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The Production of Official Discourse on 'Glue-Sniffing'

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ABSTRACT

Using a form of discourse analysis of various government texts, this article examines the way in which central government in Scotland formulated its response to the problem of 'glue-sniffing'. Drawing on a theoretical framework developed by Foucault, it traces the links between professional knowledge, political programmes and parents' desires. It describes the discursive manoeuvres government deployed in constituting parents as primarily responsible for their children's sniffing. It suggests that in doing this government sought to align its own political objectives with the aspirations of parents, by purporting to preserve their freedom and autonomy. It concludes that 'expertise' is used selectively, both in legitimating and producing policy, and in linking this to subjective life.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines aspects of the relationship between 'expertise' and policy using a contemporary social problem, 'glue-sniffing', as illustrative of this. Recently there has been a resurgence of medical and academic interest in 'glue-sniffing' (Busuttil, 1990), although the problem has been of concern in Britain for around twenty years (Gossop, 1993). Authors have claimed that deaths from sniffing remain high relative to those for other drugs (Pottier *et al.*, 1992); that sniffing deaths continue to increase at a rate of 8.9 per cent per year (Ives, 1994); they have pointed to the youthful age of those dying from this practice (Ives, 1994) and to the failure of school-based education (Coggans *et al.*, 1991). This paper, however, is less concerned with the truth or falsity of these claims than the way in which they do, or do not, shape policy. Thus it will explore central government's response to this problem in Scotland, showing how 'glue-sniffing' came to be defined not as an issue warranting government intervention but as an issue of parental responsibility.

To elaborate, although the Solvent Abuse (Scotland) Act was passed in July 1983, making 'glue-sniffing' a ground of referral to the Children's

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Panel, this should not be taken to imply that central government itself initiated any proposals for dealing with 'glue-sniffing'. Rather it was forced into a position of having to respond as a consequence of mounting pressure from MPs, parents, the media and other interested groups, fuelled by diverse concerns (Didcott and Asquith, 1983). This activity was premised on the assumption that central government and its agents had a legitimate role to play in 'glue-sniffing' and that official action in some form would be forthcoming – a perspective which government itself did not share. In practice, government was overtaken by events, since legislation was introduced under a Private Member's Bill. This paper therefore examines the modes of argument government deployed in promoting its own favoured solution: that parents were primarily responsible for dealing with 'glue-sniffing'.

The analysis is based on the view that knowledge originally produced by diverse experts (epidemiologists, psychiatrists, social workers, medical personnel, criminologists and so forth) is intrinsically linked to official discussions of 'glue-sniffing'. My argument is that only those expert discourses (or aspects of these) which are compatible with government's existing political programme or, at least, do not radically disturb it, will be taken up and used in the formulation of policy. Further, the sovereignty of a particular knowledge – that which suppresses and silences other knowledges in promoting its own vision (Walkerdine and Lucey, 1989) – is maintained by repressing contradictions and reconstructing paradox as coherence. As Foucault (1972) has pointed out, the key to power in the modern era is the acceptance by all that there exists 'an ideal continuous smooth text that runs beneath the multiplicity of contradictions, and resolves them in the calm unity of coherent thought' (Foucault, 1972, p. 55). This process was adopted by government ministers, I maintain, in producing Official Discourse on 'glue-sniffing'. For in promoting their own version of events, ministers deployed certain 'practices of exclusion' (Gordon, 1977, p. 18). Some topics were seen as 'irrelevant', some statements were construed as 'illegitimate' and some speakers were disqualified as authorised speakers. By doing this, government ministers could resist pressure from MPs, the media, parents and so forth, and rule out certain possibilities for action on the grounds that they were 'impracticable' and 'undesirable'.

The paper therefore addresses questions of the connections between professional claims to truth, political programmes and parental desires. Theoretically it draws on the work of Foucault, particularly his ideas concerning power, knowledge and the subject and how relationships between these are implicated in the production of certain discourses that

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constitute and regulate individuals. Substantively it draws on research on 'glue-sniffing', parliamentary debates recorded in Hansard and consultative documents and circulars produced by government itself.

The first two sections map out the contributions of Foucault and how his theoretical framework informs my argument. The third section describes briefly some 'expert' discourses on 'glue-sniffing' which government ministers used (or ignored) in formulating their policy. The fourth discusses the wider social, economic and political context in which government debates were located. The final section examines these debates in detail documenting how government produced its own Official Discourse (Burton and Carlen, 1979) on 'glue-sniffing'.

CONTRIBUTION TO THEORY

I have implied that the relationship between power and knowledge is crucial to any attempt to theorise the policy process and I have drawn on the work of Foucault in doing this. According to Foucault, knowledge is never objective or neutral, but always related to power; they are inextricably linked. In opposition to Marxist accounts, however, Foucault rejects a view of knowledge as simply supporting or justifying pre-existing power relations. Rather, power and knowledge are indivisible. He also refuses to deploy an epistemological grid in order to disentangle science from ideology. Instead he suggests that we direct our attention to investigating how certain 'truths' are produced, installed by knowledge and employed in social practices. In developing his argument, Foucault suggests that our categories of understanding are constituted by certain discourses which are themselves neither true nor false, but operate to promote shared meanings. They form the objects of which they speak, they create what we came to know, to think or speak about certain issues and individuals. Thus, according to Foucault, each society has its own 'regime of truth', certain discourses which it makes function as true; and he points out that it is the assumed scientificity of certain discourses which allow them to circulate as 'truth'. It is not therefore a question of bad or false sciences which are the issue. Rather the point is that science itself has become incorporated into strategies of regulation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In applying these ideas to my study, I take from Foucault the argument that modern forms of government are dependent upon ways of knowing, particularly upon knowledges produced by the human sciences. Their techniques and conceptual systems, the norms and images they construct, their modes of explanation and solutions are central in linking

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subjective life to the organisation of political power. For, to govern a population, it is necessary to isolate a section of reality, identify its characteristics, make its features speakable and notable and be able to account for them according to certain explanatory frameworks (Rose, 1990). In this way government is dependent upon the production of truths that realise in a concrete form what is to be governed. Moreover, according to Foucault, the power–knowledge nexus operates hierarchically, with some knowledges being seen as more legitimate than others. Foucault has left untheorised, however, under what circumstances hierarchies can be disturbed. I maintain therefore that those knowledges which are accorded privilege depend upon the territory in which they are spoken, the balance of forces within and between territories and who has the power to speak the truth in specific institutional sites. For it must be recognised that any discursive field can be a site of struggle and contest with competing claims to authority. Parliamentary debates, I suggest, are one such field and in this territory of government its ministers' claims to speak the truth will be sovereign.

Foucault has also shown that 'expert' discourses are implicated in the complex web of processes that constitute and regulate individuals. Thus I will suggest that the process of constituting parents as 'responsible' also involved the construction of a particular notion of the subject. This was the 'free subject', the self-reliant individual who would take responsibility for his/her health and well-being and, in the case of children, that of his/her family members. By the construction of such potent images, the constitution of subjective values and the promotion of identities which parents were already tied to, ministers attempted to solicit the active engagement of parents in the protective management of their children's solvent misuse. Before documenting how it went about this in detail, I will examine some expert discourses on 'glue-sniffing' which, I have argued, ministers ignored or supported when promoting their own preferred solution.

EXPERT DISCOURSES ON GLUE-SNIFFING

Epidemiological discourse is mainly concerned with charting the prevalence and incidence of 'glue-sniffing' and describing the demographic characteristics of those children involved. Data 'reveals' that 3.5 per cent of 15-year-olds in Scotland will have tried solvents at some time (Plant *et al.*, 1984) or that 12 per cent of 807 schoolchildren in England had tried solvents (Diamond *et al.*, 1988). We are told that sniffers generally come from low socio-economic backgrounds (Ashton, 1990) and from substandard environments such as decaying inner city areas or peripheral

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housing estates (Ellison, 1965). Typically parents are seen as being 'inadequate' in diverse ways. They are likely to have unhappy marriages, and children who sniff are likely to come from 'broken homes' (Sterling, 1964). We are told they are likely to come from 'deviant' family forms such as large families (Diamond *et al.*, 1988) or one-parent families headed by mothers. Family 'disorganisation' is said to be a feature of these children's lives – by which is meant alcohol abuse by fathers (Masterton, 1979), mothers working outside the home (Smart *et al.*, 1972) with fathers being unemployed or working part time (Fejer and Smart, 1973).

Research generally tends to distinguish between categories of sniffer. 'Experimental' sniffers are children who are assumed to sniff purely for the experience or to gain peer group acceptance and whose use is assumed to be transitory, a 'phase' in normal childhood development. 'Chronic' sniffers, however, are those whose use is seen to be prolonged and who are dependent on this practice. It is this latter category who warrant intervention since their 'glue-sniffing' is seen as a symptom of underlying pathology.

According to psychiatric discourse, which purports to explain the problem, this pathology is seen to derive from faulty family dynamics with mothers in particular being singled out for attention. Mothers are depicted variously as being 'over-indulgent' (Laury, 1971) or 'over-protective' (Krasowski, 1979) or as 'over-investing' in their children (Framrose, 1982). Although some authors acknowledge that mothers might be 'overwhelmed' with many other children to care for and working all day to maintain the family, the implications of this are not explored. For instance, the conflict of responsibilities that this might engender is ignored.

The poverty and deprivation in which some families exist is acknowledged in social work discourse, particularly in relation to 'experimental' sniffers. Davies (1975), for example, points out that children may sniff in order to escape from an unattractive and 'unacceptable' future. Lacking educational and job opportunities, children are bored and lead aimless lives (Rogowski *et al.*, 1989). 'Chronic' sniffers by contrast are those with a 'poor self-image', solitary children who fear rejection; they sniff in order to avoid 'emotional pain' (Gardiner, 1987). In these instances 'glue-sniffing' is usually associated with other 'offences' such as truancy, shoplifting and running away from home (Rubin and Babbs, 1970).

The solution proposed by psychiatric and social work discourse for 'chronic' sniffers is family therapy and counselling (Gardiner, 1987; O'Connor and Britton, 1987). It is recognised by social work, however,

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that practical help such as the provision of leisure facilities (Merrill, 1978) and long-term educational and job opportunities (Davies, 1975) might be more effective, particularly for 'experimental' sniffers.

Medical discourse takes as its object the bodies of 'glue-sniffers' and assesses the health risk attached to the practice. The ultimate risk is sudden death (Bass, 1970; Clark and Tinston, 1972) although most research is concerned with damage of a less dramatic nature. Clinicians single out particular organs of the body such as the liver, kidneys or brain for attention or the central nervous system or blood. There is some disagreement between clinicians, however, as to the precise nature of this harm and whether it is permanent or reversible. For example Sokol and Robinson (1963) have argued that sniffing causes harm to the liver and kidneys whilst Benigamus (1981) argues there is little evidence to support this. Similarly Grabski (1961) and Knox and Nelson (1966) argue that sniffing causes brain damage whereas Watson (1978) suggests that she found no evidence of this. Many authors conclude that there are problems in determining the effects of sniffing because of difficulties in diagnostic procedures (Hayden and Comstock, 1976) or because assessment of dangers depends on which solvent is used, the method of use, the frequency of use and the period of time over which it continues (Woodcock, 1976; Novak and the Stash Staff, 1980). Whilst this might seem sensible and uncontroversial, as I shall show, the contradictions within medical discourse allowed government to argue that medical knowledge was 'confused' in legitimating its non-interventionist stance. Before mapping out this argument further, I will describe the broader context in which government debates were located, since its approach to 'glue-sniffing', I argue, was channelled by its existing political desires.

GOVERNMENT'S POLITICAL PROGRAMME

The details of government policies have been documented elsewhere (cf. Gough, 1983). But in brief, the Conservative government which came to power in 1979 made explicit its aim of cutting welfare expenditure and limiting the scope and legitimacy of state welfare provisions. Importantly for my argument here, a project of cutting welfare expenditure necessarily entailed a reformulation of family–state relations in a manner likely to appeal to the majority of citizens. This was accomplished by government promoting itself as the party of 'the family' and, in particular, the construction of 'the responsible autonomous family'. The particular images of the family which it supported and promoted can be gleaned from an array of texts, including speech and policy statements. For example, in the Conservative Manifesto of 1987, the decline of parental authority

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was lamented and presented as an inevitable consequence of the decline of family values generally and as the cause of a range of social problems. The state, it was argued, had taken away the rights and responsibilities of parents, permitting families to lose their independence (Brown and Sparks, 1989) and moral obligations. Government's emphasis on familial responsibility was also made explicit in a document leaked to The *Guardian* in February 1983. In this unauthorised disclosure, the plans of government radically to shift responsibility for welfare and health away from state provision towards individuals and their families was revealed by the Central Policy Review Staff. It was stated that the principal aim of government was to promote family life and make families responsible for a range of issues including 'unemployed 16-year-olds and for the anti-social behaviour of their children'. The response of government to an issue such as 'glue-sniffing', I will maintain, is only intelligible within this broader framework of ideas. For once forced to respond, government did so in a manner consistent with this already existing political position – a position to which 'glue-sniffing' was simply 'added in'. That is, government pursued its objectives by constituting parents as responsible for dealing with the problem in the name of preserving their freedom and autonomy. It was in this way that the problem was made to operate as a 'relay' through which the wishes of individual parents could be aligned with government's aim of cutting welfare expenditure. And it drew on 'expertise' in order to accomplish this.

Before elaborating upon this it should be pointed out that throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s MPs raised numerous questions in the House about the problem of 'glue-sniffing'. Claiming to represent their constituents, they raised issues about the size and extent of the problem and its location in deprived areas. They requested that ministers provide statistics on the numbers of deaths, hospital admissions and prosecutions relating to this practice. They raised questions as to the degree and nature of the physical and psychological harm caused to children engaging in this activity, and they demanded government consider bringing in legislation to criminalise the use and sale of solvents and control their manufacture. In reacting to these demands, however, and in formulating its own response, government deployed a number of tactics in order to resist these suggestions and maintain the 'infinite continuity' of its own political discourse.

GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

The poverty of statistics

MPs, on several occasions, demanded that ministers make visible the extent of 'glue-sniffing', including information on the number of deaths,

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injuries and prosecutions resulting from this practice. In other words, they were demanding knowledge of a particular sort, that is, statistics. In order for populations to be acted upon, they have to be made calculable. As Rose (1990) has pointed out, certain features of a population are rendered calculable through the production of an 'avalanche of printed numbers' which turns them into a physical form which can then be used in political arguments and administrative decisions, constituting a 'rational' basis for policy. The corollary of this process is that if government is reluctant to devise a specific policy for whatever reason, one tactic it can deploy is to avoid discussions of a population in statistical terms. In short, it can deploy practices of exclusion. Thus, when asked to supply statistics, ministers simply replied that these were 'unavailable'. For example, to a question by David Marshall (Glasgow Shettleston), government replied: 'Detailed information about the numbers of persons involved in solvent abuse is not available centrally' (House of Commons Debate, 11 November 1982: 1221 col. 100). Similarly, in reply to a question from Lord James Douglas-Hamilton as to how many cases of solvent abuse had come to the notice of the Crown Office and the Procurator Fiscal service during the last ten years, government replied: 'Exact figures are not available (Hansard Written Papers, 5 February 1979: 1180 col. 9).

Not only did government maintain that such statistics were unavailable, it also implied that it was administratively impossible to collect them. Existing classification procedures were not adapted to this task. For example, when Tim Eggar asked about hospital admissions, Sir George Young replied that such information was not collected centrally and, anyway, the International Classification of Diseases did not enable cases to be identified separately. Indeed, ministers went on to argue that there was no point in attempting to collect statistics on solvent misuse since the information they might provide would be, in practice, 'unreliable'. Geoffrey Finsberg (Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Security), in response to a request that government provide funds for research to collect statistics, argued that it was 'unlikely' that a 'comprehensive inquiry into its incidence would be practicable or give reliable information' (Hansard Written Papers, 27 October 1981: 1219 col. 330). Similarly, in replying to a question on the numbers and ages of children involved, Fairgrieve replied: 'I know of no way of collecting reliable statistics on this subject' (Hansard Written Papers, 20 November, 1979: 1151 col. 151). Arguments about the poverty of statistics and indeed their 'unreliability' were rehearsed again and again. Statistics were unable to distinguish between accidental or deliberate inhalation (House of Commons Debate, 26 October 1982: 1255 col. 1016). They

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were unable to distinguish between 'experimenters' and those whose use had become prolonged (Official Report, 20 April 1982: 22 col. 243). Statements about statistics then were disqualified as 'illegitimate' on the grounds that they did not, anyway, provide 'reliable' information. Thus, because ministers were reluctant to engage in debates about specific policies for 'glue-sniffers', they avoided discussion about the population of children concerned. That is, they argued that official statistics on 'glue-sniffing' were not available, were difficult to collect and were likely to prove 'unreliable'. In making these arguments, ministers thus dissolved a political issue into a question of administrative practicality.

The insignificance of the problem

Having argued for the essential unreliability of statistics, paradoxically, on other occasions, government chose to cite them in order to support its own position. That is, it drew on elements of expertise to counter arguments that 'glue-sniffing' was widespread and to maintain its own contention that the problem was small. For example, Finsberg argued that the numbers were small compared with the number of young people who died in road accidents: 'In 1980 1005 young people died as a result of road accidents and 27 died from sniffing glue' (House of Commons Debate, 26 October 1982: 1255 col. 1017). Similarly, Sir George Young argued that he knew only of 5 to 10 deaths a year, and, 'Set against the 50,000 premature deaths from smoking they also fall into insignificance' (House of Commons Debate, 21 July 1980). 'Glue-sniffing' it was argued, was not widespread but limited to 'scattered outbreaks' (House of Commons Debate, 31 October 1979: 1149 col. 538). Nor was it necessarily increasing. In reply to Jack Dempsey's contention that there had been a 50 per cent increase in the numbers of young people attending clinics in Glasgow, Fairgrieve argued that there were only 225 new cases out of a population of 46,000 schoolchildren (House of Commons Debate, 6 February 1980: 1159 cols. 487–488). In these instances then it seems that ministers were prepared to uphold the reliability and precision of statistics, at least where they could be cited to support their own political stance. Knowledge of a population was endorsed when this could be used to oppose the arguments of MPs for some form of government action.

Poverty is not an issue

Not only did ministers deploy practices of exclusion by defining some statements as illegitimate, they also disqualified some topics as 'irrelevant'. As we have seen, the policy approach favoured by central government

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was to constitute parents as primarily responsible for dealing with this problem. Such an approach necessarily required that certain aspects of the lives of some parents had to be ignored, glossed over or marginalised. The diversity of family experience, the contradictions underlying this, their differential capacities to cope and the material conditions which constrained these, had to be suppressed. Instead, families had to be constituted as homogenous, unified objects. In order for government to maintain its Official Discourse as 'an ideal, continuous, smooth text' (Foucault, 1972, p. 55), issues such as poverty had to be seen as 'irrelevant' and expertise on the status of families ignored. This, despite the fact that much of the literature on 'glue-sniffing' produced by 'experts' has made links between the low socio-economic status of families in which it occurs and pointed to its location in areas of social deprivation.

Drawing on such discourses and applying them to circumstances in their own constituencies, some MPs raised these issues in parliamentary debates. For example, a connection between 'glue-sniffing', certain categories of children, deprivation and unemployment were intimated by Mrs Helen McElhone (Glasgow Queen's Park). Responding to a comment by John Mackay that 'glue-sniffing' 'ebbs and flows' in ways difficult to understand, she stated;

> The rise and fall is probably due to the environment in which some children live. In my constituency there are many derelict houses, with 759 empty. Children can go there and no one is looking after the blocks. We should put more money into the economy and get things done in urban areas where dereliction is causing so much trouble. Furthermore, secondary schools are being closed and children are having to travel much further from where they live. Some must travel two or three miles to school. Some do not bother to go to school. They may end up with the wrong people and that starts them glue-sniffing.

In replying to this speech, John MacKay (The Under-Secretary of State for Scotland) adamantly refused any recognition of the 'findings' of expertise or of their relevance to the constituency described by Mrs McElhone. Topics such as these were ignored. Instead, he proposed a series of counter suggestions, for instance, that deprivation was not the issue. The government had already spent £200 million on a project in the East End of Glasgow, part of which was in her constituency. 'Glue-sniffing' was not restricted to urban areas since it occurred in rural areas also. 'Glue-sniffing' was not associated with unemployment since 'we are talking about schoolchildren'. Then, side-stepping the issue of poverty altogether, MacKay cited an incident in which he had met a parent 'affluent enough' to have bought his son a car in order to persuade him to give up 'glue-sniffing'. Thus, through a series of evasions, absences and silences, ministers avoided making any links between poverty and 'glue-sniffing'.

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They failed to acknowledge the social conditions in which many families and children lived and their experience of poor housing and unemployment, particularly youth unemployment. Issues such as these were deemed irrelevant. Indeed, the preservation of a notion of the homogeneity of parents meant that, in practice, ministers could not make any specific argument about 'causes' of 'glue-sniffing'. For, in an important sense, there was no existing explanatory framework provided by expertise on which it could draw to back its own claims to truth.

To elaborate, all discourses of expertise placed emphasis on the 'inadequacy' of parents, albeit in diverse ways. If ministers were, therefore, to draw on this expertise to make an argument which implicated parents in the cause of the problem, then they could not by their own logic hold them responsible for its amelioration. Since central government's categories refused to recognise the 'inadequacy' of parents, it could be speculated that it had no other option but to refrain from entering debates about causes. A close examination of several texts supports this contention. Indeed, this was stated explicitly by MacKay on 23 February 1983: 'The problem is multifactorial – if I may use the jargon. I do not want to become involved in a discussion of the causes of the problem ...' (House of Commons Debate Solvent Abuse (Scotland) Act 1983: col. 17). Further, it can be suggested that a refusal to make a specific argument about causes was useful to ministers in another respect, to the extent that it made possible the argument that there was 'no easy solution'. This point had been made by George Younger in 1981 when he asserted that government could not 'propose any kind of omnibus answer to this very complex problem. Indeed such an answer may not exist' (House of Commons Debate, 2 December 1982: 1225 col. 146). Avoidance of making an argument about causes, therefore, was one way in which government could ignore the multiplicity of contradictions underlying its approach and resolve them 'in the calm unity of coherent thought'.

The diffusion of concern

In addition to refraining from offering a specific explanation about the causes of 'glue-sniffing', ministers also seemed reluctant to be specific about the possible harm inflicted upon children by this practice. Issues of harm were frequently raised by MPs trying to galvanise government into some form of action. These were usually responded to in a manner hedged about with prevarications implying that the evidence was 'uncertain' or 'unclear'. This apparent reluctance to be specific may be seen as 'logical' or 'rational' to the extent that as we have seen, the 'findings' of medical experts in relation to harm are inconclusive. They are far from

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homogeneous, but riven with competing claims and incompatible results. Of course, such variability does not necessarily undermine the claims to truth of any knowledge. As Rose (1990) has pointed out, such diversity is one of the keys to the continued inventiveness of knowledge and thus to its wideranging social applicability. More importantly here, the diversity and heterogeneity of medical knowledge about 'glue-sniffing' is one of the keys to its utility to a government reluctant to take action. It allowed ministers to refer to the competing claims of expertise in order to make a two-stage argument about harm which supported their own position. First, it enabled ministers to claim that 'hard' or 'reliable' evidence on health risks was difficult to find. It was impossible to be certain. It depended upon circumstances. It was difficult to generalise. Second, having made these prevarications, paradoxically, it allowed ministers to then go on to make very general and vague statements without defining the nature of harm with any precision and without citing any particular expertise.

For example, Sir George Young when asked to make a statement about harm, argued that the effects on health depended upon the nature of the chemicals inhaled, the method and duration of inhalation, how long 'glue-sniffing' had been practised and the possible interactions with other substances (Hansard Written Answers, 15 May 1980: 1173 col. 549). Similarly, on a later occasion, in reply to a question by Teddy Taylor, he argued, 'Precise information is not available ... on the health risks associated with deliberate inhalation of the vapours of solvents, including glue ... Longer term risks depend upon persistence of misuse and on the nature of the solvent involved ... In some cases there may be temporary or permanent damage to the heart, kidneys, blood or nerves' (Hansard Written Answers, 25 June 1981: 1213 col. 177). Thus, by keeping its comments on harm to a level of generality, government could both avoid having to address any counter arguments from MPs and resist pressure for solutions, for instance, in the form of specialist medical resources. Conflicting medical expertise in this context had not provided 'reliable' evidence on which it was possible to base a 'rational' policy. However, as we shall see, although government was not prepared to make any clear arguments about the 'causes' of 'glue-sniffing' or about the health risks attached to this practice, it did not display the same reluctance when it came to making precise arguments against the adoption of legislative solutions.

Legislation is unworkable and undesirable

A variety of suggestions were put forward by MPs concerning action which could be taken by government in order to control the use, sale and

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manufacture of solvents. However, government resisted this pressure by arguing strongly for the difficulties inherent in legislative solutions. It is in this context that Foucault's comment that the power–knowledge nexus operates invisibly through the definition of modes of operation as 'practical' is of some salience. In addressing these issues, government constructed a series of arguments which consigned the possibility of any legislative solution to criminalise 'glue-sniffing' to the realm of the impracticable, by listing the various difficulties attendant upon its implementation.

Against arguments for the criminalisation of use, government contended that this was likely to drive the practice further underground, increasing incentives for sniffers to avoid detection. The creation of any statutory offence would necessarily involve a listing of abusable substances and, by highlighting such products, children previously unaware of their potential might be tempted to try them. Such an approach, it was argued, would be unacceptable and counter-productive.

Against arguments for the criminalisation of supply, government contended that it would be impracticable to put the onus on shopkeepers either to identify the purposes for which solvents were being purchased or to judge with reasonable accuracy the age of the children concerned. As Sir George Younger pointed out: 'It would be extremely difficult to enforce the effective enforcement of age limits, even on pain of criminal prosecution of the trader and the check out girl at the supermarket' (House of Commons Debate, 21 July 1980: col. 214). Ministers went on to point out that young people could, anyway, evade controls by getting someone else to buy products for them or indeed by shoplifting.

In an array of official documents we see the same arguments rehearsed again and again. Legislative solutions in the form suggested by MPs were unworkable and impracticable. Criminalisation of use or supply contained too many difficulties for its effective enforcement. Thus, numerous lines of obstruction and inhibition were construed as lying in the way of legislative change.

Whilst the substance of these arguments might seem reasonable and uncontentious, it is their form and purpose which is of interest here. For the present analysis is concerned less with the 'truth' of such statements than with the mode of its argumentation which is essentially directed by political desire. To elaborate, first, the precise and detailed nature of these arguments, which contrasts markedly to the mode of argumentation adopted with regard to 'causes' and health risks, allowed government to demonstrate persuasively that these options had been carefully considered. Thus it could counter (or close off) any potential charges from opposing MPs of failure to engage in policy debates. Second, these

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arguments should be understood in the context of a situation where government was determined not to act. That is, by describing in detail the problems attendant upon legislative solutions, it allowed government once more to constitute non-intervention as a practical, not political, issue and in a manner likely to appeal to the majority of MPs. Similar difficulties were presented as being attendant upon legal controls on the manufacture of solvents. Government ministers said that it would be difficult to find aversive additives which did not affect materially the efficacy of the product. They would deter 'legitimate' users. Moreover, referring to the American experience, Geoffrey Finsberg (Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Security) argued that additives contained their own problems, including the risk of cancer (House of Commons Debate, 26 October 1982: col. 1017). Government's own reluctance to fund research into additives was made clear by Sir George Younger who argued that a research programme would be 'uncertain and costly'. It was difficult at present, he suggested 'to justify embarking on such a project' (House of Commons Debate, 21 July 1980: col. 213).

Whatever proposals were put forward by MPs, government's response was always the same. These would be impracticable, unenforceable and unworkable. These numerous and detailed arguments were presented in a form which closed off these avenues, removing them from government's practical field of action. On every occasion, then, government took the opportunity to iterate and make clear its own preferred solution; parents were primarily responsible for solving this problem.

The responsible autonomous family

Government's own proposal, in accordance with its established political position, was to constitute parents as primarily responsible for tackling this problem. I have suggested that this was done on grounds likely to appeal to the majority of citizens, the preservation of their own autonomy. By invoking and promoting the traditional authority and responsibility of parents for their own children and suggesting that government action might threaten this, government were able to abdicate responsibility for solvent misuse on the basis that parents were 'free' subjects. As Finsberg stated in October 1982:

> Each individual is responsible for making sensible decisions about his or her own health. But since it is in the main youngsters of school age who misuse solvents, parents find themselves in the frontline. They have to teach children about looking after their health; and parents have to find ways to help their children if they start sniffing. As I said in the House in April, let none of us seek to undermine parents' efforts. (House of Commons Debate, 26 October 1982: 1255 col. 1017)

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Thus government intervention was promoted as undesirable on the grounds that this would undermine parental authority. Any extension of government action in this field was unwarranted and would constitute an unacceptable dilution of parental effort. Parental responsibility, not government intervention, should be 'the real safeguard against the hazards of glue-sniffing' (*ibid.* col. 1020). Government's constant promotion of the notion of individual responsibility and the 'free' subject is evident throughout all parliamentary debates and reiterated again and again. For example, Finsberg had argued earlier in the same year, 'it is worth re-calling that we live in a society in which each individual has a responsibility for his or her own health. We must assist parents... to teach their own children...' (Official Report, 20 April 1982: 22 col. 246). Exceptions to this notion of 'free' subjects, it was acknowledged, may have to be made in the case of children. Children themselves could not be expected to take on responsibility for their own health. Instead this task must pass to parents. It is they who must supervise the changes in behaviour and lifestyle necessary to secure their children's health.

It was evident, however, throughout debates, that parents were not to be permitted too much autonomy. Indeed, they were to be assisted in this task by 'experts'. Thus in this context, ministers promoted elements of expertise, arguing that it had a 'valuable role' in 'educating' parents. 'We have to find the best way of educating parents' argued Sir George Young (Hansard Written Answers, 12 March 1981: 1119 col. 382); and they should be made 'aware of the signs of solvent abuse to look for' argued Sir George Younger (House of Commons Debate, December 1982: 1263. col. 228–229). The details of these 'signs' were also spelled out on several occasions. Thus, having allotted parents their responsibilities and assured them of their capacities to cope, ministers then went on to suggest that they needed to be educated by 'experts' in order to 'know' how to identify the problem, how to react, and to have confidence in their own capacities. As Rose (1990) has pointed out, it is in this paradoxical way that 'Parents are bound into the language and evaluations of expertise at the very moment they are assured of their freedom and autonomy' (p. 203). In this context then, elements of discourses provided by expertise could be incorporated into government's own political programme to the extent that they would enable the family to fulfil its obligations. 'Free subjects' were not to be dominated in the interests of power but to be educated and solicited into an alliance between their personal objectives and politically propagated goals and values (Rose, 1990).

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'The existing administrative framework is adequate'

Throughout the debates, government had maintained that criminal legislation was inappropriate and that its own preferred approach was the promotion of parental responsibility. However, the issue of whether solvent misuse could be made a ground of referral to the Children's Panel had been raised by MPs on several occasions. Although this had been initially rejected by government, in public debates at least, it appears that within government circles the suggestion was deemed worthy of consideration. For in a Consultative Memorandum issued in April 1980, specifically discussing possible amendments to the Children's Panel System, it was stated that the Secretary of State considered that the public concern generated by solvent misuse indicated there was a need for wider consultation, and that he himself was 'inclined to the view' that it should be an additional ground of referral to the Panel (Consultative Document, SED 1980). It was later announced in parliament that replies to this circular showed a 'large majority in favour' of doing so but also 'threw up some practical difficulties' (Hansard Written Answers, 2 December 1981: 1224, col. 146). A further Consultative Document was thus issued in December 1981, devoted specifically to this question of whether or not solvent misuse could be encompassed within the existing administrative framework of the Children's Panel. This raises the question of why the Panel system appeared to offer an acceptable solution to a government ostensibly committed to a strategy of minimal intervention and the promotion of parental responsibility.

It can be suggested that the attractions of the Children's Panel system were rooted in several inter-related factors. It did not radically disturb a policy of parental responsibility, since notions of parental involvement are central to its functioning and embodied within its operating categories (e.g., beyond parental control, parental neglect, etc.) Discourses on 'glue-sniffing' were congruent with, or could easily articulate with, the existing discursive assumptions which produced this regulatory apparatus in the first instance. And it allowed government to be seen to be doing something about the 'tiny minority' of 'chronic' sniffers whose use had become problematic and their 'deviant' parents.

To elaborate, the idea that 'glue-sniffing' might be a problem for a 'tiny minority' of children had been acknowledged by government on several occasions. Indeed this was one of the instances whereby government had explicitly drawn on the 'findings' of expertise. That is, in making a distinction between 'experimental' and 'chronic' sniffers. As we have seen, discourses on 'glue-sniffing' construct this problem as both a manifestation of normality (it is normal for young people to experiment with glue)

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and as a symptom of underlying pathology ('chronic' abusers are likely to have other problems of which sniffing is merely symptomatic). Differential solutions are, therefore, implied depending on which side of this conceptual divide 'glue-sniffing' cases come to rest. Drawing on such distinctions, ministers could argue that experimentation could not be prevented, it was normal for adolescents to experiment: 'Many young people experiment briefly with sniffing as one experiment among many in growing up, without it becoming a habit or leading to more serious consequences' (Sir George Younger, House of Commons Debate, 21 July 1980: col. 210).

And similar arguments were incorporated into the second Consultative Document circulated to agencies in December, 1981 where it was implied that no system of monitoring and counselling could hope to prevent occasional experimentation. It was intimated therefore, that only certain categories of children could be or should be dealt with and these were the 'relatively small proportion' whose use became 'chronic'. As Finsberg stated in the House:

> I am worried ... about the small minority of users who go on to prolonged misuse ... There seems to be evidence that this minority already has other problems, and it seems that solvent misuse may be an expression of these deeper problems. (House of Commons Debate, 26 October 1982: 1255 col. 1016)

This mode of argumentation was rehearsed in the letter circulated to retailers in September 1982 and reiterated in the document disseminated to agencies in December 1981. It was argued that the 'tiny minority' of children who did have a problem with 'glue-sniffing' were 'quite likely' to come to the attention of the Reporter on other grounds such as truancy, falling into bad associations or committing an offence, the implication being that the Panel may already know about these children. They were well equipped to deal with the kinds of problems that 'chronic' sniffers might display. Indeed these were the problems that the Panel System already dealt with. Moreover, the Panel System was perfectly adapted to dealing with parents of such children. If 'chronic' glue-sniffing was symptomatic of 'inadequate' parenting then parents too could benefit from attending the Hearings:

> Since chronic abusers are most likely to be caught and also most likely to have family or school problems, it might well be valuable in such cases to give the child and his parents the benefit of expertise in family related difficulties which can be looked for among experienced Panel members. (Consultative Document, SED, December 1981: 7)

Thus the existing administrative framework, it was argued, could cope with the 'small minority' of sniffers and their 'deviant' families. Panel

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members had the necessary expertise to help them. It was evident in subsequent debates that this expertise was assumed to take a particular form. That is, it would educate parents about their responsibilities and assist them in fulfilling their obligations. As John MacKay stated: 'One of the strengths of the system is that it involves parents ... It is, therefore, important that, besides being sympathetic, the Panel should help parents impose discipline patterns in normal day to day living' (House of Commons Debate, 23 February 1983).

In these diverse ways then, the Panel system had some attractions for government. It allowed it to be seen to be taking the problem seriously, to stress the importance of parental involvement, and it required no further action by government. It should be pointed out that on close examination, the Consultative Document did contain some rather contradictory statements and assumptions. For example, at one point when government was setting out its arguments against criminalisation of use, it was implied that 'chronic' users were likely to be older and 'beyond the age limit' of the Panel. These children, it was argued, were likely to appear before the courts on charges of breach of the peace, shoplifting, or disorderly conduct. At a later stage, by some 'flight from logic', it was assumed that those children who were most in need ('chronic' sniffers), were those most likely to be brought before the Panel. Maintaining the 'coherence' of Official Discourse, however, necessarily involves the repression of such contradictions.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have used a form of discourse analysis in order to trace and describe the processes involved in the constitution of a policy response to the problem of 'glue-sniffing' by central government. Through an analysis of various texts, parliamentary debates and official statements, I have shown the discursive manoeuvres by which government ministers sought to construct the problem of 'glue-sniffing' in accordance with their existing political position, map out a series of paths for resolving the problem, and, simultaneously, represent their policy in a manner aimed at overcoming opposition and appealing to the majority of parents. I have traced the complex links between parental desires, 'expert' knowledges and the organisation of political power, showing how 'expert' knowledge enters the field of political debate but only in a selective and mediated manner describing the practices of exclusion involved in this process. I have demonstrated that 'expert' knowledge is partly constitutive of official policy and, in part, a central component of its legitimation. And in the arena of government its claims to truth are accorded privilege.

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SOME GENERAL IMPLICATIONS

What then are the wider implications of this study for policy analysis? Ultimately, the value of this approach must be left to the reader to decide, but perhaps some claims can be made here. First, it can be suggested that a form of discourse analysis, dealing with the substance of an array of texts and their construction, allows the processes involved in the formulation of policy to be traced and described at a level of detail not otherwise available. For example, rather than relying on vague notions of 'influence' shaping the policy process (without necessarily being able to substantiate such claims) we can investigate and illustrate precisely the modes of argument deployed, how certain 'evasions', compromises and manoeuvres are discursively constructed. Second, if these discursive processes are theorised within the context of a particular programme of power, this method permits a detailed description of the complex links between 'expert' knowledges and the organisation of political power. For example, instead of conceptualising knowledge as 'ideology' which merely reflects or justifies political power, investigations can be directed towards its wider significance. That is, we can explore the extent to which government is dependent upon ways of knowing. We can examine the degree to which knowledge is partly constitutive of policy and partly a component in its justification, determining the balance of these elements in specific instances. Third, it can be demonstrated that expertise enters the field of political debate in a compromised and qualified manner precisely because of the variety and competitiveness of 'expert' discourses; and we can show how ministers can exploit the contradictions between them where particular discourses are deemed incongruent with political programmes. Even in instances where knowledges might be less ambivalent, within the framework outlined here the extent to which they are taken up and used will still be driven by political desire. This method of analysis then directs our attention to the production of 'truths', whose knowledge claims are afforded privilege, the territories in which claims are made and the balance of forces between territories. It can be argued therefore that this politico-discursive approach allows for the process of policy formulation to be analysed in a more comprehensive and intelligible manner.

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