

## OPPONENT REVIEW

on master's thesis of Kelsey M. Beckmeyer

### ***„Public Perception on Target Populations and Homeless Policy Design in Seattle, WA“***

The Master's thesis strive to test *“the impact of public perception of target groups on homeless policy design”* (39). The thesis is presented in five chapters organized in standard structure: Definition and Causes of Homelessness; Theoretical Background; Research Design and Methodology; The Current Situation; and Analysis and Findings.

First of all I would like to appreciate the clear cut goal of the theses and also the following analytical and methodological approach applied by author to test *“theory on the role of public perception of target population on homeless policy design.”*(41) which predicts that type of implemented public policy design will correspond with the type of social construction of the homeless phenomenon. To accomplish the test author followed the line of Schneider's and Ingram's theory focused on the relationships between positive or negative social constructions of target population and public policy. She developed their own target groups categorization better accommodated to the situation of homeless population. I think this categorization really contribute to the scientific knowledge about the phenomenon of homeless people and related public policies.

In the line with her aim to test the correspondence or non-correspondence between the types social constructions of homeless population and types of implemented public policies design the author delineate two sets of research questions:

1. questions relating to public perception of homelessness in Seattle, WA:
  - How does the public in general perceive the homeless?
  - What is the elite political narrative on homelessness?
  - How has public perception on homelessness changed between 2006 and 2016?
  - And, what was the public perception on homelessness prior to policy updates or changes in Seattle and King County, WA?
2. questions on the legislative actions in both Seattle, WA:
  - How has legislation relating to homelessness in Seattle, WA evolved from 2006 to 2016?
  - In which policy category do legislative actions fall?
  - Have any factors led to changes in homeless policy, and if so, why and how?
  - What approach does Seattle, WA currently use to address homelessness? (40)

To answer these questions the author decided to use mix of qualitative and quantitative methods - *Discourse Analysis and Narrative Inquiry* of 1,092 local news articles and *Content Analysis* of legislative data. Through the application of these methods she received robust empirical data on the homeless phenomenon and public policies (programs) focused to ameliorating it. Before the empirical chapter she presented careful and detailed methodology description. I am persuaded that all the research questions were answered correctly and the theses can serve as the very good demonstration of theoretical and empirical coherence of scientific work.

In concluding chapters she summarize the empirical results and states that the empirically identified categories of social construction of homeless population in public space can serve as a good predictor of the implemented model of public policy – “there is a recognizable correlation between how the public views the homeless and what type of policy the Seattle City Council passed. (80) The “policy type predictions based on the identified public perception are, overall, accurate most of the time (63%). This confirms the theory that public perception of target populations influences homeless policy design.”(84) My critical remark on this conclusion is focused on the term “public”. By the authors’ words: “In American cities, the policy climate is guided by the Mayor and the City Council. ... the public comments and beliefs held by the Mayor then shape the policies implemented during their term in office.” (64) Public opinion is influenced (manipulated) by elite (Mayor) and public policy too. The statement one can logically develop into banal conclusion: “policies are influenced by policy makers”. My question is, how the author can preserve such banal interpretation of her empirical findings?

Finally I would like to add, that the thesis is written in the perfect and fresh academic language and represents very good piece of scientific work. Therefore I evaluate it with the degree “excellent” and recommend it for its defense.

### **Other questions to discussion**

The author tested the hypothesis that public opinion has influence on public policy. But is it even possible in democracy that public policies are not influenced by public opinion? Some authors even state that the correspondence between the two phenomena is basic presupposition of democracy (Manza and Cook 2002).

Can author explain the essence of what she named “my theory”?

Is the idea of correspondence between social constructions and public policy really new?  
I think it is just the extension of the very old paradigm „Vox populi, vox Dei!“