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“My forest, my kingdom”—Self-referentiality as a strategy in the case of small forest owners coping with government regulations

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Abstract Social research that informs the implementation of natural resource policies is frequently driven by the logic of the policy system itself. A prevailing concern with achieving policy outcomes can lead, however, to lack of attention to equally important aspects, for example the challenges the policy instruments present to those they are targeting and the consequences this might have for government–citizen relationships. To help guide research into these issues we have developed a situational–interactional approach to interpretive policy analysis that seeks to examine the processes involved when people collectively make sense of government instruments. The theoretical basis is provided to a large extent by Luhmann’s theory of self-referential social systems. In addition, we operationalise the concepts of interactional framing and resemiotisation to capture the active work of the citizens in sense-making processes. We then apply our situational–interactional analysis to small-scale forest ownership in Flanders. Analysis of data from focus groups with forest owners reveals how interactions build on each other in the co-development of particular strategies to cope with government intervention. Finally, we discuss two future directions for research. First, the forest owners find themselves in an inescapable relationship with the government, and feel their autonomy is threatened. Government intervention, therefore, will almost necessarily lead to resistance. Second, forest groups enhance compatibility between the government system and the forest owners, but rather than narrowing the gap between the two worlds they tend to emphasise it.

Keywords Interpretive policy analysis · Policy implementation · Frame analysis · Resemiotization · Resistance · Non-industrial private forest owners

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Introduction

Public policy instruments frequently rest on behavioural assumptions (Schneider and Ingram 1990) and the usual way of looking at them is as functional devices aimed at achieving specific policy objectives. This observation applies to all areas of natural resource policy, including biodiversity, water quality, and soil protection. Increasingly, the public policies in place use incentives, legal rules, and other regulations to urge farmers, forest owners, and other local landholders to take (or avoid) specific actions. In this sense, public policy instruments represent a script, an ideal scenario, prescribing the roles and behaviour of their target population (Van Herzele et al. 2011).

One remarkable thing about the behavioural orientation in policy development is that its logic also pervades much of the research. Not only does it imply a particular language (seeing people in terms of target groups, for instance)—numerous studies are purposefully designed to fit with a given policy strategy or a set definition of how the policy should work. This is clear, for instance, from the growing number of studies conducted to discover the factors or determinants that affect people's willingness and ability to comply with specific policy measures (Siebert et al. 2006). Although there is little doubt about the relevance and applicability of the findings, there is also the risk that together with pursuing policy relevance such studies may focus insufficiently on what is relevant to the target group under consideration. Research into policy acceptance, in particular, has been based on the recognition that what counts as relevant and important to a particular policy domain may be less so to those affected by it. However, the reverse is also true: what citizens find important and relevant is reflected only in part in policies and plans. As Wagemans (2002) puts it, governments have limited interest in what is going on in society because problems, opportunities, and solutions are only relevant as far as they can be handled within the institutional system. Accordingly, problems and their definitions are adapted to instruments instead of vice versa.

In this paper we present a methodological approach that provides particular focus on the life-world of those affected by the policy instruments in use. We make no assumptions a priori about how an instrument should work, but recognise that instruments can be studied in several ways, irrespective of the stated objectives or behavioural objectives ascribed to them. By going beyond the behavioural or functionalist orientation—that is, by distinguishing between the instrument and the objectives pursued—we seek to address some aspects of policy implementation that would otherwise not be very visible. An often overlooked but critically important aspect is the manner in which the laws and regulations are represented and experienced in the lives of everyday citizens. This would, however, require broader scope than is customary in studies of public policy instruments. People are likely to be targeted by more than one instrument at the same time. It is useful, therefore, to gain a sense of the wider landscape of rules and tools as experienced by those living within it. Questions then relate to what challenges these instruments present to those they are targeting, how they are interpreted or rendered problematic, and how people (re-)organise around them. Furthermore, a particular aspect that we focus on is the relationship between the governing and the governed. Although there is growing evidence of the importance of government–citizen relationships in the implementation of ecosystem-based management (Cvetkovich and Winter 2003; Bergmann and Bliss 2004), the dynamics of how these relationships are constructed are not well understood.

To guide research into these questions we develop in this article a situational–interactional approach to interpretive policy analysis. Next, to exemplify the approach and demonstrate its utility, we use a case of small forest owners in Flanders (Belgium). We then discuss the analysis and conclude with some future directions for interpretive policy research on government–citizen relationships.

A situational–interactional approach to interpretive policy analysis

Interpretive policy analysis starts with recognition of people as active meaning makers and interpreters who continually make sense of the reality they experience. Such an (ethnographic) orientation leads us to envisage the meanings that emerge with these experiences—in this case, experiences of instances of government intervention—rather than the policy meanings pursued by the policy makers themselves. In her work on interpretive policy analysis, Yanow (2000, pp. 9–10) highlights the distinction between authored texts—meanings as intended by policy makers—and constructed texts, which reflect the possibly variant meanings made of them by other policy-relevant groups. As implementation problems are often created by different understandings of policy artefacts (language, objects, acts), she argued, it is important for analysis to access these other interpretations. In this paper our purpose is not to document what the different interpretations are, but rather to capture the processes and conditions that generate these interpretations. Differences in interpretation are not just a matter of differences in predispositions such as preferences, ideology, etc. Cramer Walsh (2004) illustrates this point with different examples from the literature of people relying on their *experience with situations* to construct their own interpretation of public affairs. Her work—but see also Gamson (1992)—describes how, through group interaction (informal political talk), people collectively create meaning.

Such a situational–interactional perspective on policy interpretation can be traced to Goffman's frame analysis (1974). Goffman starts with the classic question: "What is it that's going on here?" (p. 8). The point is that by explicitly or implicitly asking themselves and others what is going on, people make sense of the situation they attend to. With regard to this process, Goffman assumes that "definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principals of organisation, which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them" (p. 11). Framing, then, is the *ordering process* through which people select and label the relevant features of the situation, structure these into an understandable whole, and behave accordingly. In short, by framing the situation people come to an understanding of what is going on. Framing a situation provides a larger scope of interpretation than that of the single element or policy artefact (object, person, act, language) involved in that situation. This is because the meaning of an element will crucially depend on the framing of the situation in which it occurs. Schön and Rein (1994) speak of a complementary process of naming and framing: "Things are selected for attention and named in such a way as to fit the frame constructed for the situation" (p. 16).

In the following sections, we further theorise the key processes involved when people make sense of the reality they experience. We use the concept of interactional framing to further understand the social–interactive nature of framing processes. Next, we bring in Luhmann's theory of self-referential social systems to point out the bounded or conditioned nature of framing. Finally, we use the concept of resemiotisation, which helps to uncover the shifts of meaning-making that occur as policy artefacts move from one social system to another.

Interactional framing

The concepts of frames and framing are widely used throughout the social sciences, particularly in the fields of conflict and negotiation management, political activism, and social movements. Recent reviews in these areas (Benford and Snow 2000; Dewulf et al. 2009) show that most existing studies conceptualise framing as the process of either

applying frames to situations or using frames to convince others of a specific interpretation. In this sense, frames are regarded as representations that are either stored in memory—also called cognitive frames or mental schemata—or instrumental in influencing public opinion and action (e.g., media frames, collective action frames). In this respect, the focus of research is often on the content of frames, including predispositions to support a certain interpretation: knowledge, cultural identity, ideology, etc. In this paper instead our attention focuses on the emergent and interactive nature of framing processes, more specifically, *how* people actually frame the situations in which they find themselves.

This emphasis is in accord with the early work by Goffman mentioned above (see also Bateson 1972), and it can also be linked to a growing interest in interactional approaches to framing more generally. As outlined by Dewulf et al. (2009), interactional approaches consider framing to be the dynamic enactment and shaping of meaning in ongoing interactions. Frames are, then, transient structures that give form to processes of social interaction and communication (Goffman 1974; Dewulf et al. 2009). In the context of conflict and negotiation research, interaction refers to the communication that occurs between participants in debate: individuals, interest groups, institutions—“The participants co-develop the conversation and they try to negotiate the relevant framing on the spot” (Dewulf et al. 2009). Thus, meanings are *co-constructed*, and they evolve as interactants react to each other’s framings.¹

Framing is an active, productive process. While people are framing their experiences in interaction with others—whether those others are imagined or physically present (Weick 1995, p. 39)—questions are generated concerning what the problem is, who is responsible, what interventions are acceptable, and what should be done, by whom, and how to do it (Felstiner et al. 1980; Gamson 1992; Fischer 2000). In formulating these questions and finding answers to them people actively construct the problems and opportunities they face. When people in interactions frame an event or phenomenon, they try to achieve social ends and thus become active agents (Ford 1999; Aarts and van Woerkum 2006). However, we should not overestimate the originality and freedom of framing. In fact, much of what is spoken in everyday discourse is the product of repetition, the reappearance of what has been said before, or what could be termed *discursive re-circulation* (Hook 2001). This is largely because the situated (and recurring) interactions through which people construct and communicate meaning fit into (and overlap with) broader configurations of social relationships. Communicative networks, for example the family, the local nature-conservancy group, the national forest administration, and so on, all have their own sets of rules, procedures, discourses, and practices that limit or condition the possible ways a situation or problem can be framed. But such conditions and boundaries are often tacit and outside of explicit experience, let alone a topic of conversation. As a consequence, a particular way of framing a policy problem may become dominant while interactants are often unaware of why this should be so (Buizer and Van Herzele 2012).

Selection and self-reference

Whereas the concept of interactional framing is useful in analysing how policy interpretations and meanings are brought forth in people’s interactions, it will by itself not suffice to address the conditions and boundaries of their formation. As noted above, framing is not entirely negotiable, because any interaction between people is embedded in a broader network of communications. At this point, we introduce Luhmann’s (1984, 1990) theory of

¹ Examples are given by Drake and Donohue (1996), Dewulf et al. (2004).

self-referential social systems. Such systems (e.g., law, politics, science) constitute their own boundaries, re-create the conditions for their internal operations, and develop according to their own operational logic rather than obeying an external logic (Jessop 2001). Luhmann's ideas are most commonly applied to the government side of policy implementation—in particular, public administrations and organisations—but they can also be useful when considering the life-worlds of citizens.

An important feature of Luhmann's theory is the distinction between system and environment. Each system treats the others as part of its environment. For Luhmann (1984) the communication between system and environment involves two major aspects: selection and self-reference. Selection is inevitable simply for capacity reasons. We can only think about a few things simultaneously, and even a single thing or object can be grasped through different viewpoints, or, put another way, the object allows for multiple interpretations. Luhmann (1995) uses the notion of *references*: “The totality of the references presented by a meaningfully intended object offers more to hand than can in fact be actualised at any moment” (p. 60). Because the world is excessively complex it always contains more possibilities than the system can respond to. In fact, the environment is always more complex than the system. And, the function of a system is precisely to make complexity accessible by reducing it and being selective (Brans and Rossbach 1997). In Luhmann's (1990) terminology meaning is a selective representation of complexity. “Meaning is a... powerful form of coping with complexity under the unavoidable condition of enforced selectivity” (p. 83). And, it is the self-referential structure of meaning that forces selection (Luhmann 1995, p. 60). In other words, to cope with complexity the system divides reality into what it considers important or relevant and what is not. This means that systems both include and exclude, and they create visibilities at the same time as they mask or neglect alternative constructions of reality.

The question, then, is how does that selection proceed? In Luhmann's theory—underpinned by Maturana and Varela's (1980) autopoiesis²—systems have the inclination to pick up those elements from the environment that will define their own world. Thus, the partial perspective on the environment is determined by the system's internal constitution, its own internal logic, rather than purely external information. For an administration this implies that what can and needs to be done is directed by its own structure, which may include staff roles and responsibilities, chosen technologies, the vocabularies and discourses in use. Hence, outside reality is reduced to the point where it can be handled, bureaucratically processed, or regulated. Thus, the self-produced image of reality is not just a by-product of the bureaucratic system, but a concrete condition for its self-preservation and efficient functioning. For example, it is the job of the legal system to transform a social conflict into a technical legal question so that it becomes decidable (Teubner 2009).³

Resemiotisation

As we suggested above, selection involves more than choosing something and rejecting something else, it is also a process of transformation. A system—through the day-to-day work of its members or staff—selectively transforms problems it finds in the environment into internal problems. Thus, complexity is reduced and translated into a manageable *form*. From an autopoietic stance, such transformations are a condition for (or at least lend

² Luisi (2003), for a review on autopoiesis.

³ Another clear example is the production of sketches and maps for purposes of planning decision making (Iedema 2001; Van Herzele and van Woerkum 2011).

support to) a system's effective operation. However, the products of those transformations—for example texts and maps—also take part in subsequent communicative events, that is, situated interactions inside and outside the system. Iedema (1999) describes the example of a report summarising the outcome of a planning negotiation. The report was written in such a way that it suits the expectations of bureaucratic hierarchy and efficiency (a self-referential perspective). Furthermore, as soon as the report moves to the next stage of the project, its status is reconfigured from being the end point of the social interactions that generated it in the preceding events to being the starting point, the basis of the interaction in the next step of the process. To highlight the shifts in meaning-making that occur through such processes, Iedema (2001) introduces the concept of *resemiotisation*.

In brief, the process is as follows: when a policy artefact—language, object, act (Yanow 1993, 2000)—leaves the confines of the government system, it is exposed to the outside world. Here it gets involved in new situations that require interpretation. Policy instruments are not simply imported into the world of citizens bearing the label “made in government” (Teubner 1989). Rather, their meaning is constituted anew and therefore probably altered. This is due, in part, to the shift in reality status undergone by those artefacts as they move from the government system to the operational networks of citizens' communications. Whereas a government instrument was the end product of an entire trajectory within the government system, it is now a baseline from which to begin the citizens' meaning-making process. As such, policy instruments may acquire meanings that are quite different from those of the policy system. Thus, resemiotisation is not only a strategy of the policy system (a condition to further a policy's implementation towards its next stage) it also plays an essential role in the communication between different systems.

Introduction to the case study

Small-scale forest ownership is an area in which there is ever-growing accumulation of government rules and tools. This applies not least to Flanders (Belgium). To encourage private owners to adopt government policies, a large variety of regulatory, financial, and informational instruments have been put in place over the years (Serbruyns and Luysaert 2006).⁴ In addition, forest groups—cooperatives of forest owners—were created as an instrument to achieve policy objectives.⁵ In contrast with traditional policy instruments, forest groups have growing success and popularity. They are supportive in several ways, including providing information and advice to forest owners and assisting them with management practices. Important in this case is that forest groups are expected “to reduce the distance between the owners and Flemish government forest policy” (www.bosgroepen.be, accessed November 15, 2011).

Owners of pine plantations are a key target group for government policies to promote sustainable forest management. Until recently, however, little was known about this group. In 2004–2006, a research project was undertaken to learn about these owners, their motivations of ownership, management activities, and experiences with government

⁴ Incentives offered by the government (subsidies for reforestation, forest management plans, etc.) have had limited success, although they generally cover more than the costs and the loss of revenue (Serbruyns and Luysaert 2006; Verheyen et al. 2006).

⁵ These concern, in particular, the 1990 Forest Decree, and the Sustainable Forest Management Criteria stipulated by the Flemish government in 2003. Additional information on forest groups is given by Van Gossum and De Maeyer (2006).

instruments.⁶ A quantitative survey and subsequent focus groups were conducted with property owners of parcels within large areas of pine plantations in the North of Flanders (Van Herzele and Van Gossum 2008, 2009). The survey results suggest that most of the properties here are very small (60 % less than one hectare), the owners are predominantly male and fairly old (mean age 61 years) and they are often well educated.⁷ The survey also revealed that the owners vary in aspirations about their forest. Cluster analysis was used to categorize the survey respondents into three groups on the basis of their motivations of ownership. These were labelled *economists*, *recreationists*, and *passive owners*.⁸ For a typical economist, the forest must be profitable, both productively (timber and firewood) and as a financial investment. For recreationists, recreational motivations are most important (relaxation, walking for pleasure, wildlife). Finally, passive owners seemed to have no clear motivation. The results were then used to select two focus groups in each motivational category.

Whereas the six focus groups revealed contrasting opinions about forest management, one striking observation from all these groups was the strong sentiments the owners shared on the issue of government intervention. These pertained to rules and tools of all kinds, including both the newer ones, for example the forest groups, and more long-standing restrictions on cutting trees, building a cottage, and so on. Given the broad representation of owner types and the richness of the data—not merely reflecting opinions but showing how these were formed through group interaction—we decided to use this material for the analysis hereafter. Before turning to the analysis we provide information on these focus groups.

The focus groups were established in two different regions, with three groups in the Flemish Sand region and the other three in the Campine region. To obtain a sufficient number of participants, a total of 80 individuals were recruited from the pool of survey respondents. The sample was gradually built up and more or less evenly distributed across the three motivational categories and the areas of pine plantations. The potential participants were telephoned and asked to participate in a focus group. Those who agreed were sent a letter with further details and asked to confirm their participation. They were also invited for a lunch after the meeting. Finally, 64 turned up at the focus groups. Table 1 gives an overview of the participant characteristics.

The focus groups were conducted on Saturday mornings in April and May 2005. The discussion guide centred on the owners' practical experience of and viewpoints on forest management, including the role of government. An assistant moderator was present to make notes on group interaction: who was speaking to whom and any non-verbal behaviour throughout each session. All focus groups lasted for 2 h. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim (360 pages in total). The contents of the transcripts were coded, and parts of the coded texts were subsequently categorised, analysed, and interpreted by using the interpretive policy analysis presented in the previous section. Given our emphasis on the processes of policy interpretation, the dynamics of the group was as important as the manifest content. According to methodologists, focus groups are a valuable resource for documenting group processes of joint meaning generation (Bloor et al. 2001). The focus of analysis is, then, not merely on what participants say about an

⁶ Belgian Science Policy: Feasibility of forest conversion: ecological, social and economic aspects, Scientific Support Plan for a Sustainable Development Policy (SPSD II), Part 4: Mixed actions (MA/O4).

⁷ Out of the 276 respondents, 74 % were male, 25 % were older than 75 years, 52 % were retired, 43 % had completed higher levels of education (bachelor or master degree), 28 % inherited the property; 18 % had a residence on the property, 33 % lived at a distance of less than 5 km and 30 % between 5 and 20 km.

⁸ This typology is much in line with findings elsewhere (Van Herzele and Van Gossum 2008).

Table 1 Participant characteristics

Location	Sint-Niklaas (Flemish Sand region)			Geel (Campine region)			
	Date	April 2	April 9	April 30	April 23	May 21	May 28
Participants		14	12	10	12	9	7
Motivational category		Economist (85 %)	Recreationist (83 %)	Passive (60 %)	Economist (83 %)	Recreationist (89 %)	Passive (86 %)
Mean age (range)		67 (40–78) years	52 (36–65) years	57 (15–84) years	60 (46–71) years	56 (44–76) years	64 (33–78) years
Gender (% men)		71 %	50 %	60 %	75 %	77 %	57 %
Mean duration of ownership (range)		31 (19–62) years	29 (5–54) years	22 (14–29) years	22 (1–35) years	22 (10–43) years	41 (8–75) years
Daily/weekly in forest		57 %	58 %	40 %	83 %	78 %	29 %

issue, but how they say it and why they say it the way they do, that is, what leads them to express things in a particular way (Morgan 1997, pp. 20, 46).

Coping strategies by small forest owners

Overall, the focus groups generated lively conversations. Clearly the participants enjoyed sharing perspectives, telling of experiences, and hearing from one another.⁹ As Morgan (1997, pp. 20–21) points out, such a process of sharing and comparing among participants provides direct evidence on the participants' search for connections among each others' experiences and viewpoints. However, what our situational–interactional analysis reveals is the strategic importance of this process. The participants' interactions built on each other to co-develop and present particular strategies of coping with government intervention. As a result, we were able to identify three major types of coping strategy:

- how forest owners interpreted (and resemiotised) policy artefacts from within their life-world to make them contestable, even disprovable;
- how forest owners constructed contrasts or boundaries (i.e., between *we* and *they* identifications) to strengthen a shared discourse against the government system; and
- how forest owners—with or without the help of the forest group—positioned themselves within the government's perspective in a way acceptable to all parties.

Interpreting (and resemiotising) policy artefacts from within the life-world

As a general observation, small forest ownership is entangled in various ways with the life-worlds of the owners, involving personal achievement and freedom, escape from daily routine, aesthetic enjoyment, contact with nature, family togetherness, financial investment, but also many worries about doing the right thing in the right way.¹⁰ Consequently, as a part of the life-world of the owners, the forest means different things to different owners. Interestingly, however, what all these owners have in common is that the life-world serves as a basis from which to discuss and evaluate the policies they face.

At any time during the sessions, including right from the beginning, we find participants airing their resentment of government intervention and, in doing so, making connections with what it means to be a forest owner. The following extract is typical and gives a flavour of the overall tone. The moderator had asked the participants what they highly value about forests and that should not be changed.

Marc (after a rather long silence):... The feeling that that forest is yours... that you can actually live there like a king from nature... If the state is going to interfere too much with that, then... um... then the fun is gone.

André: Yeah... the owner should in fact be the boss... yes...

Armand: That no one from above is going to tell you... it ought to all be conifers now...

Roger: Advising...

⁹ We note that the participants were not acquainted with each other.

¹⁰ Full analyses of forest and owner relationships are given by Bliss and Martin (1989), Rickenbach and Reed (2002), and Van Herzele and Van Gossum (2008).

André:... thus... um... in fact, the forest group lets the owner be boss... gives advice... gives recommendations... will possibly help... but lets the owner be boss (*many nod in agreement*).

Marc: The state has duty to help... not to play boss... they should help us and be thankful that we are such idiots to work and do... and from which everyone benefits.

Moderator: Yes Madam?

Rafaëlle: Um... For me, personally, it is... um... there is a lot of money in it... it brings nothing... and then someone else has a say in it... No, I do not fancy that idea at all. (*Sint-Niklaas, April 2*)

Despite the different meanings they attach to the forest—for instance, a houseman's working place and an old lady's capital investment—the owners end up having a collectively defined sense of what government intervention means. But, what is more, such a collective construction of reality is also functional in the interaction. In particular, the whole idea of government intervening to regulate and place restrictions on the owners' autonomy is made contestable by presenting it from within their own life-world. Apart from such generalised opinions that are directly on the topic, we also find plenty of references to concrete practical experiences. Two anecdotes about restrictive rules:

Louis: I, thus, have four dogs... and then I am in the forest with those four dogs and a forester turns up... and they run free... you can't do that... I find that wrong (*Marcel nods in much agreement*). Thus, now I have to keep my four dogs on a leash... so there is no freedom for those dogs, eh?... And neither for me, eh?... And I do think, however, that a forest... to repeat what was said a moment ago... why do you do it... to have freedom... piece... yes... that is gone... I can't let my dogs go. (*Geel, April 23*)

Johan: From April first you can't enter the forest with a saw... to July first... it's birds time! Thus um... we have stopped working now. It was a beautiful day this morning, but... it's a pity, eh?... Yeah, from April first you are no longer permitted. (*Sint-Niklaas, April 2*)

These examples show the self-referential perspective implicit in the framing of practical situations. In answering Goffman's (1974) classic question (what is it that's going on here?) those elements are selected which refer positively to the forest owners' world: freedom for dogs, beautiful day for working, etc. By contrast, the policy artefacts they are faced with (the forester, birds time) are framed in terms of impacts, perturbations, on their day-to-day life. What the rules stand for (in this example, wildlife protection) is not at issue here. Such at first sight simple anecdotes are functional in the conversation in that they add to the cascade of evidence against government rules. One by one the rules are reduced to the point that they become contestable (as unreasonable, illogical, unfair, etc.) and so capable of being disproved. What is particularly interesting here is the shift of meaning—the resemiotisation (Iedema 2001)—that occurs. In fact, any such process involves a shift away from the policy meaning as intended by the government toward the situated meaning-makings by forest owners. Such a resemiotisation is sometimes very explicit:

Leo: The government should try to meddle as little as possible... that would be a great step forward. Because nothing is allowed anymore and you have to pay incredibly much (*André much agrees*). You have a piece of land with trees on it and that is cadastral income... and again to the municipality... and then there is a shed on it where you can eat and store your grass mower... And then you have to pay again for a second residence... If this would cease to exist, it would become much more interesting.

André: I find that very important.

Arnold: (adds another example of unduly taxes).

Leo: It is a burden... but it is a milk cow for the government.

Arnold: Yes, yes... completely wrong... (*Sint Niklaas, April 9*)

The strategy used here is similar to the previous examples—the rules are interpreted anew (with the aim of disproving them)—but, interestingly enough, these owners are taking the resemitotisation even further. They qualify their own framing of the situation as natural and concrete reality—eating, storing the grass mower—and, at the same time, they blame the government for transforming physical reality into (unreal) juridical terms—a piece of land with trees into cadastral income and a shed into real property—and this with the intent of profiting from the forest owners. As Teubner (1989) points out, the law not only produces legal rules and acts but legal constructions of reality also. Cadastral income, for instance, is a purely internal construction of the outside world. The fact that government creates and imposes a reality of its own that cannot be matched to reality out there is further proof to forest owners of the validity of their accusations.

Drawing boundaries between themselves (we) and the government (they)

We saw above that forest owners find themselves the target of government rules and acts and see their everyday reality transformed into government constructions (cadastral income, exotic species, etc.). Overall they agree that the government should not patronise, play the boss, meddle with and profit from them. All this suggests a deep division between the two worlds (government and forest owners). In the following we illustrate how boundaries of separation and incompatibility are also, in part, actively created in conversation.

Perhaps most obvious is the observation that in all focus group conversations participants are constructing negative identities of government. Below we list a series of quotes with reference to the issues raised.

The government is slow:

André: (*furious*) When you ask the government... It happened to me... eh... and I got my tree cutting permit two years later... yeah... two years later eh! (*Sint-Niklaas, April 2*)

The government is not hard working:

Arnold: The government eh... that are officials eh... they are not motivated... it should be four o'clock as fast as possible... so they can go home... and preferably at two... (*Sint-Niklaas, April 9*)

The government is not qualified:

Karel: The highest placed people in the [ministerial] cabinet, eh... they never had to pass an exam. (*Geel, May, 21*)

The government makes decisions on its own:

Guy: The whole thing is decided over our heads... from one day to another it becomes nature area [on the zoning plan]... dark green coloured and you're not aware of it... and then they ask your opinion... while you no longer have a say (*Angela and Paul agree*). (*Geel May 21*)

The government takes all the power:

Robert: When they get so much power eh... that is really too much power against the small people. (*Geel, April 23*)

The government is forest-unfriendly:

Eddy: In the Lembeke Forest hectares and hectares have been sold... and castles were built there (*Arnold nods affirmatively*). (*Sint-Niklaas, April 9*)

The government has no long term vision:

Karel: A politician thinks only of the next election (*some laughter*). I think that is something very important... That sustains itself... Nothing more... (*Geel, May, 21*)

The government knows little:

Raf: What sort of authority is Nature & Forest [the forest administration]? Let me say it rude... one that actually knows nothing... or knows little... and has its own wisdoms... which have grown over the years. (*Geel, April 23*)

Similar to most citizens, forest owners have little access to the government system, let alone its internal operation. So, in conversation they have to work with the knowledge at hand: hearsay, practical experience, common sense, etc. However, the biggest issue here is not the evidence itself, but how it is used in interaction. By opening small windows into the system and shedding negative light on it, the government is judged and rejected for *who* it is and not merely for what it does to the owners. In the last two quotes we also note a reference to government as an autonomous (autopoietic) system, that is, one that sustains itself and creates its own wisdom. Furthermore, government is mostly defined by what it is not (not knowing, not caring, not clear, not trustworthy, etc.), in fact, referring implicitly to what is normally expected from a good functioning government.

In interaction, the forest owners confirm each other, resulting in the development of a common story that is constantly reinforced and reproduced. By adding examples of the same attribute—unknowing, capricious, etc.—individual framings of government reinforce each other and result in a shared truth that is not contested within the we-group. All of this also leads us to a further observation: the construction of a negative *they* (the government) is often contrasted with the construction of an opposite *we*, being the poor and powerless, hard-working people who own a small piece of forest on which they are not allowed to do anything:

Antoine: And I also think an ordinary person has a right to a little relaxation in a forest and when you come to buy a forest lot... if only 200 square metres... and you can't place anything on it, and so... For it's all easy... just look at all those in government... or in parliament... yeah... or in the state also... Where are... where are their properties... eh? Their house is built on a huge lot... but we cannot afford... and that I regret. (*Sint-Niklaas, April 2*)

Marleen: Very rich people who have a villa somewhere in Spain or the like... where they go on holiday... but an ordinary human... a hard working human who can afford a little forest... that is quite something! And if he is still limited by the government because he can't place anything on it... then I find it a said affair... because for these people is this a dream. (*Sint-Niklaas, April 30*)

As the above quotes show, the contrasts or boundaries created between the government and forest owners serve as a further argument to contest the government rules and tools. This also means that boundaries should be protected against the government. Even a seemingly fortunate situation like being provided with information from the government is commonly framed as threatening forest owners' autonomy.

Marleen: I think if you need information... then you go and get it... they should not impose that information...

Marijke: Yeah... you should actually find it yourself (*Marleen admits*).

Jean: Well, that's what I think too!

Marleen: I think there is enough information to be found... but that information should not come to you... you should look for that information, eh... that is my standpoint (*many agree*) (*Jean, Marijke and Beatrix exchange experiences about the information they were receiving from the municipality*).

Jean: I think it's good... but above all... um... it {the information} must be available but they shouldn't drop it in my lap... I will go and ask for it (*makes many gestures*).

Ben: Yeah... they should not spoon-feed us everything...

Jean: No... no... no... if you want it you should just ask... it shouldn't come across, eh... it should come across as a sort of advice...

Ben: Yeah... and that's what the forest group does, eh... the forest group just gives advice... you get what you ask for but there is nothing imposed...

Jean:... and that they send a letter every three or four months... I do not mind that... I think that's good... so you stay... you stay alert...

Guido:... of course... so you wake up or you stay awake or...

Jean:... of course...

Guido: Yes, that's enough!

Marleen: In other words... it should be free of obligation and definitely not pushy (*Beatrix admits*).

Guido: Yes, absolutely... and I would be willing to pay something... eh... that's no problem... Oh my goodness, that's no problem... if they leave me in peace after that. (*Sint-Niklaas, April 30*)

In these processes of constructing and protecting boundaries the so-called forest groups play an interesting role. Basically, the forest owners seek to frame the forest group as being closely linked to them. This is also shown, for example, by *personalising* the forest group as being there for them:

Josée:... and I have... with mister X {name omitted}... and I just call him "Jan"... I made a deal with him... which trees they would thin out... and that has already happened twice and I must say that they have done well, that I have had no dirt at all. (*Geel, May 28*)

Ben:... and the coordinator is Sylvie Y {name omitted}... a very sympathetic lady (*Romain is smiling*)... and she helps... and you regularly receive... when you have a computer at home... messages like we organise a walk over there... that's a possibility... or we offer courses in tree pruning... and so on. (*Sint-Niklaas, April 30*)

Interesting enough, the forest group—which is in fact a government tool—is considered not to belong to the government. Even more, the forest group is often contrasted with the government (the very first extract is one example). When the owners talk about the forest group they stress their help and assistance with forest management. Important, moreover, is

that they regard these interventions not as meddling. On the contrary, they find that the forest group takes into account the views of the forest owners and as many would say: “the owner remains boss”. In other words, the forest group respects the forest owner’s life-world, including its *boundary codes* such as property, autonomy, and freedom. Hence the owners collectively frame the forest group as a separate system independent from government, so they can take advantage of it and, at the same time, blackguard the government as much as they like. As a result, the relational distance increases between owners and government.

Positioning themselves within the government’s perspective

We already noted that the forest owners are well aware that the government constructs its own realities. Specifically, rules and regulations condition the way outside reality is transformed (e.g., into legal constructs) so that it can be handled within the institutional system. A notable observation is that the owners try to fit themselves into the government’s (self-referential) perspective with the aim of enhancing their own position. One strategy is to re-create the situation in such a way that it complies with the rule’s terms and conditions in a way that is profitable for them:

Marc: I have sold that forest to just four metres less than one hectare... because from one hectare you are a petty criminal or a big capitalist, as can be seen from the taxes you pay. (*Sint-Niklaas, April 2*)

Herman: Speaking as a farmer, I find it sad that you need a permit to cut down a tree... and as a farmer I know very well... trees are shooting up everywhere... um... those green guys have made it such that when they hear the drone of a saw... they point the finger and say... that is not allowed... It is so bad that farmers make sure in advance that no more tree can grow big eh... so that they no longer need to cut it down... that is totally absurd... (*Geel, April 23*)

Thus, the owners act within the rules of the government but at the same time they avoid the major drawbacks of these rules (for instance, paying a lot of tax). The strategy of shifting the situation also implies that the existing rule, because of not being neglected or contested, is implicitly reconfirmed. Such a strategy is, of course, limited by what is possible in each situation. Moreover, many forest owners have little knowledge about government regulation. As a consequence, they are uncertain and even anxious about their position in relation to the government perspective.

Paul: Until recently, I was even scared to chop down a dead tree in my forest... (*Johan assents*)... because I still had the idea that sometime we could be arrested... neighbours who telephone and say... hey... come and see what the one next door is doing. (*Geel, May 21*)

Testimonies like this are sometimes used when owners praise the forest group for improving their situation. The forest group is commonly framed as a solution, an intermediate device for coping with government intervention. By sharing negative experiences this role is continually confirmed in the course of interaction:

Armand:... and the forester had to give his permission... give his blessing... to recover a tree that has fallen down... but then he says... if you still want to recover a fallen tree in the future... you must ask for permission to the municipality... I say... why should I ask permission to recover my own wood? You are in a nature area [the zoning plan] he says... I never knew that is a nature area... no... They have not informed me about

this... Thus... if there is a tree that is a danger... and I want to recover the wood... I must ask for permission to the municipality

Mariette: (vigorously) That's rude! (*Others are saying that it is very extreme*)

Armand: I'm going to appeal to the forest group! (*Sint-Niklaas, April 2*)

Furthermore, promoting the forest group (in particular to those not yet acquainted with it) is a topic on its own and an essential element to help others enhance their position within the government perspective:

Marcel (toward Herman who is a farmer): I can only recommend to our friend the farmer... if you don't want to spend your time buried in paperwork, just go the forest group... You can only profit from it... I really mean that... those people won't do anything wrong... for they can arrange for a cutting permit... they can really help you... I think... and you have no burden or obligation (*Mia adds: "And it's all free!"*) (*Geel, April 23*).

Johan:... and you can use the forest group to obtain a tree cutting permit (*echoed by many*) because by yourself you get desperately lost... The forest group itself is saying:... if we ask... everything will be okay... perfect... And you get the phone number of the forester... one week before you start working you must inform him... and that's all perfect... he has not even come to see... he didn't need... I called him... Ah! That comes from the forest group... that's good... it should be okay. (*Sint-Niklaas, April 2*)

Mieke: It is the only way to do it yourself... because otherwise you'd run into an administrative... um... nightmare... where you don't get an answer in three years... because you wish to cut for instance... you know you can't just do it... so... and they [the forest group] they can. (*Geel, May 28*)

These quotes illustrate that the forest owners view the forest groups as a tool for coping with the problems they face and for doing what they want to do (e.g., cutting specific trees). As a result, the forest groups support the life-world of the owners and, at the same time, they ensure the reproduction of the government rules. By acting according to the rules, these very rules are indeed restated and reaffirmed.

Discussion and conclusions: government–citizen relationships

In this paper we developed a situational–interactional approach to interpretive policy analysis. In our view, a major advantage of applying interpretive policy analysis is that it includes the perspectives of the agencies that issue policies and instruments and the people affected by them. In our critique on the behavioural orientation we noted that too often research takes over the logic of policy implementers or what we call the (self-referential) government perspective. For example, people are labelled as target groups and classified as adopters and non-adopters or low and high intenders in relation to a given policy. In contrast, interpretive policy analysis views people as active interpreters implying that the policy in question is likely to have a different meaning for different groups (Yanow 2000; Fischer 2003).

The situational–interactional analysis outlined and demonstrated in this paper is concerned above all with the different ways people affected by a policy come to construct their own interpretation of that policy, in interaction with one another. The novelty of our

approach is that we locate these communicative interactions as situated events within a broader network of (intra or inter-systemic) communications. On the one hand, consideration is given to the sense making or framing processes that people in interaction use to deal with the policy in question. On the other, it is recognised that such interactional framings are limited and conditioned by the life-worlds or systems those people operate in. How a problem is framed, for example, will depend on the flow of interaction in which it is discussed as well as interactional relationships a priori present (e.g., the forest and the forest owner, the governing and the governed). In our case example we showed indeed that here-and-now conversations of meaning-making are firmly embedded in more or less enduring relationships *within* and *between* systems (the government, forest groups, forest owners), and that these sense-making conversations somehow serve to confirm one's own system. Thus, the three coping strategies identified from the focus group conversations can be understood as both citizens' attempts to cope with the government's self-referentiality and their own self-referential reactions to the government policies in question.

What our case demonstrates is the active part the citizens themselves play in shaping the government–citizens relationship. Our case example illustrates how citizens, by sharing and comparing experiences, collectively make sense of government intervention. In so doing, they make their policy interpretations from what a policy does rather than what it says (Lipsky 1980; Yanow 2000). The forest owners in our case were keen to confirm each other's interpretations with supportive examples of everyday life experiences. Overall, we found a great diversity of experiences, arising from different times and situations, involving different types of owner as well as government regulations. Sometimes, moreover, their lived experience fell short—in particular when blaming the government itself—and they had to work with assumptions, hearsay and common sense knowledge. Most notable, however, was the owners' on-going effort to seek alignment between the various experiences (and possible other evidence) to transform these into shared objective realities. As a result, government rules and the government itself become, by definition, illogical, unfair, untrustworthy, and should therefore be dismissed as much as possible.

To conclude we draw attention to two phenomena in the case of small forest owners which in our view deserve special attention in future research. The first is the extreme anger and hostility existing among the forest owners. We believe that such strong sentiments could be explained by the owners' limited ability or power to cope with the government policies and instruments. From an autopoietic stance, a government system develops its rules and tools according to its own operational logic. Such a partial, self-referential perspective on the environment is a condition for the system's effective operation. Citizens in a welfare state do benefit from an effective government, because it frees them from all kinds of worry (education, transport, health care, etc.) and so make their lives easier. Forest owners also are most likely to receive many services from the government. However, there are several points that affect them more directly and profoundly. Along with the many rules and tools the government enters owners' everyday lives. One could say that the government comes as an uninvited guest at the dinner table. As a result, the small forest owners find themselves in an inescapable relationship with the government system. Even receiving information about forest management could, at times, be regarded as threatening. Clearly, the forest owners want to be autonomous and make decisions for themselves. Reis et al. (2000) argue that *autonomy* is one of the inherent human needs that is decisive for emotional well-being. Government intervention, therefore, will almost necessarily lead to resistance. According to Ford et al. (2002), such resistance is not to be found "in the individual", but is instead a reality constructed in, by, and through conversations. Similar to everyday life conversations, focus groups are a socially dynamic

situation (Bloor et al. 2001, p. 21). As Puchta and Potter (2004, p. 22) state: “focus groups provide a setting for developing evaluations in interaction”. Meeting with others who are similarly situated in the eyes of government gives people the chance to share and compare, to evaluate and conclude about the situation. This is likely to result not only in specific outcomes or realities, but also in the kind of talk with which these are conducted and maintained (Ford et al. 2002). Further research is needed to build an understanding of how government initiatives affect people’s basic human needs and consequently, as a (coping) reaction, how people build resistance in their relationships with the government.

Another interesting phenomenon is the role of the forest group as *boundary spanner* between the worlds of the government and the forest owners. Forest groups were developed by the government as a tool to reduce the distance between the government’s forest policy and the private forest owners. In practice, forest groups translate or resemiotise what is issued by the government in such a way that it becomes meaningful within the owners’ life-world. For example, forest groups organise activities, e.g., thinning and collective wood sales, with the purpose of promoting native trees and shrubs (a government objective). The forest owners benefit from the help and assistance they receive in proper maintenance of their forest. What is important for them is that their life-world, including the fact that they are the owner of the forest, is treated with respect. Their autonomy is not violated. The intermediary role of street-level bureaucrats (i.e., executive civil servants) in the implementation of government policies is well described by Lipsky (1980). According to Lipsky, street-level bureaucrats develop strategies to cope with differences between reality constructions of citizens and government. They seek connection with the life-world of citizens and create possibilities for citizens within the restricted perspective of the government and within the abstraction of the already existing policy. As we have shown, the forest groups ensure the implementation of government rules in such a way that they cause no trouble for the owners. By doing so, they actually confirm the two worlds. The compatibility may indeed be enhanced but divergent realities are re-created, and consequently the distance between the government and the owners will remain. Instead of narrowing the gap, they tend to emphasise it. Both realities remain untouched. Further research is needed to answer the question of whether or not the construction of a common reality is exceptional, possible, or even needed to convince people to implement government policies.

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