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Challenge and Development: The Emerging Understanding of Policy Work

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Summary

Two themes have traversed the academic and practitioner literatures on policy and policy analysis: the search for a sophisticated technology of choice in the paradigm of instrumental rationality, and a ‘puzzling’ about the relationship of this technology to practice. A great deal of conceptual development has emerged from the tension between these two themes. There has been a re-thinking of the nature of the actors in the policy process, of the significance of the organizational forms within which they are located, and of the way in which they engage with policy problems. There has been an increasing realization that while concepts of hierarchical authority and instrumental rationality are very significant *in* the policy process, they are inadequate as descriptions *of* that process, and that attention has to be given to the place of interpretation in the construction of policy. In this context, there has been a focus on the agency of the participants, and the way that policy activity has become a form of specialized and interactive practice, going well beyond classical formulations of ‘policy analysis’. This paper reviews the way in which this conceptual development has enabled a more complex and more informative analysis of the policy process, and the place of ‘policy analysis’ as part of this process.

Keywords: policy analysis, policy practice, policy knowledge, policy actors, interpretative policy analysis

Policy, Policy Work and Policy Analysis

Policy has become a central concept, both for participants and observers, in our understanding of how we are governed. It embodies many of our tacit self-perceptions about instrumental rationality, and the coherence and legitimacy of collective

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action. It became a more explicit focus of attention in the second half of the 20th century (e.g. Lasswell, 1951), particularly in Western liberal democratic states, and a preferred way of explaining, validating and contesting the way in which the resources and authority of government were deployed. It presented government as a process in which authoritative leaders made choices ('policy') which were then put into effect by subordinate officials. Other subordinate officials might also be active before the choice, assembling information, evaluating alternative courses of action, and relating the choice to previous choices and present practices; this was termed 'policy advising'. So the practice which produced policy was seen as advising, deciding, and implementing the decision.

From the 1960s, this 'policy advising' was increasingly elaborated and differentiated, notably by the emergence of 'policy analysis' and 'evaluation' as distinct fields of knowledge and practice. Lasswell had argued for a policy science which was applied, interdisciplinary and explicitly normative, but policy analysis as it emerged in the US in the 1960s was essentially derived from microeconomics, largely quantitative, and saw itself as a neutral technology for determining the optimal outcome. The policy analyst would be a technician, independent of the day-to-day workings of the organization, perhaps a consultant, perhaps located in a separate office near the top of the organization, and called in to 'advise the Prince' when required.

As a field of knowledge, policy analysis was developed in graduate programs in public policy, where it was usually a compulsory unit, and expounded in texts (e.g. Patton and Sawicki, 1991; Weimer and Vining, 2004; Bridgman and Davis, 2004) which set out a systematic, sequential model of informed choice (although often with a cautionary note, warning that in practice the policy process might not follow this model). This expansion of academic interest in policy analysis was reflected in the emergence of journals and specialized segments in scholarly associations. 'Evaluation' similarly emerged as an intellectual field, building on a relatively long-standing interest in the field of education (see Guba and Lincoln, 1989), and the academic activity was reflected in the emergence of scholarly associations and journals dedicated to evaluation.

As a field of practice, policy analysis was institutionalized in government organisation charts (in the form of policy branches staffed by 'policy analysts') and, particularly in the US, in the staffing of the legislature (Radin 2000). Non-governmental organisations which dealt with government – professional or industry bodies, welfare providers or advocacy groups – felt the need to appoint similar staff in order to facilitate their dealings with government (Keen 2010). The institutionalization of evaluation was also evident in the organization charts (though to a lesser extent), but much more in the increasing tendency for evaluation to be required as

a condition of government funding, whether from the centre to lower levels of government, or from government to non-government bodies. These evaluations were often carried out under contract by consultants, either from consulting firms or universities, and these became (in this way) ancillary elements of government.

This was the model of policy work 'in good standing' (Schon 1973), though Radin (2000) found that the work done by designated policy analysts was very varied and often had little resemblance to the methodology of systematic comparison in which the analysts had been trained. Aberbach and Rockman concluded that the early enthusiasm for policy analysis in the US seemed to have faded by the 1980s, and Howlett, similarly, found that 'even in advanced countries such as Canada, the level of policy analytical capacity... is low' (2009a: 153). Certainly, the policy workers identified by Page and Jenkins in their *Policy Bureaucracy: policy with a cast of thousands* (2005) resembled much more the old Administrative Class of the UK civil service – smart generalist bureaucrats with diplomatic skills – than they did the policy analysts envisaged in the policy analysis texts. So while the model of policy analysis as a key element of policy development was well-established, it was not clear how much it had been taken up by governments.

Modelling and Doing

The model is clear; the question is how much of a guide it is to the development of the policy process in governments across the world. Certainly, a number of aspects of it proved problematic; they are all related to one another, but it is useful to think of them under a number of headings.

a. Actors and Locations

In the model, there were just two sorts of participants: the policy-maker and the advisers (with policy analysts emerging as a sub-set of the advisers). The analyst was there to 'advise the Prince' – 'speaking truth to power' (Wildavsky, 1979).

What sort of person could do this, and where would they be located in the organization? The initial assumption was that they would be highly skilled in policy analysis as a methodology of comparison, like the pioneers who emerged from RAND with PhDs in economics and operations research, and would either be brought in as required for specific projects, or be located in special units towards the top of the organization, within earshot of the Prince. But if the Prince was going to use policy analysis as a decision aid, then his subordinates would want to have their own policy analysts, in order to be able to present their claims in the most appropriate terms. As policy analysis became institutionalized (see below), it would become more widespread, more distant from 'the Prince', and more banal.

At the same time, it was not universally accepted that the advice the Prince needed was the findings from a scientific comparison of options. Some reformers argued that what ministers in parliamentary systems needed was a counterweight to the bureaucratic inertia of the agencies over which they presided – that the technocrats might be very good at designing the next dam, but not at thinking about whether building another dam was the best answer to a water supply problem (see, e.g., Wilenski, 1977). In this perspective, the point of a policy unit was to give the Prince a distinct stream of advice, not derived from the operational side of the agency, and the staff might have come from other areas of government, or from outside government. This perspective was further exemplified by the growth of ministerial staff or ‘special advisers’, recruited on the basis of their personal commitment to the minister and the values of the government as much (see Anderson, 2006; Connaughton, 2006). The assumption in the texts that the task was to equip policy staff with the right skills and place them at the Prince’s side did not pass without question.

b. Analysis and the Subject

The relationship between the analysis and the subject was particularly significant for evaluation, which can be regarded as a sub-set of policy analysis, even though it has its own distinct identity. Is the evaluator part of the process, or an outside inspector – the coach or the judge? This becomes an issue in terms of recruitment (for instance, does the evaluator of a medical procedure need to be qualified in medicine?), in judgments about practice (do the people whose practice is being evaluated contribute to the framing of the question and the sort of data being used to answer it?), and in the reception of the evaluation (does an evaluation where the subjects were more closely involved have a greater effect on subsequent practice?). What makes for credibility, and in whose eyes? Would the evaluation of the medical procedure be more persuasive if carried out by a doctor with no qualifications in evaluation, or a trained evaluator with no qualifications in medicine? Guba and Lincoln (1989) argue that while the dominant discourse (which they call ‘3rd generation evaluation’, while some would call it ‘summative evaluation’) has been in terms of the independence of the evaluator (‘the judge’), there is an increasing shift to a more integrated model (‘the coach’), which they call ‘4th generation evaluation’ (and others might call ‘formative evaluation’).

c. Institutionalization

As noted above, in some countries policy analysis became part of normal practice in government, and the policy analysts part of the institutional framework. We can identify a number of distinct aspects of this.

- i Incorporation. Analysts were not outsiders called in to advise the Prince on the basis of a specialized technique, but staff, engaged to pursue the corporate agenda.

- ii Specialisation. Rather than being experts in an analytical technique, policy analysts came to specialise in particular policy areas, like urban transport, child care or health financing.
- iii Negotiation. Increasingly, policy analysts found that they spent their time talking not to the Prince, but to policy analysts from other branches or organisations, with the techniques of policy analysis being the ‘duelling swords’ (Radin, 2000) that were deployed in trying to reach an agreed outcome which best suited their respective agendas.
- iv Commitment. As policy analysts became expert in specific policy agendas, they tended to become less the laboratory scientists who could discern the optimal policy from a rack of options, and more the advocates of particular policy approaches and initiatives.

Beryl Radin illustrates this nicely in her *Beyond Machiavelli* (2000) with two fictional policy analysts, one emerging from RAND in the 1960s with a PhD in economics and working for Robert McNamara in the Defense Department, and one entering policy analysis in the 1990s with an MPP and becoming a specialist in child care policy. The first feels that he can barely recognise the policy analysis in which he was trained in the sort of policy work in which the second is engaged.

d. Discourse and Diversity

In many ways, this institutionalization reflected the structure of government, which is composed of distinct elements with specialized agendas, and while in some respects, as Allison (1971) showed, these elements can be thought of as constituting a whole (‘the government’), in other respects they can be regarded as independent entities, working to their own agendas in mutual ignorance of one another, and in yet other respects, as competitors for attention and resources. One of the consequences is that policy questions can be framed very differently by different agencies. Take the problem of drug use by teenagers: for the police, this is a question of law enforcement, but just one of a great many such questions; for the health agency, this is partly about treatment for the effects of drug use, partly about counselling users, partly about discouraging non-users from becoming users; for a welfare agency, it may be seen more as a symptom of anomie, and a sign of the need for a focus on finding meaningful and rewarding activity for young people; for the education system, there are questions about curriculum content, about discipline in schools and about the extent to which the schools should be involved in law enforcement; and for the customs agency, the issue is likely to be preventing the importation of drugs. In each case, the governmental agencies involved are likely to have links with relevant (to them) non-governmental bodies, with an established discourse embodying their distinct perspective on the policy question. Any discussion about ‘the policy problem’ is therefore likely to encounter a diversity of distinct and overlapping in-

terpretations, and the textbook injunction to ‘first, define the problem’ has to be understood in this light.

e. Problematisation

For this reason, policy work was seen to be not simply about how to select the best response to the problem, but a process of ‘collective puzzling’ (Hecló, 1974) about what the problem was and how it related to existing and potential patterns of practice. The ‘interpretive turn’ in policy analysis (Fischer and Forester, 1993; Zittoun and Demongeot, 2009) directed attention to ‘sense-making’ in policy, and Roe (1994) identified the way that policy responses are framed by the ‘narratives’ adopted by the participants. Against the confident assumption that rational analysis would disclose the optimal solution to a clear problem, researchers identified ‘competing rationalities’ (Lin, 2003), multiple streams of problem-framing (Kingdon, 1984) and strategic application of appropriate knowledge (Tenbenschel, 2006). This conceptual development was paralleled and reinforced by other social science research on ‘governmentality’, deriving from the work of Foucault (e.g. Dean, 1999; Rose and Miller, 1992), which pointed to the way in which the construction of policy problems involves judgments (often tacit) on what is problematic and what is normal, what is good knowledge, who can speak, what demands action, what actions are appropriate, and who is responsible.

Re-thinking Policy

As both practitioners and observers engaged with these questions, there was a re-thinking of the nature of policy. It was increasingly recognised that rather than (or perhaps as well as) seeing it as an artefact – a decision or a statute or a directive – policy had to be seen as a complex process involving a diverse assemblage of players. To make sense of this process, we need (as Allison, 1971 showed) to make use of multiple perspectives, each of which helps to explain some aspects of the process, but none of which explains all of it. We can think of these perspectives as parallel accounts of policy, in some senses complementary, in others competing with one another. I have argued (2009) that we can identify three central accounts.

The first we can call *authoritative choice* – an account of policy as decisions by appropriate authoritative leaders. This is, of course, the mainstream or ‘common sense’ account of policy (‘what governments decided to do’), and it has retained its rhetorical primacy in the face of both critical academic research and experiential knowledge of policy activity. In Foucault’s well-known words, ‘In our political and social thought, we have not yet cut off the king’s head’. To talk in terms of government as an actor, choosing courses of action in response to known problems ‘makes sense’, not necessarily as a clarification of what has happened, but as a way of ma-

king the process, and the outcome, sensible. A problem is identified, data is collected, a case for action is articulated, views are expressed, and an announcement is made; the government has decided. Whether this is an accurate representation of the process is not relevant; it is a 'good account' of the outcome.

Both practitioners and observers know that this account of authoritative choice is a crude and unhelpful account of the way policy is developed. One experienced practitioner reported that his policy workers

... describe to me policy processes constituted not by order and rationality but by uncertainty, interpretation, contested meanings, power, volatility, compressed views of time and space and partial information. When combined with constant staff changes and the need to incorporate multiple and conflicting policies into coherent program formats practitioners are confronted with constant paradoxes. (Adams, 2005: 103)

But this is not a world of pure anarchy. There are many players, but for the most part, their positions and dispositions are relatively known. There are tensions, but these, too, are predictable: between development and conservation, between welfare-oriented and business-oriented agencies, between central agencies and operational agencies, etc. Some channels of communication are there for use, others have to be opened up. Some participants have a recognised place at the table, others have to struggle for recognition. Participants know who their likely allies and opponents are, and this includes those outside the formal structure of government as well as inside it. But there is relative stability: the things which are of concern, the people and institutions who can deal with them, the sorts of responses which might be made – these can be discerned, more or less, though there is fluidity and challenge and change as well as relative stability. In this perspective, we can give an account of policy as *structured interaction* among the recognised stakeholders (subject to challenge from the unrecognized).

So we can recognize an account of choice and an account of interaction – but what are they interacting (or choosing) *about*? To say that the participants are concerned with 'policy problems' is to beg the question; what are the problems, and what makes them so? In what sense is 'the environment' or 'the status of women' or 'the condition of manufacturing industry' a problem? Are they problems at some times, or in some countries, but not at or in others? Developing policy is an exercise in *problematizing* the world – making judgments about what is normal and what is deviant, what demands attention and where that attention should come from, what things might be done and who should do them. Both decisions and interaction rest on collectively-recognised judgments on these questions: the matters that constitute (in Bourdieu's phrase) 'serious speech'. And on specific policy issues, there is the question of what this is 'about': what is the story, and Roe (1994) traces the

way that the policy dynamic is shaped by the development and acceptance of ‘narratives’ about the nature of the problem and the appropriateness of responses. So we can recognize a third account of policy, as the *social construction* of the subject matter.

Clearly these accounts are related to one another, and the participants are likely to recognize the connections. Decision-makers want to know that the stakeholders will accept a decision (structured interaction) before they announce it (authoritative choice), and they know (or learn) that it is unwise to rely on their authority to seek to make a decision outside the range of shared expectations of policy (social construction). And the accounts interact with one another: how a policy problem is perceived (social construction) depends on who is sitting around the table (structured interaction), and who is sitting around the table depends on how the problem is perceived. So they are distinct dimensions of the same process, rather than separate spheres of action, but distinguishing them helps us to clarify particular aspects of the policy process, including what is required in the work of policy – to which we will now turn.

Framing the Work of Policy

We can see, then, that rather than seeing policy simply as a chosen course of action, it is more helpful to see it as a complex pattern of continuing activity involving a range of participants, both inside and outside government. Over the last few decades, policy has become a much more prominent part of the activity of government in many liberal democratic countries (though not all at the same rate or in the same degree), and ‘doing policy’ has become part of the repertoire of senior officials. Policy activity has become a form of specialized work, highly skilled and increasingly professionalized. This does not mean, though, that it is only to be found in state bureaucracy, since organised interests and advocacy groups have their own skilled practitioners, who are recognised as important players in the game (see, e.g., Millward, 2005). But how we understand the work of these policy participants depends on the account of policy on which we are drawing.

In the authoritative choice account, where policy is understood as the choices made by governments, the work of policy is seen in terms of informed decision-making, and not so much about the ‘decision-makers’, but about the expert advice on which they draw and the ways in which this is brought into play. So there has been a move to incorporate policy analysis into the working of government, which has resulted in positions and organizational units with ‘policy’ in their titles. The argument for these positions was that governments needed to draw on expert advice, and the North American graduate schools (and the textbooks they generated) were explicitly aimed at producing these expert policy analysts, and equipping them with

a sophisticated technology of comparison on which their analysis could be based. But as we have seen, the people appointed as policy analysts are not necessarily doing this sort of analysis, or have even been trained to do it (Radin, 2000; Howlett, 2009b). As policy became more salient in government, there was more need for relatively routine practices, like writing briefs for ministers (Howlett, 2009b). In any case, political leaders may feel that their need is for skilled analysis, but they may feel that they want advice from professionals in the policy field – foresters on questions about forestry, doctors on health, etc. They may want people who can find their way around complex bureaucratic worlds and identify opportunities for constructive outcomes: ‘fixers’. Or they may feel that the need is for partisan supporters, committed to the political program, who can serve as a counterweight to the technical inertia of the bureaucracy. So the nature of the work to be done, and of the people who could do it, was not defined, and had to be shaped in context. If the need was for expertise, was it for expertise in the subject matter, or in the technology of choice, or in the workings of government? Or was the need for commitment rather than expertise – ‘Red or expert’, as the Chinese put it?

In the structured interaction account, where the policy process is seen more in terms of the interplay between organized participants, the work of policy is seen more in terms of facilitating this interaction, steering it towards positive outcomes. It would be important for policy workers to know the terrain: the people involved, where they are located in the institutional structures, the discourses in use and the stances that participants are likely to take. They should be familiar with the ‘rules of the game’, formal and informal, and it would be useful to be familiar with the spongy organizational forms through which players within government engage with their non-governmental counterparts. The work would involve mediating and negotiating among different organizations and frameworks of meaning, and searching for opportunities for building outcomes which further their own agency’s agenda but are also consistent with other agendas. The skills needed to do this are unlikely to have been acquired by formal instruction, and certainly not in university courses in policy analysis, which tend to be ambivalent about the extent to which a policy analyst should be engaged in this sort of activity. (Van der Arend and Behagel [2010] found community activists taking training courses in order to become more effective participants in official procedures.) These skills are more likely to have been learned from experience, perhaps the experience that ‘outsiders’ have gained, so there is a well-trodden track from outside agitator to trusted representative to salaried official.

In the social construction account, however, policy development is seen in terms of shared discourses and problematisations, and these are hard to see, while it is even harder to discern their origins. The policy shift on smoking in many West-

ern countries over the last half-century has been pronounced, but in most cases, it does not appear to have been simply the result of a decision made on the basis of evidence, or of a negotiated settlement among stakeholders. Both decision-making and stakeholder negotiation have been important, but both have been governed by shared views about smoking, the extent to which it was seen as a problem, and what were seen as appropriate responses, by government and others – that is, by the social construction of the policy issue. Certainly, there have been government campaigns aimed at shaping behaviour, but it is very difficult to know what effect such campaigns have (Chapman, 1993), or why some campaigns of this sort are followed by the desired outcome and others are not (Considine, 1994). It is clear, though, that the development and transformation of these shared understandings and values involves much more than the transmission of the preference of ‘the policy-makers’; what is less clear is whether involvement in this process of social construction could be considered ‘policy work’. In the policy shift on smoking in Australia, for instance, the ‘social reconstruction’ of smoking took place over decades, and the initiative came largely from elements of the medical profession and from non-governmental advocacy groups. Over time, attitudes to smoking changed, the incidence of smoking fell, and regulation of smoking (by government and by others) increased – but rather than a linear relationship between one factor (e.g. regulation) and the others, there appears to have been a process of incremental, cumulative mutual support: the agitation contributed to the delegitimisation of smoking, which made increasingly-stringent regulation acceptable, which further undermined public support for smoking (Ballard, 2004). In the same way, the imposition (by government) of bans on smoking in pubs in Scotland was followed, in many cases, by a redefinition of smoking practices in the home, as smokers chose to constrain their own behaviour; they usually denied that the ban on smoking in pubs had influenced their decision, citing instead their concern for other family members, particularly grandchildren (Phillips *et al.*, 2007).

So while the shaping and changing of shared understandings is a part of policy development, it is not easy to see what actions lead to change, or whether the people engaged in shaping these understandings could be regarded as being engaged in policy work. Often, policy workers in government get approval for big advertising campaigns in the mass media, but there is little reason to be confident about their impact. It seems likely that more impact comes from the support for locations for encounter and discourse, facilitating encounter and negotiation, and the development (over time) of engagement, shared understanding and mutual trust. It may well be that the more evident official efforts are to shape these understandings, the less effective they are, which makes it difficult to identify policy work in this dimension of policy development.

Doing Policy Work

So the emergence of policy practice as a form of specialized work is not a natural and obvious progression, but an ambiguous and contestable process of institutionalization, as participants in specific contexts struggle with the inherent ambiguities in giving direction to governing.

For a start, they had to ask where the policy focus was to be. Was it the whole government, or a specific organization within government? As Allison (1971) points out, while in some contexts we can think of government as a whole, in others it is better seen as an assemblage of distinct and often conflicting interests. There have been a number of initiatives to establish ‘whole of government’ policy units (like the Central Policy Review Staff in the UK) in order to exercise some central leverage over the competing principalities of government, but they tend not to have long life spans. The aim, however, might be to focus on a policy field, like agriculture or youth or urban transport, in which case the aim would be to constitute a forum in which a diversity of participants from a range of organizations, governmental and non-governmental, could engage in the construction of a shared discourse. Kingdon (1984) identifies three distinct ‘policy streams’, with different participants and locations – the problem stream, the policy stream, and the politics stream – and argues that even on a clear policy issue, the nature of the policy focus will reflect the skills and concerns of that stream. In the problem stream, the question is ‘what is the nature and cause of the problem?’; in the policy stream, it is ‘what could we do about it?’; and in the politics stream, the question is ‘what should we do about it?’. There are many ways in which participants can view the task of policy work, and there need not be an explicit choice between them.

These questions about focus and location interact with questions about who might do ‘policy work’ and how it might be done. Is it a specialist task, to be done by trained experts (‘policy analysts’), or an aspect of function-based activity – i.e. does policy work in relation to health call for policy experts with no training in health or health professionals with training (or experience, or aptitude) in policy? And what is to be the relationship between the policy staff and the operational staff? And between the ‘insiders’ and the ‘outsiders’? Here, the inter-relationship between discourse and context (or ‘cogitation and negotiation’, as Hoppe, 2010 puts it) is very evident. How policy work is done reflects who is involved, how they understand the task, and in what organizational setting it is being done. Hoppe (1999) argues that the recognition of organizational and agenda diversity has meant that the task of policy analysis has changed from ‘advising the Prince’ to ‘making sense together’, and Tenbensel (2006), going back to Aristotle, argues that policy workers have to be able to master different sorts of rationale, and be able to deploy the appropriate one in a range of contexts – that is, that policy work involves the strategic use of discourse.

Conclusion

There is widespread support for the idea of ‘professional policy-making for the 21st century’ (as the UK Cabinet Office Handbook [1999] puts it), but there is no single model for putting this aspiration into practice. Framing the institutional form for policy work, whether inside government or outside it, involves dealing with a number of distinct and potentially competing rationales of practice, and in particular, managing the relationship between policy work and the other stimuli for action in the governing process, such as the inertia of present practice, finite resources, and the public drama of political contest. Policy is less concerned with defining goals than with the continuing management of the problematic – ‘the governance of problems’, as Hoppe (2010) puts it – although framing goals and evaluating possible courses of action against these goals may well form part of this continuing management. In many of the liberal democracies, the recognition that societal steering involves more than the actions of state bureaucracy has led to policy analysis being seen as a range of policy participants ‘making sense together’. For transitional polities, the key challenge may not be finding skilled policy workers, but establishing the validity of policy as a vehicle for interrogating the process of governing, and here the specific context and the work of non-governmental organizations in framing issues about governing are likely to be more important than the nature of the organizational framework for policy practice within government. One size does not fit all.

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