This draft continues from this post https://paulcairney.wordpress.com/2016/12/27/who-are-the-most-deserving-and-entitled-to-government-benefits/. It will be far shorter and ‘tighter’ when incorporated in an academic paper. It will also contain references. In the meantime, if you want to chase up some of the references, email p.a.cairney@stir.ac.uk

The Social Construction and Policy Design Framework: the wider literature

One key test of the endurance of a theory comes from its meaningful application by other scholars without the direct involvement (authorship or editing) by the founding theorists. Another is that other scholars use the theory in a non-trivial or non-superficial way. Focusing on the latter, Pierce et al (2014) identify 123 relevant publications, of which 111 are empirical applications. 65 were published after 2008, including 17 in 2012 alone (2014: 8-9). Almost one-third of applications were to ‘social welfare’ which, along with health, crime, and immigration, accounted for two-thirds (2014: 10). Most were qualitative, and 35% were non-empirical (2014: 11). Most applications (62%) focused on SCTP. Further, most studies magnified Schneider and Ingram’s tendency to focus on degenerative politics and the potential for the mistreatment of relatively powerless target populations: deviant (35%) and dependent (32%) groups account for two-thirds of relevant applications, including studies of criminal justice, poverty, and the treatment of immigrants and African Americans. Most studies focused on US federal policymaking (61%). Recent studies (generally post-2010) have responded to earlier concerns about identifying clear causal processes – such as to cause a target population to switch categories from, say, deviant to dependent – perhaps at the expense of the original SCPD focus on citizen participation and equality (2014: 18-21). Still, overall, Pierce et al (2015) have identified a thriving research agenda which generally seems loyal to much of the initial focus by Schneider and Ingram. Their theory has potentially wide-reaching applications, but most applications reinforce its concentrated focus on similar target populations, domains, and venues (which, we argue, can be a strength even if it looks like a weakness).

A wider literature with wider insights?

Focusing on the former and latter, we ‘zoom in’ to examine a sample of the (15) most direct applications of SCTP (outside of Deserving and Entitled) to see how they reinforce existing insights, test well-established propositions, and/ or produce new insights (we also briefly discuss Ingram and Schneider, 1998 and Schneider 2012 as key publications by the original SCPD authors). In some cases, US studies primarily add more depth to the SCPD field without providing further theoretical insight. For example, Hudson and Gonyea (2012) take a historical perspective to argue that the status of ‘the aged’ changes over time, from dependent before WW2, to advantaged ever since, now transitioning to contenders as the social construction of ‘baby boomers’ becomes negative (from relatively poor and vulnerable, to better off than the next generation) but previous policy designs help them remain powerful (creating an expectation of benefits, encouraging participation, and supplementing the power of well organised and funded interest groups). Further, few studies have focused directly on the bureaucratic/ expert dominance of policy at the expense of citizen participation (like Ingram and Schneider, 1998), even though scientists are one of the most frequently identified as advantaged groups (Pierce et al, 2014: 13).
Many other US studies raise methodological issues or identify the scope for comparative subnational analysis, while relatively few non-US applications help us identify the extent to which SCPD provides ‘universal’ insights.

**Insight 8: some target populations do not have to speak for themselves to receive benefits. Interest groups acting on behalf of dependents can help them become advantaged.**

Czech et al (1998) present an unusual case study of non-human target populations whose social construction can be unearthed via social surveys and is debated on their behalf by interest groups (1998: 1104), some of which are more numerous and powerful than others. This helps explain why, for example, mammals and birds are far more protected than reptiles in the US Endangered Species Act: they are viewed more positively by the public, and more powerful groups advocate on their behalf (1998: 1104).

Donovan (1993: 14) makes a similar case for some humans in relation to HIV/AIDS policy, in which ‘Children, by virtue of the political mobilization of pediatric-AIDS lobbying groups and the prevailing sympathy for their plight, are the most politically powerful of these groups’ (although compare with Schroedel and Jordan, 1998: 123, who identify unpredictability when legislative votes involve more than one group; in one case, ‘dependent’ patients lost out to the ‘advantaged’ health care industry).

**Insight 9: events can prompt the construction of new target populations or shift their status (although the status of some groups in the SCPT typology can relate as much to scholarly interpretation as social construction).**

Children were also a subset of a wider population of the ‘innocent victims’ so crucial to encouraging positive social and political attention to the need to fund HIV/AIDS policies alongside haemophiliacs and public service workers infected at work. Predictably, all were to receive disproportionate benefits from the statute under study (1993: 24). Less predictable is the sense that a key event – film star Ruck Hudson announcing his HIV in 1985 – seemed incongruous with two stereotypes: that AIDS was restricted to deviants, and that homosexuality was not masculine (1993: 12; 23).

Such events, and well-organised lobbying, helped shift gay men from deviant in 1981 to contender status by 1990, while injecting drug users (generally prohibited from receiving clean needles legally), prisoners (subject to mandatory HIV testing if convicted of sex crimes), and ‘ethnic minorities’ (deprived of proportionate funding) remained as deviant throughout (1993: 15). Schroedel and Jordan (1998: 112) broadly agree, but note the relative difficulty in assigning clear contender status: survey evidence in 1992 can be used to identify high levels of public homophobia, but the equation of AIDS with gay male sex is not always explicit in policy debate, and there is more data on the size and budget of gay interest groups than of their influence (compare their measure of power with Weible et al, 2011). Still, consistent with SCPD, contender status allowed US Senators to inflict specific burdens in public (e.g. prohibiting the promotion of gay sex in health education) and distribute benefits in private (e.g. funding the HIV drugs that would benefit gay men disproportionately – 1998: 121-2).
Insight 10: subnational, nongovernmental, and comparative studies allow us to quantify variations in social construction and their relative effect on policy design (and assess the feed-forward effect of policy – Schneider, 2012).

Nicholson-Crotty and Nicholson-Crotty (2004) use statistical measures of incarceration rates in 50 US states as a proxy for levels of negative social construction of deviant prison populations (as well as important sub-groups such as the relatively punished African American inmate population). They find a strong association between negative construction and programme failure (in this case, public health programs to prevent HIV and TB spread in prison) caused primarily by a reluctance to fund programs that benefit marginalised populations (2004: 255). They also argue that such associations are more readily identified in subnational comparative studies (Rollins, 2002 makes a similar case for judicial opinions, but only provides a superficial discussion of SCTP).

Garrow (2012: 1) studies devolved/privatized public services to identify an inverse relationship between the proportions of African Americans in neighborhoods and the willingness of governments to fund non-profit organisations in those neighborhoods (in Los Angeles County). Such analysis expands work which shows that ‘state welfare programs are less generous and more stringent as the percentage of racial and ethnic minority population or recipients increases’ (2012: 2). In this case, policymakers can use disinvestment in a place as over for disinvestment in target populations if the latter are concentrated in specific areas (2012: 3). Greater poverty generally boosts the likelihood that a non-profit will receive government funding, but not if the neighbourhood has a high enough proportion of African American residents to ‘increase feelings of racial threat among whites’ but low enough to limit African American electoral influence (2012: 3; 5): ‘because African Americans are both negatively constructed and politically marginalized, government may respond to increased need in African American neighborhoods with disinvestment rather than investment’ (2012: 15). This effect is not present in (contender) Latino populations, who have a slightly more favourable construction and large enough share of the electorate (2012: 15).

Nguyen et al (2013) combine quantitative media analysis with qualitative interviews to identify the ways in which local populations imagine the likely tenants of affordable housing (in California). They identify the need to ‘deconstruct’ the language of opposition. Taken at face value, it is a general form of NIMBYism but, when analysed in more depth, it highlights strong associations with fears about deviant target populations (generally African American or Hispanic) entering local areas. They use this data to argue that, without fully understanding the basis for opposition, and how local developers and governments overcome it with more positive ‘messaging’ (2013: 113), policymakers will otherwise take the path of least resistance, reinforcing segregation and the link between affordable and public housing and its concentration in particular areas.

Insight 11: some aspects of social construction and policy design may be specific to the US, while others are ‘universal’, but directly comparable international applications are limited.
Mondou and Montpetit (2010) study poverty policies in two provinces in Canada (Newfoundland and Quebec) to assess the impact of ‘policy styles’. They suggest that degenerative politics is associated with adversarial political systems or contexts (such as in the US, as the source of most SCPD data), while consensual policy styles may produce a lower propensity to reward advantaged and demonise deviant groups. They find some (albeit limited) evidence, from a content analysis of action plans, to back up this hypothesis and prompt us to wonder if SCPD’s insights relate disproportionately to the US.

Conversely, Hunter and Nixon’s (1999) study of UK housing policy demonstrates the potential for the same insights, developed from US studies, to apply to multiple countries (or perhaps equally adversarial countries). They apply SCTP directly, using a method (discourse analysis of policy debates in the legislature) common in SCPD studies, and identifying the same advantaged status for homeowners as in the US (but not a comparable racial element to the discourse around debtor tenants). They identify a shift from the late 1970s, ‘from the provision of housing as a social right of citizenship to the promotion of housing as a private market commodity’ (1999: 166). Owner-occupation became the norm, and accelerated when the UK government obliged local governments to sell housing at a major discount to their tenants, and social housing seen increasingly as a ‘safety net for the minority’ (1999: 166). This shift contributed to discourse on housing-related debt: media stories were more likely to express sympathy for owner-occupiers as part of a system over which they had minimal control, and describe social housing tenants as feckless individuals; district court judges supported homeowners and lectured tenants of benefit dependency and financial management; and, politicians paid disproportionate attention to mortgage debt, while generally ignoring rising rental costs and arrears or, when doing so, focusing primarily on incompetent local government landlords (1999: 171-4). Policy design reflected this discourse, with owners often described as ‘passive victims’ and receiving ‘mortgage rescue package policies’ (including temporary government funding for mortgage interest) in 1991, and local government landlords facing reprisals in 1992 (1999: 175). Although not discussed in the article, a long-term effect of this expansion of owner-occupation has been to favour the Conservative, not Labour, party in elections.

Hynes and Hayes’ (2011) study of early childcare policy in Ireland also shows that SCPD allows ready comparisons between the US and other countries. While identifying some Ireland-specific issues, they primarily use SCPD and the US experience to confirm similar links between target populations and policy designs, such as when the services for advantaged parents are backed by information, capacity building and economic incentives, while those dependent parents are subject to more invasive micromanagement (2011: 282).

However, such studies are unusual. Although we describe certain elements of SCPD as ‘universal’, and many seem almost intuitive, only 15% of the 111 empirical applications were outside the US (Pierce et al, 2014: 10). This figure contrasts with non-US applications of multiple streams, which accounted for two-thirds (Jones et al, 2016), and applications of the ACF, PET, and IAD which have taken off internationally (often in a coordinated manner) despite focusing initially on the US (Sabatier and Weible, 2014).
One explanation is that it is possible to publish SCPD-style scholarship without significant reference to Schneider and Ingram’s work. This seems to be the case in a far larger literature than identified by Pierce et al (2014). For example, European scholars describe social construction and the ways in which policymakers understand normality and deviance, but often without reference to comparable US experiences. SCPD studies do not seem a million miles from, for example, the large literature on the social construction of ‘problem’ or ‘troubled’ families in the UK (including the work of Hunter and Nixon), which has direct parallels with Schneider and Ingram’s (2005) depiction of US politics: people have long blamed individuals (or an ‘underclass’) rather than their environments for behavioural pathologies that pass down the generations (Garrett, 2007; Starkey, 2000; Allen and Taylor, 2012: 1; De Benedictus, 2012: 1; Welshman, 2012; Bristow, 2013; Butler, 2014: 417; Nixon, 2007: 550; Casey, 2014: 59; 2012: 1; Crossley, 2015: 2).

Without using SCPD terminology or hypotheses, scholars describe how moral entrepreneurs and policy champions seek ways to intervene in – otherwise private - family life by identifying only some families as relevant to policy (Bourdieu, 1996: 21; Cornford et al, 2013; Gillies, 2014; Featherstone et al, 2013: 10; Parr, 2009: 1258-9). Strategies include: identifying ‘deviant’ children let down by their parents (Tisdall, 2006); using ‘deficit’ measures to identify ‘at risk’ families (Nixon et al, 2010: 315); advocating ‘tough love’ as the last chance before children are taken into care (Casey, 2014: 60); and, using a ‘now or never’ argument, and selective interpretations of neuroscience, to protect children (as classic ‘dependants’) before it’s too late (Rose and Rose, 2016a; 2016b; Bruer, 1999; 2011; Featherstone et al, 2013: 5; Gillies, 2014; Wastell and White, 2012; Shonkoff and Bales, 2011). Identifying the social construction of deviant or dependent populations is at the heart of such work.

**Insight 12:** Scholars can combine different theories or concepts to confirm key aspects of SCPD (a fact that could increase or dilute its importance).

38% of empirical applications combine SCPD with other theories or approaches (Pierce et al, 2014: 12). For example, Weible et al’s (2012: 500-1) case study of ‘water and land policy in the Lake Tahoe basin’ combines insights from SCPD and the ACF, using survey data of participants over time. Its main thesis is that groups or target populations will generally be seen to be more powerful and treated more positively if the policymaking context is ‘collaborative’ rather than ‘adversarial’; when policymakers bring in organisations ‘with institutional arrangements that encourage collaboration and consensus’ (it also suggests, unusually, that environmental groups are advantaged and business groups deviant) (2012: 504). So, for example, the right policy design can generally offer something to all groups even when it only distributes specific benefits to some (the broad thesis seems similar to that of Mondou and Montpetit, 2010). However, the authors also suggest that SCPD is not clear enough conceptually to be conducive to the kinds of quantitative work they attempt, adding to the sense that relatively recent applications have to take SCPD study away from its original focus to make scientific progress (Pierce et al, 2014: 18-21).

Guetzkow (2010: 174) combines a focus on problem definition and policy tools analysis, arguing that the simple deserving/ undeserving dichotomy does not allow us to explain policy
change or the use of specific policy tools to solve problems. He advocates more nuanced accounts of the ways in which policymakers identify the causes and most effective solutions to problems. His case study – a ‘close reading’ of congressional debates on US poverty policy, in the 60s/70s versus 80s onwards - identifies shifting frames and tools, from the identification: of ‘hopeless victims’ of a ‘cycle of poverty’ related to low economic and educational opportunities (often driven by racism), prompting solutions such as employment and training for people with low education, and capacity building in poor communities; to, the unintended consequences of policy such as welfare dependency and a lack of family values regarding self-sufficiency, prompting debates on how best to encourage work (via incentives or punishments). Notably, Guetzkow (2010) situates his study within a far wider body of literature examining the deserving/ undeserving theme: SCPD is important but not essential to his analysis.

Mettler’s (2002) case study is the GI Bill for WW2 veterans (which provided widespread access to further education for former military), to try to identify the increases in civic participation that could be attributed to overall policy design, rather than the specific effect of education. For example, the bill enabled access to education that some GIs otherwise could not afford, it was a benefit that GIs may feel they should pay back in kind, and the non-means tested and uncomplicated policy sent a positive signal to the target population (2002: 354). Mettler (2002: 357-8) finds an independent effect of the design’s signal: ‘The form of public provision through which G.I. Bill beneficiaries obtained their education’ appears most responsible for prompting greater civic and political involvement, particularly among ‘veterans from low to moderate socioeconomic backgrounds’ who saw education as a privilege (2002: 361). Notably, Mettler also uses SCPD as part of a far wider exploration of the role of policy design on citizen participation, identifying foundational work (such as by Skocpol) that preceded SCPD, and drawing more on the ‘policy feedback’ literature (and Pierson in particular) which is distinct from SCPD and still features in Theories of the Policy Process 4 (Mettler and SoRelle, 2017).

So, one explanation for insights 11 and 12 is that many aspects of the SCPD do not involve a USP or sense that it is the foundational literature. Instead, it (or specific case studies) adds important insights to the study of policy design, policy feedback, and problem definition, and draws on international work to identify the role of interpretive or constructivist scholarship as an alternative to the ‘policy sciences’ approach, but without being indispensable to analysis. Indeed, policy feedback theory, with its origins in historical institutionalism, and taken forward by scholars such as Pierson, and Mettler, may effectively take the place of SCPD by providing a wider framework (containing more concepts and explanation). Mettler and Sorelle (2017) review a wide range of studies of the effects of policy design on citizens, but under the policy feedback, not SCPD, brand and with no mention of Schneider and Ingram’s preferred ‘feed-forward’ model (further, Schneider’s 2012 long term study of US state punishment policy could be included under either brand). This experience raises a key question about why we need a study to have the SCPD brand for it to count as part of a meaningful body of work, particularly when (as in SCPD) very few studies are making direct tests of specific hypotheses. We can cut this work in many different ways to ask broad and focused questions, so does the brand really matter?
I suspect that many scholars prefer ‘feedback’ to refer to the idea of a system interacting continuously (providing positive or negative feedback) with inputs (i.e. a feedback loop in a system), and finding the justification for the term ‘feedforward’ (feedback ‘implies the social economic and political conditions are the starting point’ - Schneider, 2012: 195) misleading and unhelpful since it suggests a more linear chronological path of policy development.