Understanding Policy Work

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1. Understanding policy work

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**Policy as a handle on government**

‘Policy’ has become one of the central ways in which we talk about government, presenting the process of government as a pattern of systematic action oriented to particular collective concerns. It is a central concept in a narrative of governing in authoritative and instrumental terms: governments recognise problems, and make decisions to bring public authority and resources to bear upon these problems, with ‘policy’ as the expression of these decisions. As we will see, this perspective embodies questions and puzzles for both practitioners and observers, but it occupies the centre stage, constituting a framework within which policy concerns are discussed.

In a way, the policy perspective is an alternative to the more traditional ‘politics’ perspective on government, which sees it as a competitive struggle for power and the capacity for allocation which goes with it. Of course, the two cannot be totally separated, as the politics perspective sees one of the fruits of political success as the capacity to steer government through policy, and the policy perspective assumes that political leaders will want to shape the direction of government activity through policy choices. But the politics perspective tends to focus attention on the competitive struggle for the right to choose, while the policy perspective likes to think that it is more concerned with problem-solving.

In this narrative of ‘authoritative instrumentalism’, a central place is given to ‘policy makers’, though it is not always clear who is being referred to. It also envisages that the policy makers will have ‘policy advisers’ and may also draw on the work of specialist ‘policy analysts’. We find this unduly specific and limiting in its vision. There are many people whose work is oriented to policy: political leaders, bureaucrats, professional
experts, advocates, interest group representatives, and others. These are the people we call *policy workers*. They may be employed by some part of government, or one of a range of bodies with a concern for the way that the authority of government can be brought to bear on problems: think tanks, interest groups, professional bodies, community associations, international organisations, et cetera. They may not be employed at all, but be committed activists for whom the policy concern has become a major part of their life, though in many cases, these people are drawn into paid employment, often because governments offer grants to issue-focused groups so that they can employ staff, and more easily bring their perspective to bear in official locations.

*Policy work* is the way in which these participants bring their diverse forms of knowledge to bear on policy questions but how this work is done seems to be something which is learned from practice rather than from study. ‘You learn on the job’, as one policy worker put it (Howard 2005: 10). This may be related to differences in the sort of knowledge that we have of the policy process, particularly between the detached, codified knowledge of the academic observer and the involved and (possibly tacit) experiential knowledge of the practitioner. This book brings both of these forms of knowledge to bear to illuminate the work of policy, both for the outsider who wants to understand it and the insider who has to make it happen.

This introductory chapter first discusses the ways in which policy is understood and what these mean for the nature of policy work. It goes on to discuss the way that policy work is institutionalised, and the collective nature of policy work, which can mean that policy workers find that different sorts of account that are given of their practice, and that different accounts may make sense in different contexts. It then identifies the questions that this book raises – about policy, policy work and policy workers – and shows the way in which the chapters in the book contribute to our growing understanding of policy work.
The policy narrative and policy work

The term ‘policy’ conveys a sense of clarity and stability, but its exact meaning (and its implications for policy work) is not always clear. Generally it sits within a paradigm that we can call ‘authoritative instrumentalism’, which sees government as a mechanism for official problem-solving, centred around a decision by authorised leaders, with official practice being seen as the ‘implementation’ of the decision (Friedrich 1963; Dye 1972; Hale 1988; Anderson 1997; Althause, Bridgman & Davis 2008). Within this paradigm, policy is used to refer to:

- the goals or strategies of the leaders;
- specific acts such as decisions, announcements and statutes;
- an overriding logic of action (e.g. ‘our policy on the environment’);
- a structure of practice (e.g. ‘the school’s policy on late essays’).

In some of these uses, policy refers to something specific and tangible, expressed in a document, but in other uses, it is more diffuse and has to be inferred from practice, so we find people distinguishing between ‘formal’, written policy, and tacitly-understood unwritten policy. Or they may play one usage against another – e.g. criticising structures of practice because they operate to undermine efforts to achieve stated goals. As a concept, policy would have to be considered what Levi-Strauss termed ‘a floating signifier’: its meaning depends on the context and the people speaking.

So to understand the work of policy, we have to look at the specific context in which it is produced. The narrative of authoritative instrumentalism focuses attention on the leaders, who are seen to ‘make policy’ by the exercise of their authority; policy is said to be made when leaders or groups of leaders approve a proposal. But the narrative also recognises that these proposals
emerge from the work of governing, and are channelled through officials, whose function is seen as ‘advising’ the political leader. This means the recognition of a variety of ‘policy advisors’.

There are the functional experts in the field under review – medical scientists, social workers, marine ecologists, et cetera – some of whom may well have been the instigators of the policy moves. Then there are people who might be called ‘process experts’, skilled at generating policy proposals, steering them through the complex world of procedure and stakeholder opinion, and responding appropriately to the proposals of others. The policy movement in the US gave rise to a new cadre of ‘decision experts’ who were called ‘policy analysts’, trained in graduate schools, and claimed two linked forms of expertise. One was problem-focused – what is the nature of the problem to be governed, what do we know about it, what possible responses could be made – and policy analysts were trained to generate data, both about the problem, about responses, and the impact they were known to make. Their second field of expertise was a technology of decision-making, so that alternative courses of action of could be compared in terms of the resources needed to put them into effect and their probable outcomes. The policy analyst was seen as an expert adviser who could clarify the problem, identify the alternative courses of action in response, and systematically determine the optimal response: this person would be comparable to the scientist in the laboratory, and engaged in ‘speaking truth to power’ (Wildavsky 1979).

The idea that systematic analysis should be incorporated into the governmental process was well received in the US, and ‘policy analysis’ was soon a recognised term, and became institutionalised both as a body of knowledge and as a field of practice, so that by the turn of the century Beryl Radin could report that policy analysis had ‘come of age’ (Radin 2000). The increasing use of policy analysis in government induced non-government bodies to hire policy staff who could ‘speak the language’. The discourses and norms of policy analysis became increasingly normalised through graduate programs subject to accreditation, through the
homogenising effect of conference of bodies like the Association for Public Policy and Management, and through their incorporation into ‘normal practice’ (e.g. requirements that activity funded by grants under federal programs to community groups be formally evaluated). Even academic writers who had reservations about this ‘normal practice’ sometimes felt obliged to instruct their students in its use (e.g. Clemons & McBeth 2001: chapter 8).

At the same time, it was not clear that what these people were doing matched the claims made for policy analysis. Radin found that people employed as policy analysts were likely to be engaged in a wide range of tasks, ranging from doing non-partisan research for legislators to educating the general public to lobbying for specific measures. This takes them well beyond the formal methodology of choice in which they were trained, and that as a result

There seems to be a disconnect between the analyst’s perception of self-worth (often drawn from the rational actor model) and the real contribution that the actor makes in the nooks and crannies of the policy process. […] They seem to need a language to describe what they do and to convince themselves – as well as others – that they contribute to the process. (Radin 2000: 183)

Some conclude that the knowledge in their textbooks was ‘really about theory rather than practice’ (Howard 2005: 10). This friction between the teaching and the experience finds it way back into the texts, where it can be seen in the argument about rigour and relevance: is it more important to conform to the canons of social science research, or to have an impact on the process even if it means that the research is ‘quick and dirty’? Should the policy analyst seek to build support for the optimal course of action as disclosed by the analysis? This was an important question, because policy analysts and researchers observed that carefully crafted policy analyses
did not appear to be used by decision-makers. This generated appeals for policy analysts to make their findings more accessible to busy decision makers (e.g. Edwards 2005), discussion of the various ways in which research findings might have an impact (e.g. Weiss 1982; 1991), and suggestions that perhaps the demand for analysis is not simply to generate information on which to base decisions.

Information is gathered, policy alternatives are defined, and cost-benefit analyses are pursued, but they seem more intended to reassure observers of the appropriateness of actions being taken than to influence the actions. […] choice in political institutions is orchestrated to assure its audience […] that the choice has been made intelligently, that it reflects planning, thinking, analysis and the systematic use of information. (March and Olsen 1989: 48, 50).

In any case, it was clear that those who were employed by government to work on policy were doing many things other than formal analysis, including writing texts, managing the demands of the governmental process, and above all, interacting with other players who became involved in the issue, and it is to this dimension of policy work that we now turn.

**Governing as collective activity**

In the narrative of authoritative instrumentalism, governing happens when ‘the government’ recognises problems, and decides to do something about them, and what it decides to do is ‘policy’. The narrative constitutes an actor called ‘the government’ and attributes to it instrumental rationality: it acts as it does in order to achieve preferred outcomes. This is not necessarily the way that practitioners experience the policy world. One group reported: ‘We
identified over 100 organisations involved in creating Australian illicit drugs policy. Some are national, some at the state/territory or local community level, and others are international organisations’ (McDonald et al. 2005: 11). There are many players in the game, not all them are there as part of the support crew for a single political leader, or even a collectivity called ‘the government’, and not all of them are trying to ‘make policy’. They may be from other public agencies, community organisations, professional bodies or business groups. They may be near-permanent players, or be drawn in by a particular issue. They may be skilled policy operators, or innocents having to learn a new game. But the game is not random, and over time, it has a tendency to stabilise, the players develop relations of familiarity and trust, find mutually-understood ways of talking about the policy area, and recognise their mutual interdependence. Richardson and Jordan (1979) identified this process of clustering and labelled the outcome ‘the policy community’. Others have described ‘issue networks’ (Heclo 1974), ‘sub-governments’ (Coleman & Skogstad 1990), and ‘advocacy coalitions’ (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993), and policy is now widely recognised as a multi-player game.

This dimension of policy is now more widely recognised. People in positions of authority are more likely to accept that it is appropriate for other participants to be involved in policy development, to see them as ‘stakeholders’, and to value the accomplishment of collectively-generated outcomes. Even those employed as policy professionals are likely to find that they spend more of their time negotiating with their counterparts in other agencies than they do in advising their bosses (Radin 2000), and that it is through this interaction with other participants that appropriate outcomes are discovered and agreed upon. Here, there is a clear link between the interaction and the discourse: shared discourse facilitates interaction, and interaction tends to generate shared discourse. Haas (1992) argued that the accomplishment on international policy
change on chlorofluorocarbons reflected the existence of an ‘epistemic community’ of scientists bonded by a shared understanding of the problem.

For this reason, this book is oriented to ‘policy work’ as a broad field of practice, and to ‘policy workers’, including the full range of those who find themselves engaged in the mobilisation of public authority around specific questions of collective concern – that is, in making or forming policies. The focus is primarily on what they do rather than on the prospective outcome – that is, on ‘doing policy work’ rather than ‘making a policy on x’.

**Policy development as discursive construction**

This last example points to the importance for policy development of a shared understanding of the problem. Policy work can be represented as solving problems, but it is also about finding problems identifying areas of concern in ways to which known technologies of governing are an appropriate response. This is often less to do with discovering phenomena than with re-evaluating already-known phenomena. For instance, in a number of Western countries, policy towards smoking has been radically changed in recent decades, with restrictions on where smoking is permitted, massive increases in taxation, and widespread curbs on advertising. But these changes in the regulatory regime were only possible because of changes in the shared understandings about smoking: as smoking became less socially-acceptable, it became possible to impose more restrictions on it (and in turn, these made it even less acceptable). The changing attitude to smoking reflected the activities of health professionals (some in government employ, many not) and anti-smoking activists, but also complementary activity by such bodies as insurance companies, trade unions and commercial landlords, many of whom would not have seen themselves as engaging in policy development, but who contributed to the changing perception of smoking and the consequent tightening of the regulatory framework.
Multiple accounts of policy

This book recognises that there is no simple ‘good account’ of policy work. There is a wide range of activities described as policy work, and different ways of making sense of these activities. A helpful distinction is between accounts explaining outputs and accounts seeking to explain activity. To describe the action as ‘policy-making’ is to give a central place to the apparent output – ‘making a policy on x’ – and to see the participants as contributors to this ‘making’. In a ‘authoritative instrumental’ account the action might be seen as a sequential progression to a desired output: identifying the issue, collecting data, framing options, evaluating, consulting, deciding and implementing. But an account focused on activity might show that for many participants, participation is not about making a policy on x, but on resisting it, or trying to use the interest in x to secure change in the practices of government in relation to p, q or r. The account would be framed in terms of interaction, of contest over the nature of the problem and the appropriate response, of resistance and distraction, of the search for a broadly acceptable outcome, and of ambiguity about what had been decided, and the potential for continuing contest.

The interest is not so much in how the participants collaborated to achieve a known and desired output, but how the continuing interplay between participants – involved in differing ways, to differing extents, and for differing reasons – was marked by points of apparent firmness (‘decisions’) which were then taken to have established ‘policy’ on a particular issue.

Both of these accounts of policy work can be taken as valid; it depends on the context studied (‘locus’) and perspective adopted (‘focus’). The output-based account makes sense of the result (‘the government has decided…’); the activity-based account makes sense of the experiences. The output-based account is told in a single voice; the activity-based account is told in multiple voices. The output-based account reflects a systematic and orderly understanding
of governing, the activity-based account reflects experiential knowledge. And it is clear that
different sorts of account can be given of same activity: policy work on climate change, for
instance, could be described as ‘advising the Minister’, ‘negotiating an agreed course of action
with key stakeholders’, or ‘shifting the parameters of public attention’, or even ‘tracing public
perceptions’ and ‘spinning the effects of Al Gore’s an Inconvenient Truth’; all could be equally
valid ways of describing the activity. This suggests three things:

1. accounts of policy work are not neutral; they reflect contexts and perspectives;
2. giving accounts of policy practice will be a part of that practice, and will involve
   experiential knowledge;
3. analysing policy work requires an understanding of the practices by which
   accounts are produced, both by the participants and by outside observers.

That is why this book seeks to place policy work in broader narratives of governing, will present
systemic and experiential insights into policy practices, and will reflect upon the nature of
accounts that are given.

**Our agenda for inquiry**

This multiplicity of accounts points to the importance of empirical studies of policy work,
comparable to Mintzberg’s pioneering research on the nature of managerial work (Mintzberg
1973) and the work of writers like Forester (1993) and Healey (1992), which showed that town
planning was less about making plans than about mediating between players with different
concerns who found themselves participants in a broad process of urban change. Noordegraaf
(2000a; 2000b; 2007) tracked the way that policy managers dealt with the demands of the job.
Hoppe and Jeliazkova (2006), drawing on interviews with middle-level policy workers, identified a number of quite distinct styles of policy work. A key question has been ‘why is the policy work being done?’ Tao (2006) showed that both elected members and permanent officials in American local government deploy policy analysis to support programs that they favour and to resist programs that they oppose. As Radin (2000) put it, policy analysis has become the ‘duelling swords’ which policy workers use in negotiations with other policy workers, not to generate a clear solution but to facilitate discussion.

This book is focused on policy as a continuing process, rather than as the production of completed outputs called ‘policies’, and addresses a number of problematic aspects of policy and the work through which it is produced. It highlights the tension between the perception of policy as episodes of instrumental choice (‘interventions’) as opposed to the continuing management of problematic aspects of social practice (which may at times involve the mobilisation of state authority). Accounts of policy shifts are commonly given in terms of government intention (‘the government has decided …’), but policy workers often find that these ‘intentions’ are the endorsement of painfully-negotiated understandings among stakeholders. We can see, too, that while policy is seen as an attribute and product of sovereign national governments, the process of producing it reaches upwards (i.e. to inter- and supra-national bodies), downwards (to regional and local levels of government), and outwards (to business and non-governmental bodies), involving a range of ‘non-state’ bodies in the business of exercising state authority. So there may be different accounts of policy in circulation, and the account in use may differ from the practitioner’s experience of the process. This is because the accounts of policy practice are themselves part of the practice, and this has to be borne in mind in the analysis of policy practice.

There are similar ambiguities and tensions in the study of policy work. In the narrative of authoritative instrumentalism, policy making is very much an official preserve: outsiders may
request or propose or advise, but it is for the authoritative leaders to consider and decide, and in so doing, to ‘make policy’. But there is a counter-narrative which focuses on the connections between the participants, and sees governing as the product of networks which link participants in different organisations, government and non-government, and policy as something which emerges from this interaction, rather than something that is independently determined by the governmental members of these networks. This counter-narrative of ‘governance’ has come to dominate analysis of government in the liberal democracies of Western Europe and many other countries (Rhodes 1997; Stoker 1998; Kjaer 2004; Offe 2008), and raises many questions about the analysis of policy work, including the relationships among governmental policy workers, and between them and non-governmental ones, the place of non-government in the construction regimes of rule, and the ways in which the outcomes of these linkages are ‘enacted’ through the forms and practices of authoritative instrumentalism to be recognised as ‘policy’. It directs attention to the dynamics of these interactions: to the structures through which these linkages operate, to the practices through which they are maintained, and to the shared meanings which they give rise to, and which in turn sustain the continuing collaboration.

These tensions and ambiguities about policy and policy work are reflected in the self-awareness of policy workers who experience conflicting cues for action. To what extent should they see their task as the application of expert knowledge, whether knowledge of the field of action being governed (e.g. health or transport or migration) or of appropriate methods of choice (for instance, as taught in US-style policy analysis courses)? To what extent is it to negotiate with representatives of other stakeholders in order to find an outcome which will meet with at least tacit acceptance from stakeholders? To what extent is it concerned with the management of the official structures and practices through which policy outcomes are enacted – advising leaders, generating and processing documents, and securing passage of the regulatory forms? For
the policy workers employed by government, there are questions about their relationship with their non-government counterparts, who are likely to share their professional background and whose cooperation they hope to secure; how will the need to maintain a cooperative relationship with non-government affect their orientation to the agenda of government?

The structure of the book

This shows us that we have to be attentive not only to what policy workers do, but how they (and others) make sense of this activity, in a variety of contexts. The book aims to track the nature of policy activity, and the accounts that are given of it in different contexts. It asks what it is the policy workers do in particular situations, and why is that the appropriate thing to do, what does it contribute to the policy activity, what impact does it have and what can we learn from this about the skills/knowledge required for policy work?

As we have seen, the identification of policy as a dimension of government, and of policy work as a field of practice which generates and sustains policy, is a particular account of government, which has to contend with other accounts, both in the shaping of practice and in the explanations which are given of practice. So our analysis begins with Colebatch’s investigation into the way in which accounts of government are framed, how ‘policy’ is distinguished from other aspects of governing, and how these accounts are used in the shaping of practice. Noordegraaf surveys the academic research on policy work, identifying the different levels of data on which researchers draw, the concerns that they investigate, and the picture of policy work that they assemble.

We then move to accounts of particular aspects of policy practice in particular contexts, and the questions which these accounts raise about policy work. Some of these are accounts of academic research (Geuijen, De Vries et al., Shore), some are accounts by policy workers of their
own practice (Woeltjes, Metze), and some combine elements of both sorts of account (Loeber, Sterrenberg, Williams). These accounts highlight the multiple cues and pressures experienced in policy work, the way in which policy work is concerned with continuity, but also with disruption, the range of meanings which policy activity can have for the different participants, and the way in which practitioners (particularly consultants and evaluators) locate themselves in relation to these different meanings and mediate between them. There are shared elements across these accounts, and also distinctive aspects, and we can identify three particular themes:

• **Policy workers are involved in constructing shared meaning.** Metze’s account of a redevelopment project shows the way in which consultants acted to generate innovative and shared meaning among the diverse array of interested parties. In this case, the outcome was not of great interest outside the circle of participants, and a relative open process of learning was possible. By contrast, de Vries, Halffman and Hoppe found that there was great public esteem for the economic forecasts of the Netherlands Central Planning Bureau because of its high level of expertise and autonomy: it was seen as offering unbiased expertise in a contested policy field. The practitioners knew that there was considerable uncertainty about these forecasts, and there was some debate about them between bureau experts and ministry officials, but it was important that this be kept private, and the bureau’s predictions presented purely as the outcome of its own calculations. The most important element in the construction of meaning was the meaning attributed to the bureau’s predictions by political leaders and the ‘attentive public’.

• **Policy workers are involved in mediation** between different participants and agendas, and institutional questions can be particularly important. Sterrenberg analyses a case in which ‘insiders’ initiated a review of policy in a long-established area of government. The review, which was located in an independent institute with an advisory relationship with
Parliament, encountered deep-seated cultural and institutional divisions between participants, and found that policy change called for new actor relations, and policy work involved looking for windows of opportunity to create these relations. In Loeber’s case study, a new public body was established to develop policy for sustainable development, a policy aspiration for which there was general assent but whose specific implications were unclear, and academic evaluators were involved in the project from the outset. The policy developers had to mediate between an aspiration for change and the understanding and skills of present practice, and the evaluators had to mediate between detachment and involvement. All involved in the project had to construct relationships across different meanings as they found themselves engaged in both ‘collective puzzling’ and ‘powering’ (Heclo 1974).

- While policy is seen as a state function, *policy works runs beyond the nation-state*. Political leaders preside over an apparatus of state officials, but these officials find that often, they have to reach ‘upwards’ to the international level, ‘sideways’ to business groups and non-government organisations, and ‘downwards’ to local communities and social groupings. Sterrenberg’s chapter shows policy activity reaching downwards, and Loeber’s chapter shows it reaching sideways. This has been particularly evident in Europe with the development of policy at a European level through the European Union, but it can be seen throughout the world, both ad hoc as incidents like the outbreak of SARS leads to an expansion of the policy surveillance role of the World Health Organization, and more systematically as in the standardisation of the regulation of commercial practice through the World Trade Organization. When policy workers are working in these wider fields, they are subject to a wider range of cues for action, which have to be balanced against traditional norms of professional skill and responsiveness to political leadership. We have two case studies of the way that national officials respond to the challenges of European-level policy work, one a practitioner account, the other a piece of academic research.
Woeltjes (the practitioner) find that in this trans-national context, policy work is rarely concerned with strategy, and much more with negotiation through complex institutional provisions which allow varying amounts of room for manoeuvre. Policy workers are engaged in the maintenance of relationships among the various players, maintaining a flow of information and engaging in a continuing conversation through which problems are ‘discovered’ and appropriate responses to them are negotiated. This account is supported by the academic research of Geuijen and t’Hart, which stresses the importance of political preference in the domestic policy dynamic and its relative absence at the European level, where policy workers are receiving multiple cues for action without an overriding political ‘steer’. This means, as Tenbensel (2008) would put it, that they are in a ‘no trumps’ game, in which a range of policy workers with multiple identities manage an ambiguous policy field on a continuing basis – a process that the authors describe as ‘professional bricolage’. They have to be credible in the European context without finding themselves exposed at home.

Our analysis has found that policy work is traversed by multiple, overlapping and sometime conflicting accounts of practice, and policy workers have to negotiate their reality within these different accounts. But there are also likely to be differences between the accounts that policy workers are likely to give of their own practice and the accounts that outside observers (like academic researchers) might give. We have already noted the distinction between output-based and activity-based accounts; we can also distinguish between accounts that are grounded in the logic of the system and those that are derived from the observation of activity, and between ‘sacred’ accounts for public consumption, and ‘profane’ accounts which are shared between trusted associates. Practitioners and academics are likely to ask different questions about policy work and to address them in different ways and in different timeframes. The outcome is a
widespread complaint from practitioners that academic research is not ‘useful’, which is matched by a complaint from researchers that their research is not used. Two final chapters address this conflict between academic and practitioner knowledge. Shore (an academic) responds to the claim that academic research is not useful and that researchers should ‘learn to think and talk like policy-makers’. He points to the tension between the ‘authoritative instrumental’ framework to which practitioners are (at least publicly) committed and the more critical standpoint of the academic researcher. He argues that the value of academic research is that it is open to alternative explanations and tests them against the evidence, and this yields a better understanding of the process through which the concept of policy is mobilised in the management of practice. On the other hand, Williams (wearing both an academic and a practitioner hat) argues that while academic and practitioner perspectives are quite different, they are both valid and every effort should be made to encourage communication across the barriers. She reviews the critique that each perspective makes of the other, and the barriers that they raise against learning from each other, and outlines steps which might be taken to build ‘a culture of engaged communication’ between academics and practitioners.

Policy, both as a sphere of practice and as a field of knowledge, has undergone considerable change in the last few decades, as has the sort of work that is associated with it. The questions for analysis are only now being marked out, and there is not yet an established body of knowledge. This book emerged from a gathering of academics and policy practitioners aimed at bringing together academic and practitioner knowledge to make for more informed policy work, and more practical policy research. This book can only be a beginning, but we hope that it will make a contribution both to study and to practice, and will be followed by further studies – and by the development of more critical and self-aware practice.
References


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