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Policy

Appearance and Reality¹

Overview of “Problems” and “Solutions”

“Gracious me! I’ve been talking prose for the last 40 years and have never known it.” That exclamation was by M. Jourdain in Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. I and my fellow applied social scientists, with no notable exceptions, would have to confess the same ignorance, with regard to policy, not prose, for the last 40 years. We have been that way since Lerner and Lasswell announced the emergence of the “policy sciences” in 1951 in a book with that title. In policy situations, we have gone on doing what we know best to do as social scientists. We have consistently evaded the question what it is about the policy sciences that makes them different from the other social sciences. We have been successful in that evasion, I suggest, because we have been sensitive to, and responded appropriately to, changes in context as we move from private to public organizations and from executive to administrative levels. In attributing the reasons for different practices to these contextual differences, we have been guilty, I further suggest, of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. In what follows I argue that the significant differences are conceptual, not merely contextual. I go on to suggest how we might now try to realize Lasswell’s vision that

the policy science orientation . . . will be directed toward the knowledge needed to improve the practice of democracy . . . to affirm the dignity of man, not the superiority of one set of men. (Lerner and Lasswell, 1951 : 10)

That next step takes us beyond what we mean by policy to challenge what is meant by science when people talk of policy, or economics, as a science.

¹From *A Systems-Based Approach to Policymaking*, edited by Kenyon B. De Greene. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Press, 1993.

Concepts and Definitions of Policy

Policy *formulation* must reflect the complexity and uncertainty of the environment within which choices are being made. We are not here referring to the choices that are made with respect to which goal or objective one should pursue; that is the domain of strategic planning and mission formulation. Our concern here is with forming policies. We are referring to a bias that an organization wishes to introduce with respect to a whole range of choice of means that might be made by those acting as agents of the organization; or by persons and organizations that are to some degree dependent on that organization. What is common to formulation of both strategies and policies is that both involve choices made by purposeful individuals or organizations.

Adoption of a policy should presuppose that viable plans have been made to enable the "bias" to operate in relevant areas of decision making. Unless ways can be identified so that the agents have to make choices that conform to organizational policy, e.g., follow-ups and inspections, the policy is no more than wishful thinking or window dressing. With respect to independent parties, adoption presupposes that their life-spaces have been modified in ways that lead them more often than not to make the desired choices. In this latter case, there often is no clear cut measure of effective adoption. To continually insist that there is a public policy in the absence of such evidence of adoption is to invite the so-called boomerang effect—as with many inhibitory policies, e.g., anti-smoking.

The above two statements presuppose a view of policy making that is not commonly held. A "good" policy statement would normally be held to be one which is simple and unambiguous with a clearly stated purpose that obviously serves some higher social or organizational good. The implementation of such a good policy statement could then be left to any person of common sense to work out. "Policy adoption" is simply not a problem if the policy is straightforward and stated "loudly and clearly." In this view, policy formulation is very much like formulating an advertising theme, and this may be why governmental and corporate policy making is so frequently associated with large public relations and media budgets. We shall try to explore the differences between these two views of policy. Unfortunately, we run into difficulties when we ask the first and obvious question of what makes a statement a policy statement.

In fact, the striking feature about the whole field of policy studies is the lack of definition of what it is that distinguishes policy studies ("policy sciences!") from political science, economics and applied social sciences. A common practice is to provide a simple postulate of what a policy is and then, without analysis or justification, proceed to attribute whatever meanings suit the matters under discussion. Equally common is the practice of simply ignoring the issue on the assumption that, if the author says he is writing about policy issues, then

they are policy issues (see Meehan's critique, 1985). Wildavsky, at least, in his classic study of *The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis* (1979), tried to confront the issue and admits that he and faculty colleagues have failed to resolve the matter:

How can you teach (or write a book about) a subject if you can't say what it is?

At the Graduate School of Public Policy in Berkeley, I discouraged discussions on the meaning of policy analysis. Hundreds of conversations on this slippery subject had proven futile, even exasperating, possibly dangerous. . . . Yet . . . students did learn to do (policy) analysis. . . . What was it, then, that could be learned but not explained, that all of us could sometimes do but that none of us could ever define (at least to anybody else's satisfaction?) (1971: 2)

Their teaching experiences led them to conclude that this is a subject that is "better taught backward" (p. 3).

For the moment, let us just suggest that the success of "teaching backward" is probably due to the same factors that made the case-study method of Harvard Business School so attractive when we knew so little about what constituted good management. The case-study method, insofar as it works, can do so not from inductive generalizations but only in that some general principles are intuited that can then be put to the test. We hope, in what follows, to spell out what it is that might be so intuited. Hence our primary interest, for the moment, is in the definition of policy; its conceptualization. Table 1 provides some dictionary definitions.

If the leading practitioners and scholars cannot define policy, can some help be gained from the way the word is used in society at large? This is not an unrealistic ploy as in everyday life, as distinct from academia, it is often permissible to call a spade a spade.

In the last two sets of dictionary definitions, the most modern, the repeated reference is to "a course of action," even a "definitive course of action." These references blur the distinction between policy and means-end planning, strategy and problem solving. Each of these last three terms can be taken to imply a course of action that is adopted or pursued. However, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) reference to prudent procedures seems to group together courses of action in terms of the qualities they have as means, as such, rather than their qualities as means to an end. The OED definitions abjure terms like efficacy and efficiency which would better describe courses of action as means to an end.

The apparent confusion in public usage of the term "policy" does not, however, appear in the definitions provided by Webster. It will be noted that the definitions in Webster's, original 1898 International edition, are focused on the