



## The politics of critical policy sociology: mobilities, moorings and elite networks

Glenn C. Savage, Jessica Gerrard, Trevor Gale & Tebeje Molla

To cite this article: Glenn C. Savage, Jessica Gerrard, Trevor Gale & Tebeje Molla (2021) The politics of critical policy sociology: mobilities, moorings and elite networks, *Critical Studies in Education*, 62:3, 306-321, DOI: [10.1080/17508487.2021.1878467](https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2021.1878467)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2021.1878467>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 14 Feb 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1664



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



OPEN ACCESS



## The politics of critical policy sociology: mobilities, moorings and elite networks

Glenn C. Savage <sup>a</sup>, Jessica Gerrard <sup>b</sup>, Trevor Gale <sup>c</sup> and Tebeje Molla <sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Social Sciences and Graduate School of Education, University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia; <sup>b</sup>Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia; <sup>c</sup>School of Education, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland; <sup>d</sup>School of Education, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

### ABSTRACT

This article reflects on what doing critical policy sociology means in shifting theoretical, empirical and methodological contexts of education. We focus our analytical lens on two primary considerations. First, we reflect on the *politics of criticality*, examining differing claims and debates about what it means to do critical research and be a critical researcher of education policy, paying particular attention to how critical policy sociologists position their work in relation to elite power and policy networks. Second, we build on these foundations to consider the trend towards researching mobilities within critical policy sociology, arguing that contemporary ‘follow the policy’ research risks orienting researchers to the problems and agendas already established by elite policy agents and organisations, while obscuring the not-so-mobile forces that continue to define education policy and practice. We also raise questions about the elite networks and privileged levels of resourcing typically required to conduct this kind of research. In conclusion, we invite further discussion on the politics of knowledge production and challenges for policy sociologists seeking to be critical in shifting contexts.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 February 2020  
Accepted 17 January 2021

### KEYWORDS

Policy sociology; criticality; mobility; elites

## Introduction

In this article we reflect on what it means to be a ‘critical policy sociologist’ in shifting theoretical, empirical and methodological contexts of education. What does it mean to do ‘critical’ policy sociology research? What does it mean to ‘be critical’, engage in ‘critique’ or adopt a ‘critical disposition’? What are some of the tensions and challenges for those seeking to engage in ‘critical’ sociological analyses of education policy? Given that any attempt to comprehensively map the field of critical policy sociology to provide a response to such questions goes beyond the scope of a single journal article, we focus our analytical lens on two primary considerations, which are closely related and we believe are fruitful for provoking discussion about the evolving work of critical policy sociologists. First, we reflect on the *politics of criticality*, examining differing claims and debates about what it means to do critical research and be a critical researcher of education policy.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting on some key historical and emerging trends in the field,

**CONTACT** Glenn C. Savage  [glenn.savage@uwa.edu.au](mailto:glenn.savage@uwa.edu.au)  35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, Western Australia, 6009

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

including our own histories and attempts to shape critical policy sociology research, we consider different modes of critique and pay particular attention to how critical policy sociologists position their work in relation to elite power and policy networks. Second, to illustrate how the politics of criticality is evolving, we consider trends towards researching ‘policy mobilities’ within critical policy sociology. We focus especially on calls to engage in ‘follow the policy’ research, arguing that while this form of research speaks to a crucial need to examine the power and impact of elite global networks, it risks orienting researchers to problems and agendas already established by elite policy agents and organisations, while obscuring the *not-so-mobile* forces that continue to define education policy and practice. The desire to follow global policy flows also raises questions about the elite networks and privileged levels of resourcing typically required to conduct such research. In conclusion, we invite further discussion on the politics of knowledge production and challenges for policy sociologists seeking to be critical in shifting contexts. We argue there is an ongoing need to critique the critic and question whether researchers who seek to ‘critique’ elite networks might instead be partaking in the *research of elites, by elites and for elites*.

### The politics of criticality

The history of critical policy sociology in education has been infused with differing and often competing claims and debates about what it means to do critical research (Regmi, 2019), and as authors of this paper we have contributed in different ways to the historical development of these debates (see below). These different positions speak to the inherent *politics of criticality* and raise questions about the various roles that critical researchers desire to play. In reflecting on the politics of criticality, we claim from the outset that the vast majority of researchers who associate their scholarship with critical policy sociology either implicitly or explicitly reflect a commitment to a politics of research that seeks to challenge dominant power structures and associated political and policy arrangements. In some cases, these political commitments extend to the development of research that explicitly seeks to inspire social, political or educational change. For example, if we consider foundational educational scholarship in critical policy sociology, it is clear that the approach has been characterised by normative political and emancipatory aims, with scholars arguing that a form of critique that seeks to formulate visions of a better future is central to doing *critical* research.

Gale’s (2001) framing of critical policy sociology, for example, describes it as focussed on ‘the critique of oppressive social practices’ (p. 379), and anchored in political and moral commitments to improve the world. By connecting education policy analysis to the sociological interest in relations between ‘personal troubles’ and ‘public issues’ (Mills, 1959, p. 8), Gale argues that critical policy sociology provides a means for intervening in education policy for positive change; or as critical policy scholar Prunty (1985) put it, generates research, ‘anchored in the vision of a moral order in which justice, equality and individual freedom are uncompromised by the avarice of a few’ (p. 136). Blackmore (2014) similarly argues that ‘making a difference’ is central to criticality, which ‘requires negotiating tensions between the particular/universal, working with and working over dominant orthodoxies while providing alternative ways of doing and seeing the world, about working within and on the rules of the game’ (p. 515). In Rizvi and Lingard’s (2010)

account, critical policy sociology is similarly described as driven by ‘normative and imaginative’ purposes that, ‘should not only describe relations of power and processes through which policies are developed and allocated, but should also point to strategies for progressive change which might challenge oppressive structures and practices’ (p. 51). In making these arguments, such scholars reflect a lineage of critical theory associated with the Frankfurt School, which aims to go beyond simply understanding and critiquing social, political and economic relations, towards seeking to change the world (Scott, 1978). Indeed, Horkheimer argued that theory was only critical if it went beyond explaining what was wrong with the world to develop a normative vision for transformation (e.g., Horkheimer, 1972).

However, explicit emancipatory political agendas are not always present, nor preferred, in critical policy sociology research in education. As Sellar et al. (2014) argue, there are different ways of understanding what ‘being critical’ means, and many critical policy sociology scholars who engage in a different kind of politics that does not seek to explicitly articulate solutions or visions of a desired future. This form of critical research often involves strategies such as mapping and unpacking power relations and networks, examining how political and social formations are assembled, and critiquing policy problem/solution construction. Such research typically examines, critiques and seeks to explain social phenomena, but without extending this to a specific vision for change that others see as integral to critical scholarship. Following Latour (2004), we might say such scholars signal an alternative mode of critique and a different kind of critical disposition, which seeks to assemble ideas together in ways that offer readers ‘arenas’ in which to engage in critical conversation (p. 206). This does not mean that such research cannot *imply* a preferred alternative future or set of arrangements through engaging in critique, but that attempts are not made to explicitly outline what such alternatives might be. This approach is common in actor-network theory (ANT). Fenwick and Edwards (2010) argue, for example, that ANT seeks to ‘intervene’ into established ways of thinking rather than telling readers ‘what to think’ (pp. 1–23).

A broadly similar position can be seen in scholarship that draws on poststructuralist philosophy and theory, whereby researchers often foreground the benefits of critique and forms of problematisation but in lieu of articulating explicit solutions or visions for change. Here, the act of mapping, in which the discursive, material and affective constructions of policy are ‘laid bare’, is often understood as both an intention and potential impact of research. Critique and change are seen as intimately connected (Bacchi, 2000). Building on Gilles Deleuze, for example, Thompson (2019) argues, ‘the value in theory is in the articulation of questions or problems, rather than solutions’ (p. 45), adding that the critique of problems allows us to better ‘understand the constitution of our condition’ (p. 46). Generating solutions, he argues, is circumscribed by its bounded relation to pre-defined problems, whereas problematisation ‘forces us into an encounter where something new emerges, new thinking, new possibilities, new understanding’ (p. 46).

For many, the turn away from articulating solutions-based normative ends is purposeful. Rasmussen (2016), for example, suggests an emancipatory lens geared towards providing solutions can often presume its capacity to step outside of the dominant technologies of governance that contour the lives of research participants and academic labour to determine what is ‘good’ and ‘just’. Drawing on Berlant (2011), Rasmussen

suggests the potentially non-reflexive stance that emancipatory agendas might rest upon can serve as a kind of ‘cruel optimism’. Of course, while we agree that the work of researchers is bounded, it is also important to question how prevalent such a tendency towards non-reflexivity is amongst critical policy sociologists. Indeed, building on Bourdieu’s articulations of reflexive sociology (e.g., Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), we would stress that a commitment to critical self-reflexivity is central to critical research (see also, Kenway & McLeod, 2004) and question whether research that lacks such reflexivity can be considered ‘critical’ at all.

While distinct orientations to criticality exist, it is important to recognise that there are some strong common threads that bind researchers of education together under the umbrella of critical policy sociology. This is especially the case in terms of how researchers understand the relationships between politics, criticality and the future. For example, whether researchers do or do not articulate solutions or explicit political agendas for change, we see the diverse forms of scholarship associated with critical policy sociology as underpinned by preferred forms of politics that often gesture towards future possibilities. In other words, even when scholars seek to avoid the explicit formulation of solutions or future agendas, their analyses are no less reflective of political positionings or aims, even if these might be implicit and unstated. So, while we agree with Thompson (2019) that the act of seeking solutions can be circumscribed by its relation to a problem, we see the very act of choosing which arena to intervene in and problematise, and the intellectual resources brought to bear on processes of intervention and problematisation, as also politically circumscribed. Indeed, the choice to unpack, problematise or assemble ideas together for critical discussion around an object of inquiry is clearly a restricted choice that carries with it a preferred politics, regardless of whether researchers are explicitly self-reflexive about this or not. The processes of solution construction are just as bounded as acts of problematisation, and just as capable of producing new possibilities for thinking and understanding the world.

Moreover, the choice not to explicitly articulate solutions also carries a preferred form of politics: that is, what we *do not do* is a political act. There is no possibility for academics to bypass or ‘sit outside’ the political conditions of possibility in which their work is embedded, and while engaging in self-reflexivity is integral, it does not provide an external vantage point that might release one from their inevitable boundedness and political partiality. Arguments in feminist, queer, anti-racist, and postcolonial scholarship provide some vantage points from which to address these dynamics. For many critical researchers in these fields, it is impossible to escape ‘being political’ or being positioned as having vested interests, because the positionality of their research already announces it as politically enmeshed and as articulating particular relations between the past/present/future. Take, for example, Smith’s (1999) *Decolonizing Methodologies*, which reminds us that the politics of research are deeply connected to a researcher’s relationship to it. For Smith, this involves seeing the very meaning of ‘research’ as ‘inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism’ (p. 1). In our view, the inevitably political act of research means it is problematic to view problematisation as a preferable form of critique to solution-construction. Instead, problematisation should be seen as integral to the critical formulation of solutions for those who choose to engage in such work, and the formulation of solutions should not be viewed as necessarily non-critical.

Another powerful binding thread across critical policy sociology research in education, which is of central interest to this paper, is a critical orientation towards elite actors, networks and power. Critical policy sociologists typically frame their scholarship, implicitly or explicitly, as challenging dominant and elite forms of political, social, economic and cultural power. This orientation is long standing in the sociology of education (e.g., Young 1971), and reflects broader historical trends in sociology that Mike Savage and colleagues have analysed in recent decades (see Savage, 2015; Savage & Williams, 2008). Critical policy sociology historically emerged of developments in the sociology of education, with significant evolutions taking place from the late 1980s through to the early 2000s as a connected group of scholars sought to adopt critical lines of research in reaction to changing political contexts and associated shifts in academic labour (Ozga, 2019). Central to this foundational work was a desire to critique and challenge evolving policy and governance arrangements associated with the rise of neoliberalism, especially in the UK under a Tory government (Ball, 1997) but also in Australia under a Labor government (Lingard, 1993). Various, albeit diverse, strains of critical sociology in education evolved in the US during the same period in response to Reaganism and subsequent developments (Apple, 1996), although not always with the strong ‘policy’ focus that animated the emergence of the field within and across the UK and Australia.

As time progressed, marketisation, corporatisation, new modes of accountability, audit culture, school choice, devolution and other phenomena typically associated with neoliberal forms of governance in education have been ripe areas of critique for critical policy sociologists. Here, many of the key sociological dilemmas concerning the logics of power (e.g., regarding economy, gender, race, sexuality, ability and more), as well as intersections between these forces, have been central concerns in analysing and understanding education policy and politics (e.g., David et al., 2000; Gillborn, 2005; Gunter, 2018; Hogarth, 2018). In recent decades, these focus areas have evolved and expanded to pay more explicit attention to globalisation and the associated rise and impact of new ‘policy mobilities’, with a particular interest in examining and critiquing the elite global networks of actors and organisations that now exert significant influence over the shaping of education policy ideas and practices within and across nations (e.g., Gulson et al., 2017; Ball, 2016; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Again, this shift reflects broader trends in sociology, whereby scholars of mobility have sought to understand the role of transnational elites through a conceptual focus on the shifting forms and forces of globalisation (e.g., Castells, 1996). It is this still emerging trend towards researching policy mobilities in education policy research to which we now turn our attention, in order to illustrate the implications of this shifting political gaze in critical policy sociology research.

### **Mobilities research and new global networks of concern**

Changing conditions of globalisation and the broader ‘mobilities turn’ in the social sciences (Urry, 2003) have significantly reshaped the theories, methods and empirical foci of critical policy sociology in recent decades. Indeed, critical policy sociology in education increasingly takes as its starting point the empirical reality of ‘mobility’ and focusses on developing new analytical tools to understand and address it. Of particular relevance for critical policy sociologists are new and intensified global flows of policy ideas, practices, actors, technologies and capital, enabled by technological advancement

and the connectivity of advanced capitalism (Gulson et al., 2017). These conditions have important spatial and temporal repercussions. Spatially, for example, the need to move beyond ‘methodological nationalism’, which treats the nation state as a bounded system and as an *a priori* analytical container (Beck, 2007), has had considerable up-take. As Gulson et al. (2017) argue, ‘the presence of new policy networks and relationalities means that educational policymaking and governance are no longer simply occurring within the prefigured boundaries of the nation state’<sup>2</sup> (p. 224). Temporally, recent research has paid particular attention to the speed of connectivity as a condition of mobility that shapes how policies ‘travel’ and are enacted (Lewis & Hogan, 2019). As Peck and Theodore (2015) note, the point is not simply that everything has become ‘fast’ but that speed and mobility are co-constituted, with political practices presuming and enabling speed to the extent that it is central to the meanings and practices of policy production and enactment.

Thinking differently about space and time has led to new conceptualisations of the nature of global connections and flows, evident, for example, in recent work that has sought to understand mobilities through a *topological lens*. Topological accounts, ‘seek to disrupt and re-render dominant narratives about scale, local–global relations, the exercise of power and other dimensions central to theorizing the new spatialities of globalization’ (Savage, 2020, p. 327). By rejecting the Euclidean notion of space as a set of *a priori* ‘fixed coordinates’ upon which political, policy and power relations play out, topological accounts address how new relational spaces bring the near and far into assemblages that cannot be understood in terms of fixed notions of territorial scale (Hartong & Piattoeva, 2019).

In seeking to forge new spatial and temporal understandings, critical policy sociologists in education have harnessed a diverse range of theoretical and disciplinary resources to address the dynamics of globalisation. Especially prominent have been insights from critical geography (Gulson et al., 2017), assemblage theory (Savage, 2020), and policy network analysis (Ball, 2016). While these trends cannot be collapsed as a singular orientation, there are clear convergences, most notably in their attention to mobile relations. Again, such research now tends to treat mobility and movement as conceptual and methodological entry points from which to trace and critique contemporary connections and happenings, while, at the same time, not taking traditional sociological categories – such as the nation, the state, class, race, or gender – as taken for granted or assuming the nature and form of their existence (e.g., Gorur et al., 2019). Similarly, broader governance rationalities and practices (e.g., ‘neoliberalism’) are understood not as predetermined but as dynamic becomings, diversely translated, mutated and assembled in different ways across time and space. Neoliberalism can be understood, in this sense, as a ‘mobile technology’ (Ong, 2007) that manifests in context-dependent ways.

While research concerned with mobilities takes the field in new directions, it also maintains the critical focus on elite actors, networks and power that has historically defined policy sociology in education. Thus, while the analytical lens is increasingly focussed on changing global and topological flows of policy ideas, actors and practices, the bulk of critical policy sociologists continue to frame their scholarship, either implicitly or explicitly, as speaking to and/or against elite actors, networks and power. For example, a common argument in recent policy sociology scholarship, including work by the lead author of this paper, is that shifting interactions between governments, think tanks, philanthropies, supranational organisations, policy entrepreneurs and other actors



are resulting in complex global networks that are redistributing power and influence across political spaces in new ways, reshaping the forms of evidence, expertise and influence that shape education policies (Hogan, 2016; Ball, 2016; Savage, 2016). A primary aim of this research is mapping, understanding and critically assessing the work of global 'policy elites' who inhabit positions of power and influence that allow these actors to exert significant influence over education policy reforms and processes.<sup>3</sup>

We view this research as a necessary intervention into the shifting networks of power informing the development and enactment of education policy. However, we also see a need to more critically consider the positioning of 'the critical researcher' in this evolving body of research. If we work from the premise that both researchers and the 'subjects' of their inquiry are mutually constructed by the theoretical, conceptual and methodological creations of their work, then we must not only ask how mobilities research is reshaping the kind of research we conduct, but also how such research is reconstituting academic labour itself. Such critique of the critic is needed because we are concerned that in some cases research on the global flows of policy necessitates, rewards and produces a highly privileged sub-set of globally mobile researchers, who are often compelled to become networked into the very elite policy networks they seek to understand and critique (see also, Metcalfe, 2017). This is especially the case when education policy researchers seek to engage in the kind of 'follow the policy' research designs advocated by critical geographers such as Peck and Theodore (2012, 2015), who suggest that tracking and critiquing the global movement of policies ideally requires researchers to engage in a highly mobile ethnographic endeavour geared around following key actors and sites involved in policy production. While we recognise that not all critical policy sociology in education is concerned with *physically* following global elite networks, and some forms of 'follow the policy' research centre on online research (i.e. tracing networks, analysing policies and engaging in interviews via 'desktop' research), it is fair to say the field has been strongly characterised by an interest in adopting this mobile ethnographic approach (Lewis, 2020).

In our view, the forms of mobility required of researchers to engage in the mobile ethnographic endeavours promoted by many 'follow the policy' researchers rest upon relations to elite power and influence that need to be better accounted for and held up for critique. For example, researchers often find themselves 'researching up' as they follow policy processes by travelling the globe and interviewing elite and highly influential policy agents (see Neal & McLaughlin, 2009). These experiential conditions of policy mobility research rest on and create new forms of academic research labour, in which networking with elite networks becomes central. Building on Ozga (2011), there is, therefore, a particular kind of elite habitus and interrelationship formed between researcher and policy agent through such interactions and the knowledge it produces. As with all human research, these are complex interpersonal interactions that involve a deeply embodied 'performance' of an interested and knowledgeable researcher, who is both capable and comfortable in elite contexts. This extends beyond the interrelationship that occurs within a specific interview to the networks that are required and cultivated to allow one to map and track influential global policy agents. Being a 'follow the policy' researcher therefore not only requires one to perform an 'elite habitus' but also rests on elite privileges and forms of access that allow researchers to conduct such research in the first place. Globally, for example, few can afford the privilege of global travel to research



the globe-trotting elite.<sup>4</sup> This raises challenging questions about the embedded position of the researcher within the very elite networks they seek to critique. What happens, therefore, when researchers (and the knowledge that they produce) become embedded within the flows of mobility they seek to research? To what extent might researchers become embedded within the very elite networks they seek to critically examine? There is a real risk, therefore, that researchers seeking to ‘critique’ elite networks might instead be taking part in what we might call the *research of elites, by elites and for elites*.<sup>5</sup>

There are also important gendered and racialised dimensions that need to be better recognised. For example, female policy researchers have reflected on how their gender can contribute to being perceived as non-threatening and inexperienced (Duke, 2002; Ozga & Gewirtz, 1994). Beyond the field of policy sociology, Maylor’s (2009) reflections on the Black female research experience highlights the impacts of racism in the academy and in the context of research itself. While not addressing policy contexts directly, Maylor demonstrates how ‘being a body “out of place” in White institutions has emotional and psychological costs to the bearer of that difference’ (Mirza, 2006 in Maylor, 2009, p. 60). Writing on the Australian context, Thunig and Jones (2020) bring attention to the ways in which Indigenous researchers, by far in the minority within the academy, must manage institutional and collegial expectations of doing the ‘grunt work’ of Indigenous policy development and enactment *within* their institutions, limiting their capacities to build their research priorities. These broader reflections on experiences of marginalisation, which can render some researchers visible in some ways but invisible in other ways, point to the profound importance of how researchers are positioned, understood and judged within policy-based research and the academy more broadly. In light of these concerns, we believe there is a need to ask to what extent researchers have the opportunities and networks to engage in ‘follow the policy’ research, and the barriers that might exist to engage in this scholarship. We want to stress that it is not only the ‘who’ and ‘how’ of policymaking that matters (Gale, 2003), but also the ‘who’ of the researcher. We ask, therefore, ‘who’ is more likely and able to be a ‘follow the policy’ researcher and who is not? And why?

### **Elite problems and research agendas**

It is equally important to critically reflect on how a policy mobilities approach might orient researchers to the problems and agendas already established by elite policy agents and organisations, regardless of whether researchers seek to engage in ‘follow the policy’ or not. In other words, we are interested in what kinds of policy problems, agendas and areas of empirical foci come into the optic for examination as part of a commitment to researching mobilities within critical policy sociology, and what is silenced or left out. For example, while the sheer dominance of recent research into the role of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) – and key policy technologies it has produced, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) – can partly be seen as a necessary response to changes driving global education reform, we might also say the expanding body of research into the OECD risks reifying the organisation and its dominance. The OECD has powerfully advanced arguments that education systems can be understood through standardised measurement technologies such as PISA and that the data generated by these technologies tell us important things

about the national economic competitiveness of nations (Lingard et al., 2014). In response, a significant amount of research has focussed on critiquing these claims and examining the impacts of the OECD's work. The OECD creates and critical research critiques the creation. While this might seem logical, focussing so much attention on an organisation that exists to generate attention in the first place may further embed its global power. This is, of course, a complicated scenario as while powerful forces need critique, greater attention to those forces puts them further in the spotlight and may amplify their importance to the extent that other important factors are concealed. Our concern, therefore, is not that research is conducted on the OECD, but that so much attention raises a question about what other global policy forces and technologies are being left off the table as a result of the recent 'OECD fever' among critical policy sociologists in education.

In our view, a major theoretical and methodological challenge for critical policy sociology is how to address what lies beyond the vast 'bright light' global and mobile networks that command our attention, to focus on the broader political and social contestations surrounding educational practices that cannot so easily be traced and 'followed' (Gerrard, 2015). This, in turn, raises questions about how 'mobility' itself is understood and enacted within critical policy sociology, particularly given the continued centrality of national and subnational borders in the constitution of political spaces and education policies. Indeed, we worry that forms of critical policy sociology centred primarily on understanding forms of mobility are at risk of obfuscating forms of stasis, immobility and slowness. Mobility studies proponent Urry (2003) has addressed these dynamics in the conceptual dialectic 'mobility/mooring', which indicates the relational character of mobility as involving infrastructural, material and social immobility (see also Bissell & Fuller, 2013). Similar attempts to grapple with this dynamic exist in policy mobility research that draws on assemblage theory to emphasise the context and place-specific ways that policy rationalities and technologies manifest (Prince, 2017; Savage, 2020).

Im/mobility, therefore, is not a binary, with mobile and immobile forces pulling in either direction, but rather indicates how mobilities and moorings are mutually constituted, relying on and enabling each other. 'Social life', as Urry (2003) argues, is 'increasingly constituted through material worlds that involve new and distinct moorings that enable, produce and presuppose extensive new mobilities' (p. 138). A similar point has been stressed by critical geographers, including McCann (2011), who examines the dialectic of fixity/flow and how phenomena that exhibits greater stability and place-specificity is as important as what is more fluid/mobile. As McCann argues, building on Peck and Theodore (2008), 'although knowledge might be understood to "flow" around the world, it is only "actionable" and productive when it is embedded or territorialized in specific social, spatial, and institutional contexts' (p. 123). As such, there is a need 'for a methodological approach sensitive both to movement' and 'to those variable experiences of embedding and transformation underway in "downstream" sites of adoption/emulation' (Peck & Theodore, 2012, p. 24). Robinson (2015) makes a similar point, arguing that instead of privileging 'a focus on what is moving (tracing the trajectories of a policy document, an idea, a policy consultant)', we should start with the local, to 'look instead at how policymakers compose their ideas amidst myriad influences from elsewhere' (p. 831). Building on Robinson's arguments, we suggest there is a need for critical policy sociology in education to not only address mobility itself but also the ways policy

actors draw in and combine multiple ideas and practices from elsewhere (often in fragmented bits and pieces) in the construction of place-specific policy forms. Central here is how unique political and policy arrangements serve to solidify and cement ideas and practices in ways that result in new forms that cannot simply be understood as global ideas turned local (see also Kenway & Fahey, 2008).

Related to this, we also take heed of Kalir's (2013) warning against the temptation to let the 'aquatic metaphor of flows' become over-emphasised at the expense of understanding what stays or 'sticks' (p. 314). There is often a fetishization of flow in contemporary policy sociology research or, as McCann (2011) puts it, a tendency towards 'fetishizing policies as naturally mobile objects' (p. 109). Conceptualising and responding to conditions of mobility also requires attention to how mobility is itself configured by the needs of capital and business to make some things and some people mobile, and others not. This involves mediating a focus on what is new, fast and compelling with addressing the past and the policies, materialities and socialities that are enduring and sustaining (Gerrard et al., 2017). Again, we are not seeking to depict forms of stasis as standing in opposition to movement. Rather, the dynamism of policy practice necessarily involves fixity *and* flight as it connects the past, present and future.

So, while we agree it is increasingly impossible to understand education policy without an attention to flow and mobility, we believe it is equally important to ask: *what are the immobilities of contemporary policy?* In asking this, we are not suggesting there might be some things that never move (i.e. stay immobile for time immemorial). Rather, our argument is that some things stick more than others, both temporally and spatially, and that stickiness is often part of what enables the conditions of mobility and 'fast policy'. Mobilities therefore produce strong moorings (what we might call 'policy mooralities', to coin a new term, that speaks to the anchoring forces distinct from mobilities) through the production of similar policy rationalities and technologies across varied spaces. And mobility *relies upon* such moorality: socially, politically and materially. Research should therefore maintain attention to both the world of flows and related practices of fixity and stasis.

### Criticality in shifting contexts

Decades on from the foundational works that shaped critical policy sociology, the need for researchers to think and act critically remains as important as ever. Indeed, major social, political and economic concerns that informed the development of the field have evolved in new and highly problematic directions that require ongoing critical interrogation. For example, neoliberalism is no longer 'rising' but is now consolidated as the primary mode of governance in advanced liberal economies, producing social, economic and educational impacts and inequalities that far exceed the imagined fears expressed by critical researchers in the 1980s and 1990s. As we enter the 2020s, we face a global climate emergency that outpaces many of the bleakest predictions of earlier decades and fundamentally threatens life on our planet. The racialised contradictions of 'globalisation', characterised by intensifying border controls and the profound immobility (and incarceration) of many, also pose serious challenges to governance, society and humanity (Gerrard, 2017). And, despite increased student access to its upper levels, education systems have become far more generative of inequalities, with global power concentrated in the hands of those who attended the world's most elite schools and universities (Gale et al., 2017). Powerfully

contouring all these dynamics is the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic, which is testing the economic, political and social foundations of nations globally. At the time of writing, a significant proportion of students are not even attending education institutions, and many are learning online. The pandemic has great potential to further deepen inequalities and reshape the very meanings and practices of education.

In the absence of ongoing critical research and action, these issues, and many more, have the potential to produce catastrophic outcomes in the years and decades to follow. The role of education research in contributing to knowledge production and strategies for navigating our collective path forward can barely be understated. Thinking about how education relates to the future in light of these concerns raises serious questions about the responsibilities 'we' as critical researchers have in relation to understanding and reimagining the past, present and future. While the need for criticality remains crucial, what it means to engage in 'critical policy sociology' is unlikely to remain the same, and the political gaze of researchers will need to shift and adapt to changing empirical, theoretical and methodological contexts. When critical policy sociology emerged in the 1980s, scholars were reacting to and imagining what a critical policy project should look like that spoke to the predominant issues of the time. While core elements of these articulations remain relevant in 'new times', we are now presented with new phenomena to be critically researched and understood, new ways of thinking about the world, new ways of conducting research, and new conditions of possibility for academic labour.

A key aim of this paper has been to agitate the field by raising questions about what it means to be a 'critical policy sociologist' in shifting theoretical, empirical and methodological contexts in education. Our purpose has not been to comprehensively map the field and its concerns, but to take a targeted approach focused on two primary considerations. First, we reflected on the politics of criticality, considering differing claims and debates about what it means to engage in critical and sociological research of education policy. We paid particular attention to the implicit and explicit political positionings of researchers, and how researchers position their work in relation to elite power and policy networks. Second, we built upon these foundations to consider the rapid rise of mobilities research, with a particular focus on the popular 'follow the policy' approach. We argued that while this research speaks to a crucial need to examine the power and impact of elite global networks, it also risks orienting researchers to problems and agendas already established by elite policy agents and organisations, while obscuring the not-so-mobile forces (i.e. mooralities) that not only serve as anchoring forces, but provide infrastructure for enabling mobile flows. The desire to follow global policy flows also raises questions about elite networks and privileged levels of resourcing required to conduct such research. We see great danger in research that relies on *eliteness* as a precondition for engagement, questioning whether researchers seeking to 'critique' elite networks might instead be partaking in the *research of elites, by elites and for elites*.

Looking forward, we see the arguments in this paper as raising questions about the politics of knowledge production and highlighting new challenges for policy sociologists seeking to 'be critical' in shifting contexts. We suggest there is a heightened need to critique the critic, but stress that this must also involve ongoing self-reflexive critique of our own claims to criticality, as well as critical attention to the empirical areas of focus we choose to examine (or alternatively, are ignored or obscured from our vision). As we have argued, the politics of claiming to be a critical intellectual is bound up in the positionality of our research within the social, political and economic realities we seek to critique. So, while we believe there is

significant scope to ‘act’ on the world through research and hope that such efforts might lead to positive change, any such action must be understood as constituted within the conditions that underpin and produce it. Maintaining a critical self-reflexive stance not only in relation to one’s research interests, but also in relation to what it means to be a critical researcher, is therefore central to becoming, being and evolving as a critical policy sociologist.

## Notes

1. We reiterate that our purpose is not to comprehensively ‘map’ the diverse field of critical policy sociology in education, neither historically nor in terms of key authors. Instead, we offer some concrete reflections on the ‘politics of criticality’ in order to provide foundations for our analysis in the sections to follow. It is also important to note that our reflections are primarily focused on the distinct British/Australian thread of policy sociology that has emerged since the 1980s (see Ozga’s analysis of this scholarship in her contribution to this issue).
2. We would add to this the ‘subnational’, especially in research focussed on federal systems.
3. While the focus in this research is on those elites who are able to exert significant influence over the shaping of education policy specifically, we recognise that in broader political and sociological theory, the term ‘elite’ takes on many forms (e.g., economic elite, cultural elite, political elite, power elite, and more) and is also highly contested (see, for example, Milner, 2015).
4. We acknowledge that not all academics are equally placed. Nevertheless, we argue that any researcher (from a postgraduate student through to a highly paid professor) who has access to the necessary funds to travel globally and research global elites inhabits a highly privileged position, especially when understood in relation to a broader context of global social and economic inequality.
5. We realise that our argument here hinges on a question about whether academics should be considered elite actors or not, and we invite further discussion about this. It is interesting to note that Scott (2008) defines elites not simply in terms of those with high incomes, but those who are able to wield significant forms of power. In our view, many academics represent what Scott terms the ‘expert elite’: that is, those who are capable of exercising power through their use of ‘specialized bodies of technical knowledge’ (p. 33). Of course, we recognise that within this category, the power to influence through knowledge is unequally distributed amongst academics.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Australian Research Council [DP190101867].

## Notes on contributors

*Glenn C. Savage* is a policy sociologist with expertise in education reform, federalism, intergovernmental relations and global policy mobilities. He is an Associate Professor at the University of Western Australia in the School of Social Sciences and the Graduate School of Education.

*Jessica Gerrard* researches the changing formations and lived experiences of social inequalities in relation to education, activism, work and unemployment. She works across the disciplines of sociology, history and policy studies with an interest in critical methodologies and theories.

**Trevor Gale** is Professor of Education Policy and Social Justice at the University of Glasgow. He is a critical sociologist of education with research interests in the reproduction of inequalities in and through policies and practices in formal education systems, particularly in schools and higher education.

**Tebeje Molla** is a Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA) Fellow in the School of Education at Deakin University, Australia. His research focuses on educational inequality and policy responses at systemic and institutional levels. Theoretically, his work is informed by critical sociology and the capability approach to social justice and human development.

## ORCID

Glenn C. Savage  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6495-6798>

Jessica Gerrard  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9011-6055>

Trevor Gale  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3927-9267>

Tebeje Molla  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6848-3091>

## References

- Apple, M. W. (1996). Power, meaning and identity: Critical sociology of education in the United States. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 17(2), 125–144. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569960170201>
- Bacchi, C. (2000). Policy as discourse: What does it mean? Where does it get us? *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 21(1), 45–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300050005493>
- Ball, S. (1997). Policy sociology and critical social research: A personal review of recent education policy and policy research. *British Educational Research Journal*, 23(3), 257–274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0141192970230302>
- Ball, S. J. (2016). Following policy: Networks, network ethnography and education policy mobilities. *Journal of Education Policy*, 31(5), 549–566. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2015.1122232>
- Beck, U. (2007). The cosmopolitan condition: Why methodological nationalism fails. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24(7–8), 286–290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764070240072505>
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.
- Bissell, D., & Fuller, G. (Eds.). (2013). *Stillness in a Mobile World*. Routledge.
- Blackmore, J. (2014). Cultural and gender politics in Australian education, the rise of education capitalism and the ‘fragile project’ of critical educational research. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 41(5), 499–520. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-014-0158-8>
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Castells, M. (1996). *The rise of the network society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- David, M., Weiner, G., & Arnot, M. (2000). Gender equality and schooling, education policy-making and feminist research in England and Wales in the 1990s. In Salisbury, J., & Riddell, S. (Eds.), *Gender, policy, and educational change: Shifting agendas in the UK and Europe* (pp. 19–36). London: Routledge.
- Duke, K. (2002). Getting beyond the ‘official line’: Reflections on dilemmas of access, knowledge and power in researching policy networks. *Journal of Social Policy*, 31(1), 39–59. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279402006505>
- Fenwick, T., & Edwards, R. (2010). *Actor-network theory in education*. Routledge.
- Gale, T. (2001). Critical policy sociology: Historiography, archaeology and genealogy as methods of policy analysis. *Journal of Education Policy*, 16(5), 379–393. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930110071002>
- Gale, T. (2003). Realizing policy: The *who* and *how* of policy production. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 24(1), 51–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0159630030303026>



- Gale, T., Molla, T., & Parker, S. (2017). The illusion of meritocracy and the audacity of elitism: Expanding the evaluative space in education. In S. Parker, K. N. Gulson, & T. Gale (Eds.), *Policy and inequality in education* (pp. 7-21). Springer.
- Gerrard, J. (2015). Counterpublics, crisis and critique: A feminist socio-historical approach to researching policy. In K. Gulson, M. Clarke, & E. Bendix Peterson (Eds.), *Education policy and contemporary theory: Implications for research* (pp. 122-133). Routledge.
- Gerrard, J. (2017). The refugee crisis, non-citizens, border politics and education. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 38(6), 880-891. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2016.1227959>
- Gerrard, J., Rudolph, S., & Sriprakash, A. (2017). The politics of post-qualitative inquiry: History and power. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(3), 384-394. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416672694>
- Gillborn, D. (2005). Education policy as an act of white supremacy: Whiteness, critical race theory and education reform. *Journal of Education Policy*, 20(4), 485-505. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930500132346>
- Gorur, R., Hamilton, M., Lundahl, C., & Sundström Sjödin, E. (2019). Politics by other means? STS and research in education. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 40(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2018.1549700>
- Gulson, K. N., Lewis, S., Lingard, B., Lubienski, C., Takayama, K., Webb, P. T. (2017). Policy mobilities and methodology: A proposition for inventive methods in education policy studies. *Critical Studies in Education*, 58(2), 224-241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2017.1288150>
- Gunter, H. (2018). *The politics of public education: Reform ideas and issues*. Policy Press.
- Hartong, S., & Piattoeva, N. (2019). Contextualizing the datafication of schooling: A comparative discussion of Germany and Russia. *Critical Studies in Education*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2019.1618887>
- Hogan, A. (2016). NAPLAN and the role of edu-business: New governance, new privatisations and new partnerships in Australian education policy. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 43(1), 93-110. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-014-0162-z>
- Hogarth, M. (2018). Talkin' bout a revolution: The call for transformation and reform in Indigenous education. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 45(5), 663-674. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-018-0277-8>
- Horkheimer, M. (1972). *Critical Theory*. Seabury Press.
- Kalir, B. (2013). Moving subjects, stagnant paradigms: Can the 'mobilities paradigm' transcend methodological nationalism? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 39(2), 311-327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.723260>
- Kenway, J., & Fahey, J. (2008). Imagining research otherwise. In J. Kenway & J. Fahey (Eds.), *Globalizing the Research Imagination* (pp. 1-40). Routledge.
- Kenway, J., & McLeod, J. (2004). Bourdieu's reflexive sociology and 'spaces of points of view': Whose reflexivity, which perspective? *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25(4), 525-544. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569042000236998>
- Latour, B. (2004). *Politics of nature: How to bring the sciences into democracy*. Harvard University Press.
- Lewis, S. (2020). The turn towards policy mobilities and the theoretical-methodological implications for policy sociology. *Critical Studies in Education*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2020.1808499>
- Lewis, S., & Hogan, A. (2019). Reform first and ask questions later? The implications of (fast) schooling policy and 'silver bullet' solutions. *Critical Studies in Education*, 60(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2016.1219961>
- Lingard, B. (1993). The changing state of policy production in education: Some Australian reflections on the state of policy sociology. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 3(1), 25-47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0962021930030102>
- Lingard, B., Sellar, S., & Savage, G. C. (2014). Re-articulating social justice as equity in schooling policy: The effects of testing and data infrastructures. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 35(5), 710-730. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2014.919846>

- Maylor, U. (2009). Is it because I'm Black? A Black female research experience. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 12(1), 53–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320802650949>
- McCann, E. (2011). Urban policy mobilities and global circuits of knowledge: Toward a research agenda. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 101(1), 107–130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2010.520219>
- Metcalf, A. S. (2017). Nomadic political ontology and transnational academic mobility. *Critical Studies in Education*, 58(2), 131–149. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2016.1264987>
- Mills, C. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford University Press.
- Milner, M. (2015). *Elites: A general model*. Polity.
- Mirza, H. (2006). The in/visible journey: Black women's lifelong lessons in higher education. In C. Leathwood & B. Francis (Eds.), *Gender and lifelong learning: Critical feminist engagements* (pp. 137–152). Routledge.
- Neal, S., & McLaughlin, E. (2009). Researching up? Interviews, emotionality and policy-making elites. *Journal of Social Policy*, 38(4), 689–707. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279409990018>
- Ong, A. (2007). Neoliberalism as a mobile technology. *Transactions of the Institute for British Geographers*, 32(1), 3–8.
- Ozga, J., & Gewirtz, S. (1994). Sex, lies and audiotape: Interviewing the education policy elite. In D. Halpin & B. Troyna (Eds.), *Researching education policy: Ethical and methodological issues* (pp. 145–167). Falmer Press.
- Ozga, J. (2011). Researching the powerful: Seeking knowledge about policy. *European Educational Research Journal*, 10(2), 218–224. <https://doi.org/10.2304/eej.2011.10.2.218>
- Ozga, J. (2019). Problematising policy: The development of (critical) policy sociology. *Critical Studies in Education*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2019.1697718>
- Peck, J., & Theodore, N. (2008). Embedding policy mobilities. Working paper, Department of Geography, Vancouver: University of British Columbia.
- Peck, J., & Theodore, N. (2012). Follow the policy: A distended case approach. *Environment and Planning A*, 44(1), 21–30. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a44179>
- Peck, J., & Theodore, N. (2015). *Fast Policy*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Prince, R. (2017). Local or global policy? Thinking about policy mobility with assemblage and topology. *Area*, 49(3), 335–341. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12319>
- Prunty, J. (1985). Signposts for a critical educational policy analysis. *Australian Journal of Education*, 29(2), 133–140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000494418502900205>
- Rasmussen, M. (2016). 'Cruel Optimism' and contemporary Australian critical theory in educational research. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 47(2), 192–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2013.793929>
- Regmi, K. (2019). Critical policy sociology: Key underlying assumptions and their implications for educational policy research. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 42(1), 59–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2017.1398228>
- Rizvi, F., & Lingard, B. (2010). *Globalizing education policy*. Routledge.
- Robinson, J. (2015). 'Arriving At' urban policies: The topological spaces of urban policy mobility. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 39(4), 831–834. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12255>
- Savage, G. C. (2016). Think tanks, education and elite policy actors. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 43(1), 35–53. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-015-0185-0>
- Savage, G. C. (2020). What is policy assemblage? *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 8(3), 319–335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2018.1559760>
- Savage, M. (2015). Introduction to elites: From 'the problematic of the proletariat' to a class analysis of 'wealth elites'. *The Sociological Review*, 63(2), 223–239. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12281>
- Savage, M., & Williams, K. (2008). Elites: Remembered in capitalism and forgotten by social sciences. *The Sociological Review*, 56(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2008.00759.x>
- Scott, J. (2008). Modes of power and the re-conceptualisation of elites. *The Sociological Review*, 56(1), 25–43. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2008.00760.x>

- Scott, J. P. (1978). Critical social theory: An introduction and critique. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 29(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.2307/589216>
- Sellar, S., Savage, G. C., & Gorur, R. (2014). The politics of disagreement in critical education policy studies: A response to Morsy, Gulson and Clarke. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 35(3), 462–469. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2014.890269>
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books.
- Thompson, G. (2019). Learning personalisation: Technics, disorientation and governance. In A. Wilkins & A. Olmedo (Eds.), *Education governance and social theory: Interdisciplinary approaches to research* (pp. 43–62). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Thunig, A., & Jones, T. (2020). ‘Don’t make me play house-n\*\*\*er: Indigenous academic women treated as ‘black performer’ within higher education. *The Australian Educational Researcher*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00405-9>
- Urry, J. (2003). *Global Complexity*. Polity Press.
- Young, M. F. D (Ed). (1971). *Knowledge and control: new directions for the sociology of education*. London: Collier-Macmillan Publishers.