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Jokers' pursuit of truth: critical policy analysis in the age of spectacle and post-truth politics

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ABSTRACT

Critical policy analysis examining how powerful actors use educational policies to reproduce unequal social structures presents many challenges. These challenges are amplified by the politics of spectacle, where duplicity comes to dominate how educational policies are conceptualized, presented to the public, and subsequently enacted. The pursuit of truth in policy proposals or reform designs often entails navigating contentious spaces of fiction-making, fakery, and duplicitous performances, sometimes involving researchers themselves. Drawing on Bakhtin's writing on jokers' pursuit of truth, I revisit the tensions I encountered in my ethnographic fieldwork in the Russian Federation to reimagine the possibilities of navigating research with the powerful. This paper offers a methodological provocation to rethink ethical imperatives and poses new questions for reimaging the problematics of critical policy analysis focused on equity and justice in the post-truth era.

Critical policy analysis has explored how policy discourses operate as instruments of domination, power, and control (Apple, 2019; Bacchi, 2000; Ball, 1993, 2015; Ozga, 2019; Taylor, 1997). Studies conducted in this tradition often seek 'to understand the complex connections between education and the relations of dominance and subordination in the larger society – and the movements that are trying to interrupt these relations' (Apple, 2019, p. 276). Much of this work focuses on the struggles of underserved communities and calls on the critical policy analyst to serve as a 'critical secretary' (Apple, 2013) who documents minoritized groups' pursuit of liberation. In other words, more often than not, at the center of critical inquiry into educational policies are those affected by reforms rather than those who conceptualized those reforms in the first place.

Research that involves powerful actors constitutes an exception to this trend but remains relatively uncommon partly because of the methodological challenges it presents (Aydarova, 2019a; Hertz & Imber, 1995; Walford, 1994, 2012). One of those challenges concerns game-like interviews, in which it is difficult to distinguish between truths and lies (Ball, 2013). As powerful actors share information that presents their activities in the best possible light and withhold information that could challenge that presentation

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(Duke, 2002; Fitz et al., 1994), critical policy analysis runs the risk of 'producing and legitimating social inequality' (Briggs, 2003, p. 252). Another challenge lies in gaining access to the spaces where key decisions are made (Hunter, 1995). Seeking to protect their positions of power and privilege, elite participants limit researchers' access to the spaces where they could learn the details of policy conceptualization or implementation that could challenge the official storyline (Ostrander, 1995). Finally, as feminist researchers pointed out, power imbalances due to gender, race/ethnicity, or social class differences preclude the emergence of 'mutual trust and egalitarian relations' (Boucher, 2017, p. 100).

Suggestions for addressing these challenges vary based on researchers' own theoretical and political commitments. For example, Walford (2012) argued that the powerful should be treated in the same manner as any other study participant. Drawing on feminist approaches to interviewing, Morris (2009) suggested moving to more collaborative and participatory paradigms where researchers engage in learning with their elite participants as the latter select research questions and frame the direction of inquiry. Kezar (2003) argued that researchers should deploy transformational interviews based on principles of egalitarianism and mutual trust to help elite participants see the problem under discussion from different perspectives and acknowledge the position of the oppressor they occupy. Thuesen (2011, p. 620), on the other hand, proposed that in instances when research concerns issues of discrimination or oppression, 'power and authority justify more critical questions and a more confrontational approach than an interviewer would apply to other respondents.'

Suggestions for addressing the challenges of studying up, however, rarely consider additional burdens posed by the preponderance of post-truth, which according to McIntyre (2018, p. 13) 'amounts to a form of ideological supremacy, whereby its practitioners are trying to compel someone to believe in something whether there is good evidence for it or not.' Building on this observation, Braun (2019) noted how post-truth rests on a selective use of evidence and misrepresentation of facts to accomplish political agendas. With the 'fog of disinformation' (Latour, 2018, p. 24) permeating more social worlds, politics in general and educational policy-making in particular increasingly become characterized by fiction-making, fakery, and duplicitous performances of political spectacle (Edelman, 1988).

Smith and colleagues offered a helpful heuristic for understanding the political spectacle of educational policies:

> contemporary politics resemble theater, with directors, stages, casts of actors, narrative plots, and (most importantly) a curtain that separates the action onstage – what the audience has access to – from the backstage, where the real 'allocation of values' takes place. (Smith et al., 2004, p. 11)

This heuristic reveals that educational policymaking comprises not just conceptualizations of reforms for the betterment of society, but policymakers' performances onstage that promote solutions for invented problems, regardless of whether there is evidentiary support for these solutions or not (Edelman, 1988). Amidst these performances, a critical policy analyst faces a formidable task of engaging in research while being cognizant of the fact that 'in a world that really has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood' (Debord, 1994, p. 14). The key task of the inquirer in such situations cannot

be that of a 'critical secretary' who documents the struggle (Apple, 2013), but rather a joker who disrupts the spectacle and reveals what lies hidden from the public view.

Given a lack of scholarship that could methodologically inform decision-making processes of critical policy analysts and prevent them from being coopted into the reproduction of spectacle in the post-truth era, the purpose of this paper is to offer a methodological provocation. I revisit an ethnographic study of policy conceptualization and adoption I conducted in the Russian Federation to argue that in the current political climate it is perhaps necessary and advantageous for ethnographers of policy to draw on jokers' tools as they design, conduct, and report their studies in order to disrupt political spectacle that reproduces inequality. Using Bakhtin's (1981, 1984)) writing on the fool and the joker, I explore the joker's role as a truth-seeker who disrupts the spectacle and reveals what those in power attempt to conceal. Even though Russia is known as the country where masks, duplicity, and spectacle have a long-standing history (Fitzpatrick, 2005), insights from this paper are applicable in other contexts because of the spectacle's global spread.

Teacher education reform as political theater

This paper is a methodological reflection on a project that I conducted between June 2011 and December 2017 that was rooted in the traditions of critical policy analysis (Bacchi, 2000; Ball, 1993; Taylor, 1997) and anthropology of policy (Shore et al., 2011). Conceptualized as a multi-sited (Marcus, 1995) critical ethnography (Quantz & O'Connor, 1988), it examined teacher education modernization in Russia (Aydarova, 2019b). Through several data collection trips, I conducted 80 ethnographic interviews with various policy actors, educational researchers, and educators; 15 focus groups with preservice teachers; as well as participant observations of various policy events. In my analysis, I focused on the 'Concept of Support for the Development of Teacher Education.' The policy used globally circulated principles of practice-based, competence-oriented, and performance-driven teacher preparation. It received so much opposition from educators and the public that it was never signed into law but was nevertheless implemented as an experiment (Aydarova, 2019b). According to official accounts, this policy was designed by a working group of 22 academics, administrators, educators, and researchers that the Ministry of Education assembled for this purpose. In reality, however, the working group served as the front for the work of a small group of reformers connected to a broad network of Russian and international experts who drafted the policy text, advocated for the reform in different policy contexts, and eventually oversaw its implementation. Most of these reformers were academics affiliated with the Department of Education of Lyutvino[1] Economics University (LEU) in a central Russian city where I conducted some of my site-based research. They did not occupy any formal positions in the Ministry of Education or any other legislative body but used their networks to introduce and legitimate a dramatic reorientation of Russian education through several concurrent initiatives.

In my prior work (Aydarova, 2019b), I focused on the theatricality of how this policy was conceptualized, discussed, and implemented. I analyzed how in conjunction with other reforms introduced at the same time, reformers used this policy to usher in a conservative social change that normalized inequality (Apple, 2013). Despite the

monumental changes that reformers along with other experts in their network pursued, their role in these processes remained opaque to the public, as they continuously referred to the Ministry of Education and the President of the country as actual initiators of change. Operating as 'shadow elite' (Wedel, 2008), these reformers put up a spectacle meant to distract, disarm, and produce change that would benefit those in power.

Obscured from the public gaze were not only their true roles as initiators of change, but also their vision for the future they sought to create. Among like-minded actors, some of the reformers expressed direct support for the policies that would magnify social stratification. When discussions of equality as the Soviet legacy in Russian education arose, reformers often spoke with displeasure about those from lower socioeconomic ranks who used education to climb up the social ladder (Aydarova, 2019b). From the reformers' perspective, upward social mobility violated the established 'natural' order. At the same time, reformers argued that Russia needed to create future elites by strengthening the education of gifted and talented children while the rest of the children would receive socialization (Aydarova, forthcoming). Their positions were so shocking that one of the transcribers that I hired in Russia quit the job because of the distress that the contents of the interviews caused for him.

Engagement with these reformers was a complicated matter for me. Reformers held positions of power, privilege, and prestige. As someone who grew up in poverty in Ukraine, I could not claim any of their privileges or connections. Similar to my transcriber, I was deeply troubled by the neoliberal and neoconservative ideology that drove their work, partly because I recognized that their proposals would rob children with stories similar to mine of future opportunities. I also believed that neoliberalism violates the principles of equity and social justice necessary to build and maintain democratic societies (Bourdieu, 2003). Yet to understand reformers' proposals and policy activities, I had to face a moral and ethical conundrum of building and maintaining relationships despite our divergent stances on neoliberalism and equity.

Jokers and fools as disruptors of power

As I continuously wrestled with the question of how to navigate this challenging research situation as a critical policy analyst in the age of spectacle, I came to see myself as a joker and a fool. Or, as Dray (2003, p. 725) quipped, I became a trickster – 'a person skilled in the use of tricks and illusion.' There are several different traditions that draw on the notion of trickster, such as Indigenous (Graveline, 2000; Richardson, 2013) and feminist (Haraway, 1992; Lather, 1997) approaches to inquiry. In conceptualizing my role as a joker, however, I drew on Bakhtin's (1984) analysis of jokers' role in social transformation. In his seminal work on carnival, Bakhtin (1984, p. 8) noted that jokers and fools were 'the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit.' Unlike other actors who entered their characters onstage, jokers 'remained fools and clowns always wherever they made their appearance [thus] represent[ing] a certain form of life' (p. 8), rather than just a role in a theatrical performance.

During medieval times, official events represented the world as 'stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 9). The time of carnival, however, was the moment when these hierarchies, norms, and prohibitions were suspended, allowing the

public participating in unofficial festivities to imagine a different world. In the current historic moment, when neoliberal capitalism is presented as the only acceptable form of economic and political organization, critical policy research becomes the space where established hierarchies have to be suspended in order to pursue a more equitable and just world.

As either itinerant entertainers or as members of the court, jokers and fools had access to official events but subverted them in their own performances for the public. Through their performance of simplemindedness, naivety, or incomprehension of social conventions, they carried out an important function of calling out the hypocrisy, falsehood, and duplicity of established social norms, society's hierarchies, or institutional structures (Bakhtin, 1981). Jokers used their 'ambivalent folly' to critique 'the official world with its philosophy, system of values, and seriousness' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 260). While joker's foolishness is an active position of staging a performance in opposition to power, they use masks to disguise their position (Bakhtin, 1981). Through their masked performances, jokers disrupt established hierarchies and work through the cracks in systems of injustice. Thus, the jokers' negation of official truths and rituals is not an end unto itself, but rather a path for revival and renewal towards more equal social arrangements. Similar, a critical policy analyst can pursue inquiry in ways that might not reveal their value orientations but contribute to disrupting the post-truth spectacle through their research.

Jokers' pursuit of truth

In his seminal work on carnival culture, Bakhtin presented the distinction between the official and unofficial truth. The 'official truth' – or the 'authoritarian' and dogmatic take on the world perpetuated by the state, the ruling elites, and the church – maintained structures of domination and oppression (Bakhtin, 1984). The world of politics and policy-making is replete with 'official truths.' Policy studies that follow realist and positivist paradigms identify patterns in policymakers' responses and policy texts. Once patterns are established, these studies report 'official truths,' inadvertently reproducing the oppression those truths might obscure or support (Bacchi, 2000; Fischer, 2007).

When I interviewed the reformers and their collaborators about the teacher education modernization policy they introduced, I received 'official truths' – a consistent response from everyone in their circles. The story repeated to me time and time again went along the lines of the explanation provided by the working group secretary:

> It is necessary to understand what quality of education teacher education universities provide. The working group suggested that the quality of teacher education universities' graduates should be evaluated indirectly based on the results of such research as PISA or TIMSS, considering that the result of teachers' activity manifests itself in the students. Our standards of general education are changing. The most important thing is that we are supposed to move from the knowledge paradigm to competencies, to activity-based paradigm. It is a good thing that we have good results in TIMSS, but the image of the teacher that can prepare well for TIMSS but cannot prepare well for PISA is no longer relevant. (Interview 41a; January, 2014)

Reformers argued that PISA results revealed that public education failed to prepare students for competing in the global economy. New school standards introduced in Russia in 2011 reoriented K-12 schools towards competency-based paradigm (Aydarova,

forthcoming), but teacher education programs were not working based on this paradigm. To increase Russia's global competitiveness, education had to be improved by increasing teachers' practical preparation. The narrative was consistent not only across the interviews I conducted with different reformers but also across their public engagements – their TV interviews, conference presentations, and articles in popular and academic media. Most importantly, these 'official truths' emerged in policy texts and public reform justifications.

Drawing on joker's tools, however, I questioned whether the consistency of this narrative across different participants and different data sources increased its veracity. As powerful actors presented 'official truths,' I looked for cracks in their stories. Through interviews with reformers, I learned that international assessments, such as TIMSS and PISA, did not pose any real interest for the public and therefore did not create a sense of urgency to change education among state officials or the public. As one of the reformers explained to me after the teacher education reform was introduced, 'In Russia, there was no crisis around PISA. Ask anyone on the street what PISA is and they won't even know what it is. Most people certainly don't care. We just needed to have something to get the ball rolling' (Interview 78, December 2015). The logic of reformers' reasoning that if they changed teacher education, schooling would improve was not supported by much academic scholarship and was questioned even by international researchers that reformers invited to present during LEU's public seminars, such Michael Fullan or David Berliner.

Through informal chats and observations of reformers' explanations for this reform in more private contexts, I learned that many of them saw stand-alone teacher education universities common in Russia as an 'anachronism, atavism of socialism' (Interview 47, February 2014) that created opportunities for social mobility. Despite the growing nostalgia for the Soviet past and appreciation for the equity-oriented Soviet schooling in the society at large (O. Aydarova, 2015), reformers used this reform to get rid of the Soviet educational legacies. Reformers and experts in their networks also saw this reform as an opportunity to change values in the Russian society. In an attempt to eliminate the dependence on the state perceived as a vestige of the Soviet past, they aspired to create new generations of self-reliant *Homo Economicus* (Ong, 2006). Finally, there were some among them who were enthralled by the developments in the private sector. They supported this reform to change the educational system, so that schools would serve corporations better. These 'unofficial truths' were rarely shared publicly. Instead, they existed as slip-ups in private talks, short comments in internal meetings, fragments of personal biographies, or lectures given in spaces with minimal publicity. In other words, all of these stories existed behind closed doors in order not to jeopardize the reform because these pursuits went counter to the hopes and aspirations of the public.

Another set of 'official truths' emerged when I asked reformers how this policy was received. Several of them explained that their proposal did not encounter any opposition because it reflected general consensus:

> It is harmless. This is one of those reforms that has not faced any real opposition. You see, those who work for teacher education universities themselves understand how dangerous the situation is [because of the low quality of education they provide]. That is why nothing is happening. That is why they are so calm. (Interview 48, February 2014)

At the same time, they were aware that when the Ministry of Education released a draft of the policy for public discussion, the public reaction was negative:

> Bloggers were the first ones to react and they always write negative reviews of what the Ministry does … What motivates a blogger? Desire to attract attention. You cannot attract attention with positive news. The Ministry does not understand that. And newspapers reprint what bloggers are writing without any fact-checking. (Interview 43; January 2014)

Bloggers, however, were not the only critics of the reform. Six days after the Ministry released the draft of the policy, one of the most influential business magazines published a scathing criticism of the reform (Privalov, 2014). That criticism was echoed across other media outlets and releases by professional organizations. My fieldwork included observations and interviews with members of the teacher education community. During my time at the teacher education universities – the objects of reform in this case – I learned that the educational community was mobilizing their opposition and resistance to reformers' proposals. This opposition was so strong that teacher educators convinced the Ministry not to include the policy in the meeting agenda, so that it would not be ratified and signed into law (Aydarova, 2019b).

My role as a joker in this research was to disrupt 'the official truths' and to challenge the narrative reformers curated for public consumption. Getting to the unofficial truths required not being seduced by 'saturated themes' of repeated narratives (Bernard, 2011), but pursuing cracks in reformers' stories, tracing contradictions in accounts they presented in different spaces, and juxtaposing interview data with data collected from other sources and sites. To accomplish that, I had to traverse between different sites and interact with different actors inside and outside reformers' networks. I also had to enter the spaces behind the closed doors. Or, using Goffman's (1959) language borrowed from the world of theater, I had to enter the backstage where the actors take off the masks and engage in the conversations intended only for the inner circle. However, for me to reach those spaces I myself had to wear a mask – the point I turn to next.

Jokers' Masks

Jokers and fools wear masks concealing their faces and their penetrating gazes that observe, notice, and document. As Bakhtin explains, jokers' masks fulfil many important functions:

> [masks] grant the right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life, the right to parody others while talking, the right not to be taken literally, not "to be oneself," the right to act life as a comedy and to treat others as actors, the right to rip off masks, the right to burn with a primeval (almost cultic) rage – and finally, the right to betray to the public a personal life, down to its most private and prurient little secrets. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 163)

Jokers' masks disarm; their foolishness and lack of seriousness dispel fears. Masks allow jokers to enter spaces foreclosed from the rest of the court – the spaces where they become privy to private conversations and where they investigate the inner-workings of the court to collect pieces for their acts.

When conducting research at LEU's Department of Education where most reformers worked, I was often referred to as an intern. The mask of an intern was convenient

because it afforded me an opportunity to wander around the Department, ask questions, and look generally clueless. I managed to speak to secretaries, get copies of class schedules, and receive permission to visit classes. I was also provided with space in LEU's shared office, where I would often spend time looking at research databases or reading policy-related documents – activities that aligned with my role as an intern. Once, I became a participant in a conversation that revealed how reformers interacted with the Ministry of Education. The working group secretary was preparing to leave the office and when a colleague asked where she was headed, she turned around and said, 'To the Ministry.' Then, she added,

> You know what I realized recently. We should all create a little library of the president's speeches and quotes. Without those there is not much you can do with any proposal. We sent some documents to the ministry. They returned them to us with corrections. The person who did the corrections inserted Putin's quotes everywhere. (Field Notes, February 2014)

This was one instance among many where conversations in the backstage area revealed how 'the power itself is most often wielded' (Hunter, 1995, p. 154). While the group designed the policies, they would state in interviews or in presentations that those policies came from those at the top of the hierarchy – the President or the Ministry of Education. This strategy was evoked on a regular basis to obscure experts' role in the reform processes and to ensure implementation even amidst significant contestations over reform ideologies. Yet in private conversations, they would make comments that reforms were underway because 'someone inserted this idea into the President's head' (Interview 47, February 2014) or that 'the Ministry will want what we tell them to want' (Field Notes, June 2014). These comments revealed unofficial truths about who was preparing reform designs and how reform opposition was disarmed by evoking higher powers. Access to these conversations and comments, however, was only possible under the mask of a harmless intern.

At the same time, joker's mask was uncomfortable because it required that I play dumb in research contexts. The literature on elite interviewing is full of examples of a delicate balance between appearing to know too much so that there is nothing to learn or acting innocent but not communicating complete lack of knowledge of the situation (Ball, 2013; Hunter, 1995). The most important strategic resources that fools or jokers have is the mask of not knowing and not understanding. They use this mask to question the obscurantism of those who hold power.

During interviews with reformers, I was a joker who needed help to make sense of the onslaught of changes and reforms. With one interviewee, I asked six times why educational change was necessary. Reading over that transcript was painful. It was embarrassing to see so much foolishness in myself. Yet each time I brought in the mask of incomprehension, I pushed beyond imagined consensus on the matters that we discussed. At first the answers scratched the surface – because the world is changing, because work is becoming different, because new jobs are becoming possible. But at the end, my participant blurted out, 'I can tell you that it is necessary so that corporations could receive modern well-prepared engineers for space exploration, for the atomic industry. It is clear without me saying it' (Interview 51; February, 2014). It might have been a self-evident truth that went without saying for him, but it was not for me and neither was it for most members of the public and the educational community. Without the mask of incomprehension, I would not have gotten this far in this conversation.

As Bakhtin pointed out, jokers use their masks to hide their 'primeval (almost cultic) rage' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 163), so that it can become fuel for the honesty of a later performance. During one of the meetings that I observed, one of the reformers described his vision for deschooling society. His proposal was to get rid of schools and have students earn money by mastering competencies on their own, wherever and however they chose to do it. When the room of attendees from the LEU responded in shock, he commented, 'I guess I am more neoliberal than you all are' (Field Notes, January 2014). After that meeting, I wrote how my hands were shaking during that presentation, how questions were burning in my mouth, and how the desire to speak up was eating away at me. I could not respond in the middle of fieldwork. I had to hide my rage behind the joker's mask.

Rage during the presentation was not the only time when I had to evaluate the situation and conceal my reactions. When reformers made disparaging remarks about teachers and teacher educators, I focused on taking notes. When disparaging comments about children living in poverty or immigrant children with limited Russian skills were made, I bit my tongue. Engaging a more confrontational style to disrupt reformers' narratives was an option advocated by some in the field (Kezar, 2003; Thuesen, 2011), but that would have resulted in an abrupt end to the inquiry. Jokers' masks allowed me as an ethnographer to focus on the elites' production of inequality without revealing my stances and jeopardizing the project. The price of wearing a mask, however, was feeling complicit in the changes that were being introduced and being unable to interrupt the reform.

Jokers' masks, however, did not guarantee unfettered access to insider knowledge during my research. My very first interview with the secretary of the working group that allegedly designed the reform was relaxed. I was curious to find out how the policy was designed and why it was necessary. In a tone of a middle school teacher, my interviewee laid out for me basic ideas of the reform. Several weeks later, one of the reformers joked with her in the elevator in front of me that I was going around 'sniffing out secrets' (Field Notes, January, 2014). I tried to laugh about it with them but the secretary became cautious around me. During my second interview with her, the secretary's tone changed. It did not become icy cold, but it was no longer warm either. The didactics of the middle school teacher became substituted with the distant voice of a phone operator. After that interview, I wrote in my research journal in utter exasperation:

> I left this conversation utterly exasperated. Do I look like a fool? "Everyone agrees. No disagreements. Nothing changed. [Policy proposals] only got polished up a little. Everyone contributed. Everyone discussed." How? "As usual." It is as if I am digging in someone else's dirty laundry and their job is not to let me through, not show anything to me. (Research Journal, January, 2014)

Seeing how heavily guarded some of the aspects of reform became, I became more intentional trying to uncover what I was being steered away from.

Jokers' impertinence

Some scholars have proposed that research with the powerful can be conceptualized as a collaborative transformational project where policy elites participate in developing research questions and shaping the inquiry process (Kezar, 2003; Morris, 2009). My experiences, however, cast a shadow over such proposals. From the very beginning of my

research study, one of the reformers told me that the policy I was focusing on – 'the Concept of Support for the Development of Teacher Education' – was not worth my time. Instead, I should direct my efforts elsewhere because there were other policy initiatives that would be much more interesting to study. After several months in the field, I learned that the projects that I was encouraged to consider were success stories, from the reformers' perspective, that did not generate as much controversy as the teacher education reform. Had I taken the reformers' lead in changing the focus of my study, I would have participated in recreating the spectacle and the power's 'uninterrupted monologue of self-praise' (Debord, 1994, p. 19).

This realization increased my appreciation for jokers' impertinence in directing the gaze towards the areas that the powerful do not want anyone to see. When I started my research at LEU, I asked how the reform was developed. The working group secretary – my contact person – explained that the reform was developed by a working group that consisted of 22 people. I wanted to interview them and she offered to facilitate the introduction. After I emailed her the description of my project with a request for an interview addressed to working group members, I waited for two weeks. Eventually, she said that only two people could talk to me because everyone else was busy. After another two weeks, I learned that my email never went out to the entire working group. Instead, reformers' small group discussed my request. They decided that two of the six people in their inner circle would talk to me. It took a lot of persistence on my part to interview not only all the reformers in the inner circle but also several other participants from the list. That experience yet again made it clear that reformers attempted to steer me away from controversy and contradictions to their stories. The 22 people on the list represented many different institutions, some of which were deeply antagonistic towards the reform. From the reformers' perspective, putting me in touch with those who opposed their reform would have shattered the story of consensus, dialogue, and democratic deliberation that they presented to me and to the public. I had to be an impertinent joker to get past these barriers.

Another way in which I deployed joker's impertinence was by incorporating observations of events into my data collection that on the surface seemed disconnected from reformers' activities. By mapping out network connections between different experts, I soon discovered that many of the key players were affiliated with the Shchedrovitsky Foundation – a non-profit that focused on the maintaining the legacy of a late Soviet philosopher Georgiy Shchedrovitsky. Even though some of the reformers were not forthcoming about Shchedrovitsky's influence on their thinking, I incorporated the Foundation's annual conference into my data collection. To my surprise, I found milling around the conference some of the key actors in educational reforms and heard questions relevant for the topic that I was studying. Observations at events where I was not invited or even alerted about brought rich insights into hidden stories of this reform.

As I completed the project, my interactions with Russian reformers moved onto new stages. Because reformers are academics who read many of the journals where I publish my work and attend many of the same conferences that I go to, our paths continue to intersect. During one international conference, one of the reformers attended my presentation about teacher education reforms in Russia. Afterwards, he shared with me that the metaphor of political theater was a productive lens to look at policy processes, but he did not agree with my observations that reforms could exasperate inequality in the

country, 'There were dozens of issues we could not address through this reform, like climate change. We did not include issues of inequality because you cannot do everything with one reform' (Research Journal, September 2020). While this interaction was generally collegial and friendly, it raised questions of what my research findings would have been like if reformers had more control over my inquiry.

Jokers' ethics

Critical policy analysis that involves research of the powerful raises a thorny question of ethics. When the American Anthropological Association drafted its standards of ethics, the requirement of 'protecting participants' interests' created tensions. Those who studied the powerful raised questions about the application of this requirement to the research that critiques regimes of domination and control (Nader, 1999). Pels (1999, p. 112) argued that 'in the case of "studying up," the interests of the people studied [should] be questioned rather than defended.' Protecting insider secrets might afford the care and respect to the study's participants the standards called for, but it would not serve well the broader vision of disrupting the status quo of inequality and injustice (Pels, 1999). As Baez (2002) aptly said, 'hidden power arrangements are maintained by secrets' (p. 52). Respecting reformers as individuals is not the same as honoring their roles in using educational reforms to (re)create systems of oppression and injustice.

From the perspective of ethical standards in the field, the trust that participants put into someone who they thought was harmless is violated because that which was hidden has now become visible. But seen from the perspective of jokers and fools, this conundrum acquires a new meaning because 'the making-public of specifically nonpublic spheres of life is one of the more ancient functions of the fool' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 161). Once that which was secret becomes public knowledge, it becomes contestable, laughable, scrutinizable, and malleable. Jokers' revelations about those who hold power drop the seeds of change and create a possibility of a different future. As Bakhtin (1984) noted, this way jokers' performances kindle struggle towards social justice and pave the way for social transformation.

To make this transformation possible, jokers follow a model of ethics based on answerability (Bakhtin, 1990). Jokers are a part of the carnival performance but their place is among the common people. They are not positioned with other actors on stage – they are mingling with the crowds. They are not accountable to those whose hypocrisy they call into question, to those whose duplicity they parody, or to those whose abuses of power they recreate in their performances. Rather, they are accountable to those among whom they stand – the crowd of commoners who may have come for entertainment but walk away having learned something new. Jokers' position in the crowd amplifies calls for the accountability for those who represent power. Similar, a critical policy analyst in the age of spectacle needs to hold to account those who perpetuate inequality and injustice, even if they are study participants.

This type of accountability and answerability brings researchers closer to the generative and productive critique advocated by Latour (2004) who explained:

> The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. (p. 246)

Assemblies and gatherings with the public, however, run counter to the logic of neoliberal academia that individualizes scholarly work and breaks down solidarity with communities (Brown, 2015). Critical policy scholarship hidden behind paywalls of academic journals does not always reach the public sphere to generate new conversations and understandings (Kolshus, 2017). The work on performance ethnographies (Conquergood, 2013) and theater of the oppressed (Boal, 1979) have opened tremendous possibilities for bringing to the public the findings of research studies, often creating the change that leads to social justice. One question to consider is how to bring research findings to the communities whose lives are being changed by the policies under study or to the activist groups that are contesting those policies (Bourdieu, 2000). In search of possible ways to bring my critique to spaces where it could generate change, I published some of my research findings in open access journals in Russia, wrote blog posts, and made my scholarship publicly available through Youtube videos. Holding onto my joker role, I also joined one of the national scale events dedicated to the reform I was studying to raise concerns about the direction of change (Aydarova, 2019b).

There exist many options for engaging the crowds in questioning the realities they came to accept as givens and for paving ways towards change: op-eds, memes, podcasts, YouTube videos, or Twitter threads. The unresolved tension is not what options to pursue but rather how to reconcile the push of a neoliberal university for measurable outcomes with the responsibility and answerability for public good that requires work that does not neatly fall into quantifiable metrics of research productivity. This is the tension that professional organizations and academic societies have to address in the current age of spectacle and post-truth politics. Unless there is a collective push to recognize public scholarship as an important contribution to the public good and democratic renewal, critical scholarship that seeks to disrupt the systems of domination and control will remain locked away from the public behind paywalls of academic journals and research monographs.

Concluding Thoughts

This methodological provocation calls on critical policy analysts to consider new ways of approaching research with the powerful. In the age of spectacle and post-truth politics, when large proportions of mediatized societies consume falsehood daily, those who conduct research with policy elites have to grapple with the question of what worlds their studies would recreate. As Briggs (2003) noted, if a study does not question or critique power, it can potentially reproduce and normalize social inequality. Without new approaches, critical policy analysis runs the danger of recreating the spectacle and reproducing 'official truths' that obscure the inner-workings of power. One way to address those challenges would be to engage in inquiry as jokers who use tools at their disposal to access unofficial truths, make private secrets of those in power public, and use those revelations to forge new paths towards social transformation.

Engaging in inquiry with the powerful as a joker or a fool is not simply a matter of researcher's positionality. It is also a question of methodology, research ethics, and research reporting. There is a lot one can learn from jokers about how they strategically deploy masks when dealing with the powerful, how they approach official truths, how they maintain impertinence in the time of growing authoritarian controls, and how they

enter the public square to pursue social transformation. For critical policy analysis, jokers raise questions about ways in which 'official truths' work to reproduce systems of injustice and how inquiry can disrupt the spectacle of post-truth politics.

All disruptions, however, come at a cost. In the era of litigation and omnipresent lawsuits, professional truth-tellers can be particularly vulnerable (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000), especially when academic researchers are not offered the same protections as journalists or whistle-blowers. Jokers' example is worth for scholars to consider as they reimagine collective responsibility for truth-tellers in their midst. In the Middle Ages, during the time of carnival, rules were suspended giving jokers and fools the freedom to engage in social critique. No matter how scathing was the jokers' criticism of the powerful, their freedom was protected by carnival conventions. The question of protections that professional and academic societies could offer for those who make themselves vulnerable by making public the knowledge that the elites want to remain private deserves more consideration.

The world of political theater, omnipresent spectacle, and post-truth politics necessitates methodological innovations and suspensions. While major advances have been made towards redefining what it means to do policy research (Ozga, 2019), more conversations need to happen to address the question of audience and public impact of critical policy studies. Those who focus on powerful policymakers have to find new ways to 'translate' the scholarly knowledge they produce for the public and for those whose lives are affected by reforms. The ultimate goal for this translation would be to collectively hold those who perpetuate inequality and injustice accountable for the effects of their reforms (Bourdieu, 2000). Unless we find ways to interrupt the production of falsehoods by making 'unofficial truths' public, we run the risk of allowing the spectacle to continue to wreak havoc on educators and students from underserved communities.

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