This article deals with some ways in which discourse in a specific cultural setting impact on public policy formation, taking policy in respect of older people as a case in point. It briefly surveys work by political theorists on public decision-making, underlining the fact that even optimistic writers on a spectrum from Habermas to the communitarians fail to offer constructive models for incorporating contributions from ‘civil society’ or ‘user communities’ into policy formation. If discourse is as important to democratic societies as such theorists claim, we need to know more about what it is likely to be like in real settings – which are strongly influenced by national and local cultures. General models often neglect the influence of specific cultures on policy, though in fact popular contributions are currently at least as likely to permeate discussion via this mode of osmosis than via direct inputs (which itself may have a variety of implications for democratic values). The article uses ethnographic observations to point to aspects of Irish social and political culture which, it argues, make some directions in policy for older people difficult to take, contrasting them with aspects of German popular culture which have different consequences. Finally, it suggests that a rhetorical approach to understanding local discourses might be constructive in communicating people’s needs and values from one setting to another, which is a necessary if not a sufficient condition to enable them to influence policy formation. It is also necessary if we are to assess the validity of an optimistic approach to public discourse, as opposed to a descent into Foucauldian pessimism.

Across a number of national settings, writers on older people – however vehemently they elsewhere underline the heterogeneity of this section of society – are prone to suggest that ‘older people themselves’ should contribute to developing policy. (The present author has not been immune from this trend: Edmondson 2001b). However, mechanisms for such a contribution are characteristically under-specified. Both by default and from observation of the ‘attitude-testing’ procedures which are adopted by large-scale organisations, it appears commonly to be assumed either that large-scale surveys should elicit ‘preferences’ among older populations, possibly complemented by qualitative ‘case studies’, or else that pressure-groups and lobbyists representing older people should be consulted for their views, rather as groups representing the unemployed are sporadically deferred to, effectively or otherwise, in some national contexts (Royall 1997). Each of these approaches is seriously flawed, as is indicated by current debate about questions of social-scientific methodology on the one hand and about democratic opinion-formation and the ‘democratic deficit’ on the other. This article will not deal directly with the first question, difficult though it is to arrive at conclusions about the states of mind of large groups of people (see Edmondson 2000a, which sees the attribution of shared opinions to large groups of unconnected individuals simply as a category mistake). Instead it will briefly examine aspects of the Habermas – Dworkin discussion of reasons for which it may be held to matter, in democracies, that people should subscribe to the public arrangements they follow. What are the reasons for which it would be good for people at whom policy is aimed to contribute to its development? Can we deduce from these reasons anything about suitable mechanisms for decision-making? The debates on communitarianism and social capital have much to contribute to this issue. Nonetheless, it will be argued here that public policy theorists cannot alone be blamed for failing to specify creative paths to democratic policy (cf. Gottweis and Wagenaar...
Both political theorist and increasingly technicist political practitioners fail equally to provide adequate frameworks for doing so. The article will then take a rhetorical and ethnographic approach to contrasting aspects of public discourse in Ireland and in Germany which complicate the question how to devise policies on ageing which are what (some) people want.

1. WHAT IS CLAIMED TO BE GOOD ABOUT PUBLIC DEBATE ON POLICY?

According to both Habermas (1992, English translation 1996) and Dworkin (1996), human politics are defined by the fact that, however dependent individuals may be on living in relationship with one another, they are nonetheless each fundamentally able to form rational decisions about what is right. As Michelman (1996) sums it up, this (Enlightenment) position sees human individuals as severally possessed of capacities for rational agency, for taking some substantial degree of conscious charge of their own minds and lives, making and pursuing their own judgements about what is good and right (p.4).

Hence, democratic participation in politics does not merely provide the process with a popular watch-dog scrutinising the fairness of governance, but is held to inject good sense into it on its own account. This view of human decision-making forms the basis for Habermas’s and Dworkin’s claims that public arrangements are valid only when democratic (in some sense to be defined). Whether one opts for procedural criteria for democracy, with Habermas, or an obliquely outlined ‘constitutional’ approach, with Dworkin, the idea of public participation in decision-making is that individuals should participate in choosing the right rules and laws, and identify with them because they recognise that they are right. In contrast to this, a communitarian approach would view as inadequate the contention that people ought to be governed by their own laws in order that they should be enabled to select those which are right. Like Michael Walzer in Spheres of Justice (1996), or for that matter traditional natural law theorists such as Thomas Aquinas, at least in respect of some public arrangements the emphasis may fall equally upon choosing arrangements which are suitable or comfortable, those which fall within the local structures of meaning in terms of which following them can make sense.

It is not self-evident why choosing one’s own laws should automatically be a good thing, and for much of recent history this has been a highly contentious assumption. As Michelman points out (1996 p.5), and as seemed obvious to most members of Western governing classes until the twentieth century, all sorts of elitism might as a matter of fact issue in laws which could rationally be approved by everyone, or which could seem comfortable to them. As we can see from the burning issues of the seventeenth century (exemplified in the Leveller debates in Cromwell’s New Model Army) or from those of the eighteenth before the French Revolution, the priority was seen as that of producing laws in the interest of and congenial to as many people as possible, or the national community as a whole. As a consequence it was then asked who or what sort of person should be considered best able to discern such policies – a man with some stake in the nation via the ownership of property, a man free from subservience to sectional interests which would accord him only partial perceptions of what conduced to the general good, and so on. It was, and very possibly still is, far from obvious that the mere participation by everyone in forming laws would be likely to issue in laws in some sense better than those produced by other means. Thus such ‘democratic’ ideas as inform politics in today’s West did not descend smoothly from the French Revolution but instead remained enormously unpopular among European governing classes during much of the nineteenth century and were attained only at the cost of enormous struggle (Rootes 2000). If they have not yet been endowed with mechanisms for enacting ‘emancipatory’ or ‘human’ interests rather than sectional ones, in principle they have attained widespread authority. ‘Following Tocqueville, many would want to argue that self rule has become one of the dominant ideals of modern liberal society’ (Taylor 1995, p.201).
In addition to the entrenched status of liberalism, moreover, the resurgence of nationalism, though it is often represented as intrinsically anti-democratic, also shows that the idea of somehow enacting one’s own laws has acquired great resonance. No doubt nationalists often do think that their own people will make laws which are in some sense better than those provided by their oppressors – as Padraig Pearse thought that Irish people would make laws for angels when the English could be brought to depart. But they also argue for testing out applications of particular laws to particular places and settings, deciding what feels appropriate. The following quotation from an interview with a lifelong Irish nationalist illustrates this desire for suitable laws as well as right ones:

‘There’s nothing wrong with the Germans’ laws for Germans but they would not necessarily suit us. We want laws that suit the way Irish people are’ (field notes, November 2000).

However, neither the ‘Asian values’ debate nor the experience of newly independent states shows unambiguously that newly-formed nations do often succeed in developing laws which are admirable on either set of criteria. Much of the literature of post-colonialism is devoted to explaining why this disappointment occurs – from the creation of causi belli by colonising forces (Rodney 1972; Castellino 2000) to their provision of more deadly means of pursuing traditional grievances (Allen and Seaton 1999) or their corruption of indigenous decision-making capacities (from Freire onwards). So while original democratic theorists such as Aristotle can be read as insisting that democracy is about developing laws which are both as right and as suitable as a given community can attain to, contemporary thought still lacks obvious positive models which might be adopted by public policy makers.

For Habermas, communication and debate among members of the public is integral to democratic orders, in the cause of helping to choose correct laws:

…individual private rights cannot even be adequately formulated, let alone politically implemented, if those affected have not first engaged in public discussions to clarify which features are relevant in treating typical cases as alike or different, and then mobilized communicative power for the consideration of their newly interpreted needs (1996 p.).

Habermas also speaks generally about the need for informal debates in civil society which – again through unspecified channels – are to influence public debates, but Michelman (1996 p.7) is surely right to call this ‘a dispiriting meltdown of popular sovereignty’. We can be confident neither of the self-evident democratic virtues of whatever type of public debate this may be taken to describe nor of its effects on law-making agencies. For Dworkin, however, the aim of democracy is that individual members should be assured proper treatment, and he believes this can only happen when each recognises the others as free and equal, with each possessing ‘moral membership’ in the community. Similarly, Charles Taylor argues that democratic self-rule depends on the people in question understanding themselves as a community with some common purposes, recognising the members as sharing in them, and giving people ‘a genuine hearing’ so that they can ‘have an impact on debate’ and so that the resulting decision is ‘really the majority preference’ (1995, p.204). Here people can have ‘a sense that they are being heard because they know themselves to be valued in a certain way, even when some particular demands are not met’ (1995, p.205). Taylor suggests that we can satisfy these criteria by having people participate in ‘smaller public spheres’ ‘nested within larger ones’ (1995, p.208), practising as much subsidiarity as possible in a setting which balances the party electoral system with the proliferation of advocacy movements (1995, p.215).

It is not obvious that either Dworkin or Taylor provides clear guidance for policy-makers on how to incorporate the virtues of community into public arrangements. Michelman claims that ‘Dworkin’s notion of communalism is not always very robust’ (1996, p.8), citing Dworkin’s
likening of membership in a community to membership in a symphony orchestra. Michelman pours scorn on this analogy. While he says, rightly, that it does not entail any ontological collectivism, he also seems to think that the alternative to such an ontology is merely recognising that other people have intentions; this is a characteristic of ordinary human actions no matter how egotistic, and in orchestras it is just that musicians’ intentions need to be directed to ‘the reciprocatingly right ways about the combined effect’ (1996, p.9). Hence, for Michelman, there is no particular analogy to be found between an orchestra and a ‘communal’ view of government by the people. He sets no store by Dworkin’s idea that it is necessary to care about the whole, just as (Dworkin says) musicians need each to care about it and take collective responsibility for it.

It seems nonetheless that there is more in Dworkin’s view than Michelman allows, and that it has implications about the role of culture in public action. It is not just that I should play the right notes on my flute and be anxious that you should play the right ones on your violin and someone else on his cello. In order to play at all we do need ideas about what the music as a whole should sound like, and our own playing needs to be attuned these expectations about and sensibilities for the whole project. One of the main characteristics of a good orchestra or choir member is that he or she cares less about sounding good individually than about how the music sounds. Even if you can play wonderful arpeggios, and even if your own immediate self-realisation depends on doing it, if the music demands the absence of arpeggios you simply refrain. This relates directly to the communitarians’ aim to encompass the nature of belonging to a community which makes it important. (Even if it does not automatically make it democratic: Edmondson 2001a.) For communitarians, the role to be played by the culture of a civil society in constituting just democracies is a strong one. For them, being part of a group of people sharing habits and practices is an important aspect of public life, necessary if not sufficient for a good society. It is this type of identification and fit which builds up the moral phenomenology of a locality: its understanding of an interpersonal terrain, its style. For people like the groups of ‘everyday makers’ living in Denmark (Bang and Sorensen, 2001), incorporating shared daily practices into public conventions makes for more flourishing. Here, policy which is good in at least some senses can emerge from the political culture of daily practice – as long as it remains connected with face-to-face interaction between individuals, and as long as these individuals themselves are not riven by divisions over policy or power. Under these circumstances, people can reasonably agree to common measures even when they would not personally prefer them. Like the orchestra members, they can see the common point. But it is not obvious that ‘nesting’ can transfer this to higher local and national levels, when the well-being of quite different orchestras (as it were) needs to be accommodated. And there are other problems involved in translating small-scale ideas and procedures onto the stage of public politics: Gottweis and Wagenaar (2001) emphasise the difficulties involved in eliciting what practices are and describing outside their immediate contexts.

It cannot altogether be surprising, therefore, if contemporary public policy remains dominated by the notion of bureaucratic mechanisms for achieving goals which have become detached from the idealistic expectations of the third quarter of the twentieth century and failed to replace them by others. At mid-century, the founders of the Welfare State in Britain, for instance, confidently anticipated a society in which citizens were freed from want, ignorance and disease; this was not thought to be a value-free anticipation, merely the right one. By 1975, it was clear that equal access to State-provided health or education did not transform society of their own accord, and debates in the sociology of education (see Schuemer 1991) and elsewhere underlined the fact that the policy problems involved were anything other than merely technical. Fay, for example, wrote that

…all political proposals, no matter how instrumental, will alter and shape the personal relations of at least some members of a society, and will affect the relative welfare of
various classes of people; as such they embody moral notions of what is permissible, just or right in human affairs. They are a species of moral statement (1975, p.52).

But the intervening quarter-century has made the discussion of relations between public policy and public morality more difficult, not easier. The subsequent domination of right-wing politics, at least in England and Ireland, both (in theory paradoxically) enhanced the public power of bureaucracy and undermined capacities for public discussion of the principles it practised.

This article will go on to examine some policies for older people in Ireland and elsewhere, briefly interrogating their official formulations and pointing to some special difficulties in enhancing policy by the use of public influence - either directly, via some explicit form of discourse or indirectly, via cultural practice. First, I shall point to difficulties in using discourse to contribute to good policy which arise from its corruption by bureaucratic settings. Secondly, I shall examine three aspects of Irish public culture which relevant to the development of policy but do not necessarily improve it, contrasting them with three aspects of German public culture. Thirdly, the argumentative settings this creates need to be navigated by inhabitants in pursuit of their own projects. This itself gives rise to a complicating factor in the evaluation of public contributions to policy development: in many cases, forms of discourse are removed from their original frames for a variety of reasons. They may be employed instrumentally rather than to express anybody's actual 'preferences'. Thus, in evaluating public discourse as a policy-framing instrument, we need to take into account both the impacts of cultures of argument and the ways in which individuals and agencies actually employ arguments. The article will conclude by suggesting that, despite all this, local cultures can indeed provide clues about developing good policy – keeping to the dual-track criteria of rightness and appropriateness - but it will suggest that we need more sensitive rhetorical methods for understanding them.

2. DISCOURSE AND PUBLIC POLICY

2a Bureaucracy and Public Discourse

In Ireland, as elsewhere in Europe but since considerably more recently, contemporary society is permeated by a proliferation of regulations, justified as designed to make public life perspicuous and accountable. Whatever its virtues, as elsewhere this generates among other things a bureaucratised public language and a bureaucratised set of public procedures, evoking both defensive practices (cf. Porter (1995) on 'covering one’s ass') and various forms of evasion (like the farmer in Northern Ireland who introduced foot and mouth disease onto the island through the practice of 'Celticising' sheep: purchasing them from England to sell them abroad after a fortnight as ‘Irish lamb’: Sunday Independent 4.3.2001). Needless to say, this situation issues in a great deal of 'rhetoric' in the vulgar sense of the term, and this effect permeates and corrupts nested settings from the top down – and sometimes from the bottom up.

Both Hajer’s (1993) and Rein’s and Schoen’s (1993) important work on discourses and framing points out that policies may be addressed to a variety of audiences in addition to those composed by their immediate clients. In the same volume Dunn (1993, pp.262-3) quotes Suchman (1972) in this regard. Suchman refers to forms of policy ‘pseudoevaluation’ such as the selective use of data to support a policy (‘eyewash’) or the suppression of data counter to the speaker’s interests (‘whitewash’), the ritual collection of data for reasons unconnected to its consequences (a form of ‘posturing’ currently common in Irish universities) and the use of data to delay reform (‘postponement’). Instances of most of these strategies can easily be discovered in Irish policy with regard to older people, among them the following.
A research assistant and I wrote to all the Health Boards in Ireland in 1996, requesting information on services available to support older people, and received a reply from only one Board. On applying again on foot of the 1997 Freedom of Information Act, we received immediate responses enclosing specially prepared glossy brochures. According to the Foreword of the Information Guide to Western Health Board Services (1998), this legislation and the communications generated by it reflected ‘the mood of openness and transparency’ ‘permeating Irish society at this time’. This is presumably meant to imply that a situation in which it was enormously difficult to discover how older people could be assisted had transformed spontaneously into one in which information was pressed upon enquirers. This would amount to sociocultural ‘permeation’ at an unusually fast rate. In the light of further ethnographic experience, however, it seems more realistic to speculate that the Act itself resulted from policy transfer from other European countries, and the brochures in question were addressed to spectators within Irish policy-making circles and abroad rather than to prospective clients alone.

Furthermore, certain parts of the information contained in brochures such as this exemplify a conflation of ‘eyewash’ and ‘whitewash’. A reader of the publication in question would conclude that adequate services are offered for the assistance of older people:

**Services for Older People**

**Departments of Medicine for Older People in General Hospitals**

**General Description**

Acute Departments of Medicine for Older People are located in the Acute General Hospitals in the Western Health Board’s Area. The level of care appropriate to each individual patient is determined by the multi-disciplinary team which consists of the Consultant Physician in Medicine for the older person, Nursing staff, Allied Health Professionals and support staff. The objective of the Departments of Medicine for Older People in General Hospitals is to ensure prompt and appropriate admission of Older Persons to Hospital and subsequently, wherever possible, to facilitate their return to their homes, or placement in appropriate alternative care (1998 edn p.81).

In fact, here as elsewhere, services are extremely limited and demand is controlled informally by ‘choking off’ potential claimants. The account above can be considered accurate only in respect of an equivocation on the term ‘each individual patient’. While the general reader might interpret this term to mean ‘each individual patient who requires it’ in fact a far more restricted reading is correct: ‘every individual patient whom the team sees’. Furthermore, determining need is far from either providing it or overseeing its provision, and the document is careful to describe this as an ‘objective’ rather than an actual practice. Compared to the number of those who might benefit from assistance, the number actually dealt with can be very small indeed. In the case of the writer’s own extremely infirm 84-year-old mother who had experienced a stroke, no effort to request assessment by the team described above was successful. Both hospital staff and local medical personnel explained variously that they had not the power to make a referral, or that the consulting team would be unable to provide practical support and visiting them would be a waste of time. After five weeks spent in hospital, this lady was repeatedly urged by nursing staff to leave (that is, to leave publicly funded treatment for treatment she would have to pay for herself). Both nursing home staff and social workers interviewed by the author report that this is a regular practice.

In a similar instance, one woman enquiring about sheltered housing for her mother was told that for her mother to be eligible, she would have to declare a refusal to keep her mother at home. Her reluctance to do this ensured that she neither requested (nor, of course, was denied) the service. Again, the Information Guide to Western Health Board Services mentions the existence of such services to older people as physiotherapy. In fact, there are two part-time physiotherapists in this
Health Board area to cover tens of thousands of older people. In sum, the brochure does not mention services which absolutely do not exist, but it does not give a remotely realistic impression of what is actually available for the assistance of older people. The Health Board’s ‘mission statement’, ‘to promote the highest attainable level of health for all persons in its functional area’ is to this extent risible.

Documents detailing policy for older people, therefore, are ostensibly intended in one direction - older people and those assisting them – but appear to be influenced just as much by the fact that they address other elements in the writers’ own administrative contexts. The Irish Health Boards’ own internal discourse is dominated by the policy narratives of The Years Ahead (Eastern Health Board: 1988), which underlines the aims of ‘dignity’ and ‘independence’ for older people in the manner which has come to be usual in community care discourse. Similarly, the style of health-related brochures has come to be conventional: it combines an apparently logical layout, with a plethora of sub-headings, with pictures conveying an ambience of optimism, enlightenment and humanity. This mode of presentation itself seems to have become a substitute for any discussion of what ‘dignity’ and ‘independence’ might mean in practice.

Lastly, not just the fact and mode of presentation but also the content of policies may be directed towards several audiences. One case can be summarised from an interview with a nursing home proprietor:

The ‘Winter Initiative’ was decided upon so nursing homes could employ staff to enable them to free up hospital beds and help look after older people where they should be looked after. Money was made available in October, we were notified at the end of November, people were to be employed in December. No-one to my knowledge had staff under the Winter Initiative until February. It’ll be finished in April anyway. What’ll happen to the money that was allocated? (Interview February 15 2001).

Similarly, the Nursing Homes Act of 1990 contained a provision enabling homes to register with local Health Boards, and official documentation repeatedly refers to the numbers which complied with this suggestion. In effect, registration entails a cursory compliance with standards of space and personnel provision; the ‘quality of life’ promoted by nursing homes, which members of the public might expect to be a concern in registration, is not addressed. Throughout the publications of the Irish Health Boards, the need within a system to be perceived by other elements of the system and by the public as pursuing certain aims, and pursuing them in an officially accepted style, has quickly come to permeate official practice. Not only official brochures, which have definite and increasing family resemblances, but official policies themselves, appear to be organised with a view to appearances arranged in terms of a relatively unquestioned frame in which the operationalisation of ‘openness and transparency’ has generated a paramount consciousness of how an organisation appears. It need hardly be said that what may amount to a policy culture in itself is neither a matter of conscious adoption nor limited to Irish bureaucracy. Still, the dominance of any such frame must have deleterious effects on the capacity of public discourse to address contributions to what actually can and should be done in policy areas in question.

2b. Cultural Settings and the Rhetoric of Policy

In the previous section we referred to some effects on conventions of discourse which ensue from the dominance of administrative frames in the presentation and formation of policy. Here, we shall examine effects on policy debate of some aspects of popular culture in Ireland, contrasting them with counterparts in Germany. This section is not intended to refer to Irish or German culture in an overall sense, merely to draw attention to aspects of these cultures – habits and practices within them - which, whatever their many virtues, affect public policy in specific ways.
While Fischer (1997) and others rightly underline the positive contributions to be hoped for from public discourse in cases where local communities mobilise around a cause, this section draws attention to effects of political cultures in more regular everyday settings. It takes into account the fact that sedimented, habitual cultural settings might influence certain types of policy particularly strongly. Policy on ageing, paradigmatically, is policy which reflects attitudes to the meaning attached in its national context to life courses as wholes. But in the Irish case, if public discourses have debated such issues they have on the whole been clerical ones, and while these appear to be losing their force today they have no obvious successors (Edmondson 2001b). The public arena in Ireland has often been identified as inhospitable to the type of left – right political debate to be found elsewhere, and this lacuna has perhaps impoverished the available array of conceptualisations for debating what the State’s view of its citizens’ lives should be. In contrast, attitudes to intrinsic meaningfulness at a local or community level are rich and subtle – but they are characteristically expressed in ways which are difficult to translate into contemporary policy frameworks.

Among others, Breen et al. (1990,ch.1 and passim) comment on the evasive nature of post-war public policy formation in Ireland, especially with regard to questions which might entail the redistribution of resources between classes. Potentially divisive issues had been avoided in the wake of Independence in 1922, where the ‘essentialism’ characteristic of newly independent countries ensured that public life emphasised what connected Irish people rather than what divided them (Brown 1985). Tovey and Share put it most positively:

> Nation-building in this sense has been one of the principal activities of the Irish state since 1922 and it seems clear that in engaging with this, Irish state agents were well aware of the particular difficulties associated with a post-colonial situation, where stereotypes of national worth had to be almost entirely reversed, and reasons found for people to switch their political allegiances (Tovey and Share 2000, p.473).

Whether or not to the extent of rendering Irish politics ‘sui generis’ and ‘without social bases’ (Whyte 1974), for some time political parties were classified by the public predominantly in relation to the debates of the 1920s, those connected with the national question. When in the 1950s Irish public policy overtly abandoned protectionism and embraced the economic influx of international capitalism, there were no powerful interests already organised to debate the development (Breen et al. loc.cit.). The resulting lack of emphasis on the public discussion of fundamental principles now dovetails comfortably with late capitalist, rightist emphases on the prime duty of ruling parties to deliver financial success to their countries. The hope that rising tides and trickle-down effects will of themselves resolve significant political disputes - what has been dubbed the ‘meteorological view’ of politics (cf. Higgins 2001) has rendered Irish public life relatively devoid of intellectual contests. Indeed, a Fine Gael activist interviewed in 1992 (field notes by the author) appeared unable to conceptualise political principles at all except as a device for selling the party to the public.

There are, too, further constraints on public discourse in this particular culture. Post-Independence ‘essentialism’, together with the nationalist hope that membership of the nation would in itself make for correctness of policy, is not a compound specific to Ireland, but in the Irish case it combines with two additional factors. First, the Civil War just prior to Independence caused such agonising divisions within close communities that in its wake many people preferred not to mention divisive political issues at all – a habit in polite society whose effects are observable until today. Moreover, in approximately acephalous societies (Taylor 1982) like those of rural Ireland, overt internal debate is considered potentially insulting and destructive in itself, and this too has given rise to a tradition which has lasted even as the society has industrialised (Edmondson 2000b). In formal and informal organisations throughout the country, even the act of voting is considered objectionable, a recourse to be taken only with embarrassment and in the most extreme cases in which all attempts at achieving consensus have failed. On a local scale,
this political culture can be supportive, subtle and humane; on the scale of national policy, it leaves the field somewhat bare of debate.

Secondly, public policy in Ireland was originally initiated by Church bodies, the only ones possessing both the interest and the finances to organise support for the ill or disadvantaged in the 1940s and 1950s; hospitals, education and social work were all administered by the Church. For reasons connected with the history of Irish Catholicism (see Edmondson 1998), this circumstance brought with it a disinclination for public debate on fundamental principles of policy. At the same time, it seems to have taken for granted that individual probity and an appropriately sensitive spirituality would of themselves engender appropriate public decisions. This does not entail that discussion of public policy was devoid of all interest during that period – discussions by clerics and clerically-minded laymen in the sociology journal *Christus Rex* might advocate workers’ control in industry alongside measures to protect Irishmen in England from the temptation to alcohol. But it did constrain such debate within one overall intellectual frame: workers’ control was considered spiritually uplifting for all concerned as well as exemplifying social justice. The scope of between-frame debate was severely limited.

Thirdly, in the course of industrialisation in the second half of the twentieth century, many practice-related subtleties of arguing characteristic of Irish peasant society appear to have been endangered or lost. Many of those which could not be re-framed in the terms of late twentieth-century discourse were abandoned – very often without even being noticed. Rural public debate is not non-existent, but it is flexible, even evasive. A typical instance is the practice of referring to ‘the crowd in Dublin’ or ‘the lads upstairs’ in preference to openly identifying an adversary: this has the positive consequence of avoiding lasting rifts through overt insults. The time-scale of discussion too contrasts with that of industrial society: it is open, future-oriented, recursive (Edmondson 2000a). Points are made by using silence to imply dissent, or breaking the rhythm of an otherwise unexceptionally courteous conversation to signify offence. Problems and preferences are indicated obliquely. Often, minuscule hints are used to build up argumentative stances over extended periods of time; it is more usual to point to some practical consequence from which a principle may be inferred than to name the principle directly. These are debating forms which depend on inhabiting a common context in which participants converse over extended time-periods. They are difficult or impossible to incorporate into contemporary public policy discourse. This is a discourse which is specifically designed to operate between contexts, and to this end it employs more rigid linguistic practices and repeatable conventions with regard to the presentation of goals and the time-frames for pursuing them. Interrogating local cultures to determine practices and preferences, by contrast, would require long-drawn-out processes of discernment, hard to incorporate into a setting in which decisions must be made before the year’s deadline operates. It is true that this contrast between local and public life is not complete in reality; administrative requirements for both high and regular decision-speeds and replete time schedules stand at an angle to the way in which many decisions actually get made. In Ireland, as elsewhere, old-fashioned negotiations on political deals are still disguised retrospectively in official terminology. The point is, however, that they are not regarded as valid until this re-presentation has been performed.

In the resulting culture of public policy, therefore, ‘politics’ has come to refer to a jostle for pragmatic advantage. The conventional neo-positivist tenor characteristic of policy discussion in general (Gottweis and Wagenaar 2001) only reinforces this tendency. While there certainly is a certain amount of public debate on older people in Ireland carried out by advocate groups, this debate does not generally highlight principles or alternative models, and there is little public discussion of what public policy for individuals needing public support should be (Edmondson 2001b). Even recently publicised cases in which Health Boards, over years, systematically
deprived nursing home residents of those portions of their pensions they were entitled to keep as daily spending money (O’Toole 2001) have failed to evoke widespread public indignation.

Paucity of public debate is far from confined to this particular setting, of course, but other cultures may offer discursive resources to combat it, at least in part. Again this contrast is almost certainly connected with the rapid rate of industrialisation in Ireland, which did not permit a long period in which older cultural practices could be adapted for absorption into new ones. Comparing provision for older people in the West of Ireland with aspects of good practice in Germany, it is possible to point to major sources of influence on German policy which derive from everyday cultural frames. Supportive cultural practices in Ireland tend to relate to interdependency in patterns of communication and of rural work which are falling into desuetude in contemporary life; or else they revolve around public house life in a way hard to make accessible to older people. In Germany, a more gradual process of industrialisation has incorporated rural pastimes into mainstream culture, with very different results. At least three cultural practices are familiar to a wide cross-section of the population and influence the lives of older people, whether in nursing homes or elsewhere, taking a wide variety of forms and occupying a wide range of cognitive and practical levels. These practices include engaging in handcrafts or ‘basteln’, the custom of taking trips and excursions, and the celebration of a large number of local festivals. These may appear homespun sources for public debate – but as practices they do in fact influence public policy for older people, which from Berlin to Munich supports provision for activities of this nature. Precisely the conventionality of these pastimes confers on them a special significance. Older people can invest into them a broad range of intellectual input and physical activity, and they can know that in doing so they are engaging in practices regarded as worthwhile in society in general. Habitual practices can be treated as a virtual language about what human beings can reasonably aim for, and about what activities confer and communicate human excellence and ‘ethos’. It would be a mistake to regard them as trivial; in effect, they guide the practical spelling out of ‘dignity’ and ‘independence’ – concepts in danger of vacancy in other settings.

In terms of argumentation, moreover, everyday culture in Germany provides resources which can be used to imagine what provisions life for older people should contain. The language of personal development or ‘Selbstentfaltung’ may contain implications of individual self-absorption uncongenial to communitarians, and in any case it is probably foreign to most German older people who are now in their seventies or eighties. But, whatever its other disadvantages, it does generate a public atmosphere in which it can appear normal for individuals to be concerned with leading rewarding personal lives – in contrast to the situation in Ireland, where daily practice and spiritual ideals among older people in a rural society counselled precisely the opposite. Lastly, German public discourse is a cultural practice which endorses the reasonableness of being concerned about and providing for the future, again more markedly so than in Ireland. This is also an aspect of this national culture which has its share of negative consequences, but it did contribute to a public frame in which it was possible, albeit at the cost of considerable acrimony, to arrange public dependency care insurance, or ‘Pflegeversicherung’, to which all citizens must contribute. In Ireland, in contrast, a different approach to policy makes rare any type of public discussion of the principles of public insurance (O’Shea 1991). In all these cases, public policy debate is clearly affected by its cultural setting – whether or not this is consciously acknowledged by those who participate in it.

2c. ‘Displaced Discourses’ in Local Argumentation

It should not be supposed that contemporary discourses are manipulated only by official organisations or agencies, or that only large-scale trends in local cultures influence policy
provision. On the contrary, members of the public too discover ways of manipulating accepted frames on both a national and a local level. Indeed, they are forced to do so in their attempts to interface with larger-scale organisations and regulatory conditions whose permission or endorsement is necessary for them to pursue their own projects. Thus, for example, in one case in the West of Ireland, planning permission for a new nursing home was reportedly justified by reference to its nearness to local communities – using a trope familiar to adherents of ‘community care’ - although in fact there were few roads and no systems of public transport connecting the selected spot with the settlements concerned (interview February 4 2001). It might be argued that one service provided to the locality by organisations such as Udaras na Gaeltachta, the Irish-language development organisation, is showing local people how to frame their aspirations in terms acceptable at higher levels of bureaucracy. Certainly this process can be observed in the world of third-level education. Here the term ‘putting language on’ a project was observed among academic lawyers of a variety of national origins (field notes, February 2001), whose modus operandi has much in common with those of local people. Neither group may feel called upon (or able) to produce spontaneous arguments in support of distant goals to which each may be, for undisclosed reasons, committed. Instead, each devotes considerable effort to examining the locally effective argumentative terrain for strategies which can be manipulated to achieve these goals. In such cases, public participation in policy-making or in the use of policy may foster considerable argumentative expertise which can be engaged in without casting very much light on participants’ actual intentions.

Thus, in a separate case, a submission for permission to build a new nursing home taps, all on the first page, into the following discourses:
(a) human rights discourse (‘It is a total denial of human rights’ to deny Irish-speaking older people access to linguistically appropriate nursing homes);
(b) the discourse provided by the public policy setting (such a denial is ‘a total contradiction of state Government policy’);
(c) traditional prestige-related national political discourse – the above claims are quoted from remarks by a prestigious politician with strong local and national roots;
(d) the discourse of official linguistic and cultural policy relating to Irish, so that frequent reference is made to the need to support ‘the people of the Gaeltacht’ and ‘our cultural heritage’;
(e) conventional policy discourse – which uses terms such as ‘strategic location’ and ‘the further positive impact which such a facility could have on the locality’;
(f) the traditional discourse of the long-standing claim – this proposal is related to historical expressions of local need;
(g) the feminist discourse of ‘gender-proofing’, which it is proposed to extend to linguistic policy.

In no sense do I wish to cast doubt on the genuineness of the intentions of those making this submission; I am pointing only to the fact that its argumentation involves a highly polyglot selection of frames which may or not be directly related to the original aims of the writers.

Cases such as this seem to indicate a deliberate adoption of discourses which are perceived as currently successful; their potential for effectiveness rather than their internal coherence with one another seems to provide the criterion for use (cf. Mannheim’s notion of competing markets in ideas: Edmondson and Nullmeier 1997). The examples given here underline the fact that the existence of policy communities in itself generates its own politics and its own forms of discourse. Rein and Schoen rightly recommend attempting to trace, for instance, processes by which new frames of discourse come to be sponsored, how actors establish standing within them and so on. But here it is important to emphasise that the borrowing of discourse may not always be a cynical process, where people adopt ‘a dominant frame and its conventional metaphors’ and hope thus ‘to purchase legitimacy for a course of action actually inspired by different intentions’ (Rein and Schoen 1993, p.151). The points of discourses or frames as discussed by these authors...
is precisely their relative orderliness and the fact that they can be seized upon to give form to everyday patterns of thought and behaviour. Where such patterns in their natural settings are unruly, fluid, inchoate and implicit, they are exceedingly difficult to convey out of context, and doing so may require (at the least) much more time than may be available to settle practical issues - especially where bureaucratic time-schedules are imposed. Hence it may be that actors have little option but to adopt the most approximately suitable current discourse, whether or not it fits all their concerns appropriately. Frames and discourses may be employed in wide varieties of combinations for a wide variety of reasons.

3. RHETORIC, THE THEORY OF ARGUMENT AND ETHNOGRAPHY

This article has argued that, important as public contributions to debate on policy may in principle be, in practice they exhibit a complexity of form and meaning which are hard to incorporate into the theory of democratic politics or good governance. It has tried to identify barriers to the efficacy of between-context discourse in the real world, but it has also implied that everyday cultures may contain discursive practices which could be used constructively in formulating policy – if they could be adapted and understood. As has often been stressed, translation between systems of meaning does not normally occur completely (in Fischer’s and Forester’s 1993 volume, Healey (p.93) quotes Geertz, who in turn is quoting Wittgenstein). The ‘empirical epistemology’ which Rein and Schoen recommend to elucidate ‘the knowing-in-practice by which, in our society, we deal with policy controversies in the absence of an agreed-upon basis for resolving them’ (1993, p.145) can require extensive and demanding ethnographic work. Moreover, carrying out this work accurately requires more than merely adopting an interpretive attitude, as Habermas pointed out in Knowledge and Human Interests (see Keat 1981, p.4). One element it requires is the rhetorical and argumentational understanding of local discourse, which can augment traditional hermeneutics by exploring in what ways and for what reasons discourses actually are exploited and combined, by whom, and to whose benefit.

Carrying out such an empirical epistemology is likely to involve at least the following categories of enquiry. First, it entails recognising that uses of frames and discourses are complicated by the existence of different forms of reasoning, not just different styles and combinations of thematisation. Specialised forms of reasoning, which occur in different academic disciplines as well as throughout everyday life, employ their own patterns of relevance, standards for generalisation, paradigms of inference, and substantive philosophical anthropology, and each employs its own system for foregrounding or backgrounding these items. What can appear a consistent frame or discourse from one vantage point may in fact be held together by fragile and contingent bonds. A common concern, such as concern for the environment, can unite a number of discourses on one level just as they compete on others (as anti-anthropocentrism may compete with natural-scientific concerns); or it may really cohere on some levels in ways which are now denied (as fascism and care for nature are in some ways compatible). This complicates the process of identifying what a frame or a discourse really incorporates. It suggests at the least that it is hazardous to categorise modes of argument in advance in terms of abstract contrasts (as authors such as Hofstede (1980) attempt to use theoretical oppositions such as individualist / collectivist, long-term / short-term). In the Irish case, for instance, popular culture can be described as individualist and collectivist, with long-term and short-term orientations, none of which can be easily represented on quasi-quantitative schematisations. Exploring discourses needs to be grounded in explicating actually occurring discourse, and for this, rhetorical categories assist a conceptualisation of practical contrasts.

Secondly, forms of life themselves can be regarded as implicit reasoning systems, and rhetorical techniques used to understand them. Daily customs or forms of everyday interaction can express...
attitudes and arguments attract ethos or induce pathos; they can express local ideas about human excellence when they are engaged in, or they may sensitise participants in local interaction to certain issues or concerns. Emphasis, understatement, presence, humour, order are all rhetorical figures (Edmondson 1984) which can be expressed in the conduct of local relationships. They amount to the argumentative endorsement of particular forms of life – of which it can be asked whether they conduce better or worse to aims of good governance posited by political theorists. If a given form of local life were incorporated effectively into policy, would it add to the chances of formulating good laws, enhancing the public surveillance of law-making, or encouraging public contributions to shared life? Would it tend to support positive freedom, in which citizens flourished together as human beings? Would it make them feel valued members of communities? And could any combination of these ways of life possibly aim to cover all these aims? There is a long way to go before the debate between optimistic and pessimistic accounts of public discourse can be adjudicated.

Bibliography


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