary event. Note here that a ‘dislocationary event’ bears important resemblances to ‘dilemmas’ or ‘problem pressures’ that incite agency in the other approaches discussed. The identification of a dislocationary event is central to the proposed analytical model as it explains why subjects start identifying with new
Yet in practice, as I have argued elsewhere (Eleveld, 2013), the internally split subject seeking fulfilment will not always be distinguishable from situated subjects (see arrow between situated subject [agent] and floating signifier in Figure 1). Indeed, as structures are always already dislocated, the internal split subjects will be constantly searching for new fullness, and appear as strategically acting situated agents.

The third element we have to conceptualise is the relationship between situated agents, the ideational context and the institutional context. The interpretivist model of Hay (2011) is a good starting point for this purpose. However, we need to elaborate this model so as to visualise the instability of ideas. For this purpose, the proposed analytical model conceptualises ideas as floating signifiers. Figure 1 illustrates how floating signifiers can escape certain discourses and become meaningful in other discourses (bottom left), and how the identification with a floating signifier interacts with an existing discourse that, in turn, interacts with the ideational context of an institution. In addition, Figure 1 uses dashed lines to show that discourses, the ideational context and institutions are mutually constitutive.

Based on the proposed analytical model, the hypothesis could be posited that changes for policy and institutional change increase in cases where new ideas (as floating signifiers) become meaningful in more than one discourse. Another hypothesis that could be drawn from this model is that the probability of institutional reform increases when the discourses within which the new ideas become meaningful conform to the dominant social logics ruling this discursive field. In other words, a new idea that becomes meaningful in an economic growth discourse will be adopted more easily in a discursive field that is ruled by the logics of efficiency and marketisation than a new idea that becomes (only) meaningful in a discourse on social solidarity and redistribution of resources.

This case study on the rise and fall of the life course idea in Dutch social policy is a good illustration of how ideas as linguistic expressions, the identification with those ideas and the meaning of discourses interact in a way that may both stimulate and prevent policy and institutional changes.

The Case of the Idea of Life Course Policy

Around the turn of the millennium, the idea of life course policy rose on the Dutch social policy agenda. In 2001, this idea was shared by diverse groups, such as supporters of family policy, labour unions, employer unions, social democrats, Christian and liberal political parties, and feminists. The life course policy consisted of the idea that the social security system should be reformed into a life-course-based system. According to the supporters of this new idea, the life-course-based social security system would improve work–life balance as it anticipated the new ways that individuals would prefer to distribute their time between work and other activities, including care, education, leisure and so on. A few years later, however, enthusiasm for the life course idea faded away and it did not bring about the desired policy reforms. Using the analytical model that was presented in the previous section, I offer an explanation for the rise and fall of the life course idea in the context of Dutch social policy.

For the case study, I interviewed almost 40 key actors in the policy process including (former) ministers, political representatives from diverse political parties, representatives of the most important social partners (i.e. VNO-NCW, FNV and CNV), officials and political advisors. The interview data guided the selection of fifteen documents for a textual analysis based on the method of discourse historical analysis (DHA) (Wodak et al. 1999).
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First, the three most influential policy and political documents referring to the idea of life course policy were selected. These documents originated from: (1) the government; (2) the Christian Democrats, which was the biggest opposition party at that time; and (3) the
Social Economic Council (SER), a tripartite institution that advises the government on important socio-economic policy changes. Another eight texts that were selected for textual analysis originated from five key actors in the policy and political discourse on social security reform. An additional number of articles, pamphlets and reports were selected which originated from the most important actors sustaining the life course idea. Finally, a set of four texts originating from the Christian Democrats were selected for a DHA analysis of the decline of the life course idea in Dutch policy discourse.

In order to understand how the idea of life course policy entered Dutch policy discourse, I will first outline the (historical) political and policy context within which this idea emerged. In the 1970s, the Netherlands faced a deep economic crisis leading to the retrenchment of the generous welfare state, without, however, solving the problems of uncontrollable costs. At the beginning of the 1990s, it was clear that new measures were needed to combat the rising welfare dependency that increasingly worsened the financial outlook of the Dutch welfare state. To this end, two subsequent ‘purple’ governments, consisting of the Social Democrats (PvdA), the Liberals (VVD) and the relatively small Liberal Democrats (D’66), implemented (drastic) measures in the social security system, including the introduction of market processes, the individualisation of social security benefits, and the abolition of the breadwinner principle.

These reforms disclosed the contours of new social logics that would govern the social security system for the next decades. From now on the discursive field in the domain of public social security was to be ruled by the logics of ‘marketisation’, ‘efficiency’ and ‘individualisation’ (see Figure 2). The new logics were not endorsed by everyone. On the contrary, they invoked resistance among a number of actors. First, supporters of family policy resisted the individualisation of the social security system – particularly the abolition of breadwinner facilities without reallocating the freed-up funds to families. Second, the feminist movement felt that these measures did not recognise workers with care tasks. Third, the political opposition (Christian Democrats) and the labour unions rejected the increased marketisation of social security that negatively affected the quality of life. At the same time, new discourses on the ageing of society and the increased internationalisation of the economy provoked new feelings of insecurity regarding the future of the Dutch social security system. This dislocationary situation provided a new narrative space where new floating signifiers, such as ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ emerged, ready to be invested with new meaning.

Why did policy agents identify with these new floating signifiers (see thick arrow in Figure 2)? It should be remembered from discourse theory that subjects identify with new signifiers to cover their lack of experience during a dislocationary event. The floating signifier ‘life course’ seemed to have fulfilled this function. As some of the policy actors told me, the new terms, ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ were attractive because they held the promise of something new and a way out of the old struggles in the field of social security, facilitating another way of seeing and doing things. For them, the idea of the life course perspective was able to reconcile two quite opposite ideas: the new discourse on social security reform was now structured around the fantasy that the increased need for labour participation and the desire to have more time for care or leisure do not cancel each other out. At the same time, it was clear that the policy actors used the new ideas for their
In order to understand how the idea of life course policy entered Dutch policy discourse, I will first outline the (historical) political and policy context within which this idea emerged. In the 1970s, the Netherlands faced a deep economic crisis leading to the retrenchment of the generous welfare state, without, however, solving the problems of uncontrollable costs. At the beginning of the 1990s, it was clear that new measures were needed to combat the rising welfare dependency that increasingly worsened the financial outlook of the Dutch welfare state. To this end, two subsequent ‘purple’ governments, consisting of the Social Democrats (PvdA), the Liberals (VVD) and the relatively small Liberal Democrats (D’66), implemented (drastic) measures in the social security system, including the introduction of market processes, the individualisation of social security benefits, and the abolition of the breadwinner principle.

These reforms disclosed the contours of new social logics that would govern the social security system for the next decades. From now on the discursive field in the domain of public social security was to be ruled by the logics of ‘marketisation’, ‘efficiency’ and ‘individualisation’ (see Figure 2). The new logics were not endorsed by everyone. On the contrary, they invoked resistance among a number of actors. First, supporters of family policy resisted the individualisation of the social security system – particularly the abolition of breadwinner facilities without reallocating the freed-up funds to families. Second, the feminist movement felt that these measures did not recognise workers with care tasks. Third, the political opposition (Christian Democrats) and the labour unions rejected the increased marketisation of social security that negatively affected the quality of life. At the same time, new discourses on the ageing of society and the increased internationalisation of the economy provoked new feelings of insecurity regarding the future of the Dutch social security system. This dislocationary situation provided a new narrative space where new floating signifiers, such as ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ emerged, ready to be invested with new meaning.

Why did policy agents identify with these new floating signifiers (see thick arrow in Figure 2)? It should be remembered from discourse theory that subjects identify with new signifiers to cover their lack of experience during a dislocationary event. The floating signifier ‘life course’ seemed to have fulfilled this function. As some of the policy actors told me, the new terms, ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ were attractive because they held the promise of something new and a way out of the old struggles in the field of social security, facilitating another way of seeing and doing things. For them, the idea of the life course perspective was able to reconcile two quite opposite ideas: the new discourse on social security reform was now structured around the fantasy that the increased need for labour participation and the desire to have more time for care or leisure do not cancel each other out. At the same time, it was clear that the policy actors used the new ideas for their own strategic reasons: the life course ideas were helpful in the promotion of their own body of thought.

It should be noted in this respect that the set of ideas that were named ‘life course idea’ or ‘life course perspective’ were not really new; they were already there in the...
discourses. To understand what happened, I briefly return to some discourse theoretical concepts and expand them a little. For discourse theory, as explained previously, new ideas are first and foremost conceived of as linguistic acts and practices. Hence, a new idea cannot be understood independently of the language within which it is presented. ‘Catachresis’ is helpful for understanding how new ideas are linguistically depicted in discourses. It means that an existing figural term is used to give expression to ‘something’ that could not be expressed before in the absence of words to express it (Laclau, 2004; 2005). The existing terms ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ seem to have fulfilled just this function in the Dutch social security discourse. Then, as a result of the act of naming, a new interpretive space was created and something new came into existence, something that had already been there in discourses and counter discourses but could not be represented because of the lack of a name for it. This is illustrated by the arrows between the floating signifier invested with new meaning and existing discourses (family life, diversity, etc.). In other words, due to the introduction of new names in the discourse, it became possible to represent a variety of already existing ideas and to relate them in a new way.

Now we also have to take a more precise look at the interaction between the new ideas, the discourses and the ideational/institutional context. As argued in previous sections, social constructivist approaches to the role of ideas in institutional change fail to show how ideas affect both problem constructions and solutions in a specific policy field. This is due to the fact that these approaches insufficiently conceptualise ideas as non-stable elements in a discursive field where a broader network of power relations is at play. Instead, as the dashed lines in Figure 2 of our proposed analysis illustrate, the floating signifiers (ideas), agents (subjects), discourses, ideational and institutional context are non-stable entities that are mutually constitutive.

The DHA analysis showed how the life course idea as a floating signifier both constituted the problem and offered a solution. First, the DHA analysis of three core texts showed how the texts were constructed in a similar way. Starting with a description of ‘social trends’ the texts identified some problems, and solutions to these problems. Interestingly, the analysis showed that the described social trends, the problematisation of these trends in relation to existing social security institutions and the proposed solutions became meaningful because of their relation to the signifiers as ‘life course’, ‘life course perspective’ and related signifiers. For example, ‘social trends’, such as globalisation, ageing and the increased participation of women in the labour market, are linked to the emergence of a ‘modern life course’. Consequently, the documents problematised this ‘modern’ or ‘changed life course’ because they increasingly demand that people combine a number of activities such as work, care and education or training in the same ‘stage of life’. Most importantly, these demands do not match current social security provisions as they are still tailored to ‘standard life courses’, based on the ‘life course’ of a man who works 40 years for the same employer. Solving this problem, the texts designed a modern life-course-based social security system, ready to accommodate the ‘modern life courses’ (Eleveld, 2012).

At this point, we should stop for a while and consider whether new floating signifiers like ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ invested with meaning are able to constitute the ideational context in infinite ways. This is, then, the critique of Hay and his co-authors
Yet the textual analysis of the eight studies that originated from the five key actors in the policy discourse showed that this is not necessarily true for our proposed poststructuralist analytical model. The analysis revealed that, notwithstanding the central importance of the life course idea, the interpretation of the social trends, the problematisation of those trends in relation to existing social security institutions and the solution to these problematisations were dependent on specific discourses to which the specific text referred. In other words, as illustrated in Figure 2, the impact of new ideas was limited due to pre-existing discourses and practices (family life discourse, diversity discourse, etc.). These discourses were either constitutive of distinct interests, such as the protection of family life, the (public) support for diversity and the emancipation of men and women, or they represented relatively new views on social policy, such as the human capital view and the new risks perspective to social security. In fact, the terms ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ could only become meaningful within existing discourses – the family life discourse, the diversity discourse, the emancipation discourse, the human capital discourse and the new risk discourse – in the following ways:

The family life discourse problematised the period in life during which one or two parents have to take care of their children because of a financial shortage. A life-course-based system of social security would address this financial shortage.

The diversity discourse disputed the fact that social security institutions were still based on standard male life courses, while at the same time life courses of women had become more diverse. It was argued that life-course-based social security institutions should respond to these diversified lives.

In the emancipation discourse, the life course perspective visualised the transitions of men and women between the spheres of paid work and care. This discourse argued for the facilitation of leave arrangements, which would enhance female labour market participation.

The human capital discourse problematised the depreciation of human capital in individual life courses in the current social security system. According to this discourse, a life-course-based social security system would, first and foremost, address the formation and preservation of human capital as this would be the key to labour participation.

Finally, the new risks discourse facilitated the view that life courses were the product of individual decisions. According to this discourse, it would be inefficient to base the social security system on ‘external risks’ because it was clear that in modern society people, to a great extent, are able to influence social risks, such as the risk of unemployment and/or having children. Shifting the emphasis to manufactured risks (i.e. ‘internal risks’), a life-course-based social security system would stimulate overall labour market participation.

The textual analysis suggests that the signifiers ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ not only became meaningful within these pre-existing discourses, but they also constituted these discourses in a new way. In addition, the fact that the life course idea became
meaningful in at least five pre-existing discourses indicates that part of the success was due to the constitution of a discourse coalition that shared a common life course idea. A number of political parties (CDA, PvdA and D’66), and the biggest organisation of employers and employees (VNO-NCW, FNV and CNV) endorsed the life course idea while referring to distinct meanings of it. Some parties even explicitly contested one discourse within which the life course idea had become meaningful (see Table 1). Yet these parties shared the broad idea that the social security system was to be reformed into a life-course-based system that would improve work–life balance as it anticipated the new ways individuals prefer to distribute their time between work and other activities.

In 2002, one of the great defendants of the life course perspective – the CDA – won the general election and became the largest government coalition party for the next few years. However, after a new dislocation – an economic crisis in 2003 – the meaning of ‘life course’ and ‘life course perspective’ changed drastically within the confines of the CDA. A discourse analysis of four texts originating from this political party showed that whereas in 2001 the life course perspective referred to the decreasing quality of life resulting from the lack of time and money for family life and leisure, a few years later it was, conversely, invoked to show how people could enhance their labour market participation. While on the one hand this new dominant meaning of the life course perspective was more in line with the systems of rules (social logics) at that time (i.e. efficiency and marketisation), this discursive shift alienated former supporters of the life course idea such as supporters of family policy and female emancipation (e.g. trade unions; see Table 1); as a result of this, the broad life course coalition fell apart. In 2006, instead of transforming the Dutch social security system to a ‘life-course-based social security system’, only a small institutional change took place: the introduction of the life course arrangement, a (small) savings arrangement for workers, which was subsequently withdrawn in 2013.

The dissolution of the life course discourse coalition did not imply that the life course idea totally vanished from policy discourses. On the contrary, visualising the worker as a responsible person who is able make a plan for his or her life, the life course idea contributed to the emergence of a new dominant view on social security and social risks.

### Table 1: Actors and Discourses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actors providing the idea of the life course</th>
<th>Dominant discourses</th>
<th>Contested discourses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>Family life</td>
<td>Emancipation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PvdA</td>
<td>Emancipation, human capital and new risks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D’66</td>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>New risks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VNO-NCW (organisation of employers)</td>
<td>Human capital and new risks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FNV (trade union)</td>
<td>Emancipation and diversity</td>
<td>New risks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNV (trade union)</td>
<td>Family life</td>
<td>Emancipation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This clearly replaced the ‘cradle to grave’ philosophy, according to which all citizens have to be protected from (all) social risks during their entire life. This earlier philosophy, or ‘Zeitgeist’ (Mehta, 2010; Schmidt, 2008), was based on the idea that social risks were to a great extent external to individual behaviour, which justified a collective insurance of these risks. However, by interpreting individual life courses as the outcome of individual choices, the life course perspective supported the new emerging philosophy that social risks were increasingly shaped by individual behaviour. For example, according to this view, the risk of becoming unemployed is not just contingent upon the economic conjuncture, but even more so on individual actions.

To sum up, this case study suggests that ideas are, above all, linguistic constructions that can constitute existing discourses, practices, interests and so on, particularly when they are structured around an attractive fantasy, promising a new fullness. It also suggests that ideas should not be conceived as freely floating. The new life course idea, then, could only become meaningful within these same discourses. This indicates that ideas can neither be viewed as simple cognitive short cuts for change, nor as constituting a causal mechanism that can independently produce certain effects. The role of ideas in policy and institutional change is far more complicated. On the one hand, ideas affect problem definitions, pre-existing discourses that constitute practices, interests and so on. On the other hand, ideas themselves are also affected by the same pre-existing discourses, depending on the extent to which these discourses are sedimented in society. The case study illustrates how new ideas may establish a discourse coalition as a result of which the rate of change in policy and institutional change both increase. However, it also shows that dominant social logics (and new dislocations) tend to impede (grand) institutional reforms, without being able to delete new ideas entirely from the discursive space.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have discussed three approaches to the role of ideas in policy and institutional change. I have argued that the approaches share some important elements regarding the role of ideas in policy and institutional change (i.e. the recognition of some kind of dislocation provoking change, and the recognition of both ideational and material elements in their explanatory account). I have also identified some important differences between, on the one hand, the open functional approach and constructivist approaches that envisage ideas mainly as stable entities, and poststructuralist discourse theory on the other, according to which ideas are necessarily unstable.

Conceptualising ideas as floating signifiers, the case study on life course policy has revealed, above all, how an analytical model based on a poststructuralist discourse theoretical ontology may improve the study of the role of ideas in the change of welfare states. Drawing on kindred methods such as DHA, the proposed analytical model shows how ideas as floating signifiers and problem constructions and solutions are mutually constitutive. The case study has also illustrated that, to the extent that new ideas as floating signifiers become meaningful in more than one discourse, the changes in institutional change particularly increase when this results in the constitution of a discourse coalition (compare Hajer, 1995). This is particularly true when these discourses resonate with the dominant social logics ruling this discursive field. Nevertheless, in my opinion, grand reforms
involving the emergence of new social logics also require that new ideas become meaningful in counter discourses.

Although poststructuralist discourse theory is only just starting to develop concepts and methods for the study of institutional change (Carstensen, 2011; Griggs and Howarth, 2006; Panizza and Miorelli, 2013), we should be aware of not throwing out the baby with the bathwater. First, the new analytical model can benefit from the expansive social constructivist literature on institutional change, which shares a similar postpositivist epistemology that is compatible with their divergent social ontologies (Gofas and Hay, 2010). Second, insights from the open functional approach can be valuable for the identification of problem pressures (giving rise to dislocationary events) and reference points (informing social logics in a specific discursive field). In this respect, it is also worthwhile to consider the emerging new materialist approaches and their social constructivist ontology that seems to be more consistent with a discourse theoretical ontology (Coole and Frost, 2010, p. 37).

Finally, it should be noted that, despite the fact that the proposed analytical model uses concepts and hypotheses that can be applied across different contexts, an explanatory account of the role of ideas in policy and institutional change within a specific discursive formation is, by definition, context-specific.

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Notes
1 For example, Hay also considers extra discursive institutional pathologies, and Schmidt proposes to draw on other material based on new institutionalist approaches in addition to her proposed discursive institutionalism.
2 This point is, however, not shared by Schmidt (see Schmidt, 2010b).

References


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