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Reflections on contemporary debates in policy studies

Abstract

This article offers reflections on contemporary debates in policy studies. It starts by mapping the contours of the terrain covered by *Policy & Politics* over the last forty years. It does so under four headings: (i) theorising policy (ii) evidence and the policy process (iii) transforming structures and processes and (iv) implementation and practice. It then uses these headings to draw out themes from the articles comprising this 40th Anniversary Special Issue. We conclude by arguing for greater tolerance of diversity in theoretical and empirical enquiry and for continued reflection on the foundational assumptions of the field of policy studies.

Key words: policy studies, policy analysis, evidence, governance, implementation, evaluation

Introduction

The journal *Policy & Politics* occupies unique intellectual terrain. From the outset it has sought to foster a dialogue between the discipline of political science and the field of public administration. It has recognised the ambiguity in the nature of public administration: it is both a field of academic endeavour and a set of professional practices. The journal has a foundational commitment to ensuring that the products of the academy are informed by the insights of practice, while making sure those products are accessible to reflexive practitioners. The journal has worked with the grain of policy studies in emphasising the importance of all the components of policy-making: it views politics as relevant throughout the policy process, rather than being contained within the complex choreography of the institutions of representative democracy. There has consequently been limited support for models relying on a simplistic division between politics and administration; the journal has been associated with significant contributions to debates over policy implementation and policy in action (notably Barrett and Hill, 1984). The journal has been open-minded on questions of methodology: it has accommodated a broad range of quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods. It has responded sympathetically to significant shifts in the intellectual terrain such as increasing emphasis upon inter-professional and joint working, the arrival of the discourses and practices of public management, and more recent preoccupations with questions of governance beyond the state.

The fortieth anniversary of the journal is an opportunity to reflect upon both its achievements and the current state of the debates. Interest in appraising the current state of the field of policy studies is evident elsewhere (Nowlin, 2011). There have recently been calls for greater consideration of how researchers go about their work and what it is they are seeking to achieve (Raadschelders, 2011; Cairney, 2013a). The lack of reflection on the philosophical foundations of alternative analytical perspectives is highlighted as problematic. Detailed work exploring important philosophical currents in thinking continues (Whetsell and Shields, 2013) but this type of reflection is yet to be routinely integrated into research activity. Embracing deeper reflection can, however, be uncomfortable. It can surface significant problems. Calls for new thinking which challenges dominant approaches can generate considerable hostility, as is evident in the initial responses to Luton's (2007) relatively modest call for greater awareness of the role social construction plays in shaping our knowledge base (Meier and O'Toole, 2007; Andrews et al, 2008). Yet, the discomfort induced by close questioning can open up opportunities for significant theoretical and empirical development.

This article aims to locate the contributions to this Special Issue in relation to key debates. The article starts by mapping the key contours of the terrain covered by *Policy & Politics* over the last

forty years. It does so under four broad headings: (i) theorising policy (ii) evidence and the policy process (iii) transforming structures and processes (iv) implementation and practice. The third section uses these headings and draws out some key themes from the articles comprising this Special Issue. The fourth section concludes with five key arguments. First, we advocate greater tolerance of diversity in theoretical and empirical enquiry. Second, we encourage an open mind in relation to the production and utilisation of research evidence in the policy process. Third, we feel the academy has a public duty to work with practice to generate the ‘big ideas’ and more expansive thinking currently lacking in austerity politics. Finally, we suggest that further theoretical and empirical examination of the role of individuals, leadership and ‘agency’ would be valuable. Finally, we note *Policy & Politics* aims to rise to the challenge of remaining reflexive and open minded in responding to future trends and setting research agendas.

Key themes in policy studies

This section briefly reviews four inter-related themes that we consider have been central to policy studies over the life of *Policy & Politics*. We start by considering the broad topic of theorising policy. We then focus on the more specific issue of the role of evidence in the policy process. Our third topic is the reconfiguration of structures and processes of governance and delivery. This issue has taken on a new urgency in the context of austerity politics. Finally, we consider implementation and practice. Cross-cutting these four themes are some recurrent, more fundamental, analytical issues such as the analysis of structure and agency.

Theorising policy

John (2012) proposes that we can bring order to the profusion of competing accounts of policy and policy change by identifying five broad explanatory approaches. His framework has resonance across several debates within policy studies. John argues that theory will tend to draw concepts, variables and causal explanations from one of the following approaches: institutions; groups and networks; exogenous factors; rational actors; and ideas. John is also an advocate for evolutionary explanations for policy (John, 2003; John, 2012, pp165-171). Each of these families of theory in turn covers a number of more subtly differentiated approaches. This is perhaps clearest in institutionalism where historical, sociological and rational choice variants are identified (following Hall and Taylor, 1996). These have now been joined by discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008; 2012).

Giving theoretical primacy to one of John’s five approaches can deliver ‘pure’ explanations for policy. More common in policy studies are synthetic explanations. The three explanatory frameworks that dominated the theorisation of the policy process during the 1990s (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1995) were all, to varying degrees, synthetic approaches. Attempts to provide synthetic explanations have subsequently become more elaborate: they seek to encompass an ever greater array of variables drawn from more of John’s five approaches (John, 2003; Real-Dato, 2009).

Cairney (2013a) has recently asked some probing questions about the way in which theories in policy studies are brought into dialogue. Producing synthetic explanations is only one possibility. Theories can be used to complement each other: providing different perspectives on the same issue. Or we may recognise that theories potentially contradict each other: they offer conflicting explanations and the analytical task is to compare theories in order to select the most effective. The key point we draw from Cairney’s article is that authors are not always sufficiently clear in distinguishing situations of theoretical contradiction from situations of theoretical synthesis. Synthesis may be attempted where theories make incompatible assumptions about the nature of

social or policy processes or are using nominally similar concepts to signify different things. This can lead not to successful synthesis but the risk of theoretical incoherence. Cairney's point is well made. Theory inevitably entails ontological and epistemological commitments, but these are explicitly examined less frequently than would be desirable. Recent calls for closer examination of the philosophical foundations of policy studies resonate with earlier arguments in political science (Hay, 2006; Schram and Caterino, 2006), and similar debates are being played out in parallel in different strands of the literature.

At the core of this discussion is methodological monism: can and should policy studies pursue knowledge of the type assumed to be accessible to the natural sciences? Different answers to this question rest on different ontologies. They deliver different epistemologies and hence different views on, for example, the scope and nature of intellectual progress and knowledge accumulation within policy studies. In practice, positivist thinking had a strong grip on policy studies for many years, as it did on political science and public administration. This resulted in a premium being placed upon hypothesis testing, quantitative methods and the statistical estimation of models. However, counter-currents of postpositivism have not only developed but arguably continue to strengthen (Fischer, 2003; Fischer and Gottweis, 2012; Bevir and Rhodes, 2003). Poststructuralist arguments around the potential contribution of governmentality to policy studies have assumed particular prominence (Bevir, 2011). A strand of the current policy literature explicitly takes the argument a step further. It embraces Law and Urry's (2004) argument that social science is performative: it does not simply describe the social world but also has the power to transform it (Newman, 2012).

One intriguing current development is the occurrence of an apparent theoretical bifurcation. On the one hand, authors are looking more explicitly for inspiration from the natural sciences. On the other hand, research is developing in strongly qualitative and interpretivist directions. The former move is most clearly evident in the rise of concepts such as "complexity" and "evolution". Both concepts have origins in natural science, and are used in myriad different ways in policy theory (Cairney, 2013b; Geyer and Rihani, 2010). Much of the use is allusive or metaphorical: there is limited direct importation of theoretical models and mechanisms from natural science. There have, however, been direct attempts to use concepts from complexity science and synthesise them with established concepts such as path dependency (Room, 2011; 2012). The debate over what has been, and what can be, achieved by these borrowings from natural sciences has increased in sophistication (Prindle, 2012; Little, 2012).

Approaches that look to the natural sciences can be contrasted with moves towards policy anthropology (Shore et al, 2011) and policy ethnography (Rhodes, 2011). Such approaches take a very different stance on ontological questions such as the nature of social structures or the explanation of continuity and change. They favour detailed qualitative research which seeks to unlock meaning. Micro-level analysis of subjectivity, ambiguity, and interpretation provides insights into how policy actors construct and reconstruct their world and act within it and upon it. The potential and achievements of this approach to policy studies continue to be appraised (Hay, 2011). Here again we encounter arguments in favour of theoretical synthesis. For example, McKee (2009) has argued for the synthesis of governmentality theory with ethnographic approaches as a means of unravelling the activity of governing and the intricacies of the struggles inherent in much contemporary policy.

The terrain of policy studies is, if anything, becoming ever more varied. It remains an open question whether the field is characterised by vibrant pluralism and dialogue or by a series of parallel conversations with limited interaction. There would be considerable value in developing this discussion further. However, our objective here is simply to provide a brief overview

highlighting some of the issues at stake and some of the directions in which the debates are developing.

Evidence and the policy process

Since the turn of the millennium a key strand of the debate has examined the idea of evidence-based policy, both in theory and practice (Parsons, 2002; Sanderson, 2002; Bochel and Duncan, 2007). Evidence-based policy lies squarely within the tradition of rational, technocratic policy making. It implies that certain types of generalisable, non-context specific knowledge are not only achievable but have been achieved. While the literature addresses both the demand for and supply of evidence (Duncan and Harrop, 2006; Nutley et al, 2007), greater focus has been on producing evidence in forms that are sufficiently digestible and timely to influence policy. The primary audience for such advice is academic researchers. Yet, academic researchers speaking directly to policy-makers is only one mechanisms by which ideas are imported into policy. Think Tanks have significant success in making timely and digestible inputs - grounded in evidence of wildly varying quality - into policy. Similarly, key actors in the policy process - such as Special Advisors - can play a vital translation role (Gains and Stoker, 2011).

The scope for practicing evidence-based policy has been widely questioned, as has its desirability on normative grounds. The question of the context-specificity of policy knowledge comes most sharply into focus in the related literature on policy transfer (Ettelt et al, 2012). The debate has moved on to ideas of evidence-informed policy and policy-based evidence. This move signifies a recognition that evidence sits alongside many other influences upon policy (Mulgan, 2005) and, indeed, a greater sensitivity to the role of power and politics in constructing “evidence” (Sullivan, 2011). These developments echo broader debates about the fragility of social scientific knowledge, and the strategic role of ignorance in social processes (McGoey, 2012). The acknowledgement that evidence can sit in a range of different relationships with the policy process represents something of a rediscovery of themes well-established in the research utilisation literature (following Weiss, 1979), although new dimensions have been added to the debate (Sanderson, 2009; Downe et al, 2012).

Transforming structures and processes

An ever-present theme over the last forty years has been the transformation of the organisational structures through which policy is developed and delivered. One strand of this discussion relates to changing political structures and processes: reconfiguration of the institutions of representational democracy and the rise of participative and direct democracy. The other strand of the discussion examines changing modes of policy and service delivery. The connection between these two strands is of increasing significance (Copus et al, 2013), but here we focus upon changing modes of delivery.

The ideas corralled under the heading of New Public Management (NPM) (Hood, 1991) challenged Weberian bureaucracy, the dominant models of organisation within the public sector. They led central governments across the globe to separate policy from delivery in processes of agencification (Pollitt and Talbot, 2004) and a recurrent debate over the so-called Quango State (Skelcher, 1998; Flinders, 2008). NPM also inspired the unbundling, market testing and contracting out of public services. Following Osborne and Gaebler (1993), the mantra ‘steering not rowing’ was frequently invoked to encapsulate the appropriate role for government; novel organisational forms such as the quasi-market evolved.

Analytically the discussion of organisational design was initially structured around the relative merits of markets, hierarchies and networks. One core question is the conditions under which moving services to the market is likely to deliver enhanced performance (Greener, 2008). A second strand of the discussion framed the issues more broadly and debated whether we have moved from the era of government, dominated by public bodies directly under political control, to an era of governance, in which a more fragmented landscape of independent organisations is responsible for both policy and delivery (Kooiman, 2003). The dominant logic of organisation was characterised as shifting from hierarchy to network.

However, empirically it became apparent that markets, hierarchies and networks are ideal types. They are rarely observed in pure form in practice (Exworthy et al, 1999). Organisational fragmentation gives rise to new types of co-ordination problem that must be overcome. Framing analysis around ideal types risks misreading organisational change and continuity. While the NPM project has proved highly problematic in practice (Hood and Peters, 2004) and possible successors have been identified (Dunleavy et al, 2006; Benington and Moore, 2010), it has also been argued that the rejection of traditional bureaucratic models fails to recognise both their resilience (Olsen, 2008) and value(s) (du Gay, 2000; 2005; Clegg et al, 2011). Recent developments such as the putative emergence of a 'new public governance' (Osborne, 2010) have led to a perceived need to reformulate well-established frameworks (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2012) or to explore the scope for new dialogues (Bevir, 2011).

Current debates over structures and delivery encompass both extensions of familiar themes and the emergence of new currents of thinking. The arrival of individual budgets and personalisation has moved quasi-market mechanisms closer to genuine market mechanisms. Initial use in adult social care delivered somewhat mixed results, but there are strong advocates for extensions to other areas of public services (Glasby et al, 2009). At the same time, alternative forms of delivery such as co-production have increased in prominence (Bovaird, 2007; Thomas, 2012), as has discussion of alternatives to state-centric means of organising. This is a process that accelerated with the onset of recession and austerity politics: as the state sought to scale back involvement in service delivery by professional public servants, the focus has increasingly shifted to other means of meeting need (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2011; Farnsworth, 2011; Hancock et al, 2012).

Implementation and practice

The concept of implementation rose to prominence at around the same time as *Policy & Politics* was founded. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a proliferation of models of implementation (Hill and Hupe, 2009). However, interest in the topic then waned somewhat. In the late 1990s the discussion was rekindled in more nuanced form (Hill, 1997), seeking to integrate implementation with broader policy process theories and sensitivity to institutional structures (Exworthy and Powell, 2004). Similarly, Lipsky's (1980) concept of street-level bureaucracy provided a revealing perspective on frontline service delivery (Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003) which can be embedded into broader frameworks to shed light on, for example, the implications of frontline discretion for accountability (Hupe and Hill, 2007).

Academic debates over implementation, and, more recently, over the conditions for policy success (McConnell, 2010), are complemented by the literature exploring the practice of policy, although much remains to be done to link the analysis of implementation with an understanding of how policy is negotiated at the micro-level. There has been a longstanding interest in the reflexive practitioner (Schon, 1983) and how practitioners can reframe problems in ways that allow progress to be made on the ground (Schon and Rein, 1994). It offers a route to understanding not only

what and how policy delivers, but also the scope for creativity within policy processes. This literature demonstrated a postpositivist sensibility before postpositivism rose to popularity.

More recently there has been considerable interest in the sorts of knowledge policy makers and practitioners draw on in order to form their own basis for action. Freeman (2007) deploys the concept of ‘epistemological bricolage’ to capture the way in which diverse knowledges are integrated as a basis for practice. This resonates with the way in which policy can be constructed at a notionally more strategic level (Dwyer and Ellison, 2009). A much broader ranging discussion of the nature of quotidian policy work is also under way (Colebatch et al, 2010), including examining practice at the highest levels of government (Rhodes, 2011). An outstanding task is to meld a concern with public management, frontline policy work and broader thinking on the policy process (Howlett, 2011).

Finally, alongside debates over the intricacies of structure and process, the tools of government literature seeks to assess the substance of policy: the effectiveness of the different classes of policy instrument (Hood, 1986; Hood and Magretts, 2007; Salamon, 2002; John, 2011). The aim is to provide a critical overview of the options available to policy makers seeking to shape the social world. Authors use classifications of differing levels of granularity. Hood (1986) offers a very broad categorisation of the tools available, while others embed their assessment in considerably more institutional detail which results in a rather more disaggregated picture (Salamon, 2002). This literature has been re-energised in part as a result of technological change, in part by evolving thinking about effective regulatory design, and in part by the rise of ‘nudge’ economics and behaviour change, which raise significant questions about both effectiveness and normative desirability (Jones et al, 2013; Leggett, 2013).

Advancing the debates

This section takes the four themes introduced above and provides a perspective on the contribution of the articles in this Special Issue. We also identify areas in which we consider there are analytical issues ripe for further development.

Theorising policy

The contributions to the Special Issue give a flavour of the theoretical diversity within contemporary policy studies, as well as communicating some of the foundational issues currently being contested. Both Rhodes (2013) and Flinders (2013) make the case for tolerance of greater diversity in theoretical and empirical enquiry. Flinders (2013: X) notes that ‘during the second half of the twentieth century political science shifted significantly in terms of its dominant theories, methods, values and aspirations ... the outcome was that deductive, game theoretic formal modelling and quantitative analysis enjoyed a privileged position in terms of appointments, publication opportunities and funding’. He calls for considered resistance to this dominant set of beliefs and values. He draws on the Perestroika movement in political science which mounted an epistemological challenge that called ‘for the methodological pyramid to be tipped on its side so that a broader range of theories and approaches (notably ‘thick’ descriptive methods) can be recognised as valuable and legitimate techniques’ (X).

Here it is useful to distinguish the profile of the research that is being carried out in policy studies from the hierarchy of value that is ascribed to that work. It may well be the case that a certain type of hypothetico-deductive, quantitative research is ascribed particular value, even while the majority of the research being conducted is not rooted in that approach. This tells us something important about the sociology of a discipline. Flinders gives us a flavour of this distinction. If access to the

most prestigious journals and conferences is controlled by those with particular methodological preferences and perspectives, and publication and participation in such outlets has significant career benefits, then those favoured models and modes of thought come to be valorised and replicated. But that does not necessarily tell us much about the theoretical and methodological preferences held by the majority of the community's members. Positivist methodologies may be championed as the gold standard in one part of the field, while in practice the majority of researchers work with more idiographic, qualitative methods. This may not be comfortable, but it is not contradictory.

In fact, if we look across the contributions to the Special Issue it is notable that the sort of positivist, quantitative research that authors such as Rhodes and Flinders are questioning does not feature prominently. That could be no more than a selection effect. But it also reflects the profile of presentations at the 40th Anniversary *Policy & Politics* conference. *Policy & Politics* welcomes a broad range of approaches, believing that there is strength in diversity and pluralism, but the bulk of the papers at the conference were qualitative. The examples included in this Issue are a powerful reminder of the value of theoretically-informed case study approaches that enable in-depth explorations of 'the local'. Intensive research methodologies that seek to capture the richness of the 'real world' often produce unexpected results and subtleties that would elude more extensive methods.

John (2013) perhaps has the greatest sympathy with positivist epistemologies, in the sense that nudge techniques draw on psychological results that are taken to have general applicability. John's example shows that the social sciences still have much to learn from the natural sciences in particular contexts. Van der Steen et al's (2013) article makes explicit reference to a range of concepts drawn from natural sciences, particularly complex adaptive systems (Mitchell, 2011). However, these concepts from nature science are invoked primarily for the qualitative insights they can provide. When set alongside Rhodes' (2013) article deploying ethnographic methods we have an illustration of the bifurcation in perspectives referred to earlier. In addition, Newman (2013) provides a valuable illustration of the application of the concept of performativity to pressing policy issues.

The only article in the Special Issue that adopts the approach of drawing explicitly on complementary perspectives, as suggested by Cairney (2013a), is Peters' (2013) examination of coordination. The article represents an illuminating attempt to take a phenomenon of key theoretical and practical significance and explore the insights offered by very different analytical perspectives. This approach - placing theories into dialogue with each other - has considerable unexplored potential both in its own right and as a stepping stone to more thoughtful and coherent theoretical synthesis.

Across the Special Issue we can identify most of the approaches to theorising policy identified by John (2012). Pollitt (2013) explicitly frames his work as institutionalist, whereas Peters (2013), while recognising the significance of institutions, draws on both rational actor models and the role of ideas. The articles based around local responses to austerity have a strong group and network sensibility, while also reflecting on the importance of ideas. Davies (2013) reminds us of the significance of broader structural and exogenous factors.

Even though the authors have different theoretical starting points, a theme underpinning most of the articles is the relative significance of structure and agency in determining policy and its outcomes. Peters (2013), for example, refers to the structural features of political reputation, professional traditions and communities and the 'rigidity' of policy frames or belief systems in influencing policy coordination. At the same time, he identifies agency as vital: the role of policy

entrepreneurs, leaders, boundary spanners and instigators shapes outcomes. The complex interplay between structure and agency is noted. A number of the other articles examine the structure/agency issue in a variety of contexts. One message to emerge strongly is the importance of social agency in shaping implementation and determining policy outcomes. We return to this issue below.

Evidence and the policy process

Evidence-based policy typifies a rational, technocratic approach to policy making. However, despite developments in the production and use of evidence, several articles in this Issue identify potential barriers to policy relevant research and the limitations of the social sciences in informing our understanding of contemporary policy and politics. These include the inadequacy of available research methods (Pollitt, 2013), the political motivations of policy makers (Rhodes, 2013), the inaccessibility of research findings (Flinders, 2013), preconceived ideas about the nature of the policy process (Van der Steen et al, 2013), different epistemological foundations preventing knowledge transfer between the academy and practice (Peters, 2013), and a lack of reflexive and critical analysis to inform crisis management in times of austerity (Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013).

Four articles provide more focused engagements with the issue of evidence and policy. First, Pollitt's central argument is that there is a glaring lack of evidence about the impact or success of reforms in the UK over the past forty years. Pollitt (2013: X) contextualises his observation by noting that there are 'considerable technical and methodological problems in evaluating such reforms ... Two interconnected problems are that the design of reforms do not stand still, and neither does the context in which they are being implemented'. This means that orthodox evaluation models based on *ex ante* objectives and quantifiable performance indicators often cannot be applied. In addition, Pollitt highlights the role of a general lack of sustained political interest in reform: without the demand for rigorous assessment of the consequences of reform the supply of robust evidence on outcomes is not forthcoming. Pollitt recognises that *ideas* from the social sciences are often adopted (or more likely adapted) by policy makers. But that falls far short of evidence-based policy. Pollitt draws on the work of Chris Skelcher (2008: 41) who contends that 'at the level of generalisable, empirically supported causal statements, social science research has been able to contribute little to the normative project of designing governance institutions'.

Second, Rhodes (2013) considers the limitations of the dominant tradition of modernist-empiricism in political science. He refers to 'genre mixing' as some social scientists, recognising the limitations of a positivist epistemology in policy studies, have turned away from law-like generalisations to a more interpretivist approach. Here he sees his use of ethnographic method to examine the practices of Whitehall departments as bringing something new and valuable to the analysis. He contends that the:

'rational, managerial approach has predominated since 1968, producing little beyond the civil service reform syndrome. We do not need more of the same. We need a different approach to reform. The storytelling approach is a contender. A bottom-up approach to reform rooted in the everyday knowledge of departments is a lone voice in this wilderness, but it can hardly do worse' (X).

These two contributions operate from rather different epistemological starting points. Pollitt's argument invites us to reflect upon whether the barriers to evidence-based policy identified are intrinsic to the UK policy process, and hence insurmountable, or whether a different structural alignment and different incentives could bring evidence in closer dialogue with policy in reality. Even if that were possible, the initiative would have to originate within the policy system, because

whether ‘social scientists can intervene to insist on a more evidence based approach to public management reform must be doubted - there has been no sign of that so far’ (Pollitt, 2013: X). Rhodes’ analysis raises questions for both the academy and practice about what constitutes useful evidence and how its merits might be weighed and set against real world problems requiring solutions.

The concept of evidence-based policy and practice presupposes the existence of relevant evidence, either from past local experience or imported from elsewhere via policy transfer. In their analysis of local government responses to recent austerity measures, Lowndes and McCaughie (2013) identify a surprising lack of evidence or big ideas about how to manage the crisis. They observed creative behaviours and coping strategies at a local and individual level in a bid to offset the negative effects of austerity:

‘While cost-cutting and efficiency measures dominate, creative approaches to service re-design are also emerging, based upon pragmatic politics and processes of ‘institutional bricolage’. While the absence of radical new ideas and overt political conflict is surprising, local government reveals a remarkable capacity to reinvent its institutional forms to weather the storm’ (X).

Their study showed that some public officials actually discovered a greater capacity for creative thinking within the constraints of the current economic crisis. Interestingly, it indicates that creative and resilient policy responses can be found in the absence of evidence or external guidance. Their study provides clear illustrations of practice-based policy - whereby the act of ‘doing’ shapes policy bottom-up. The concept of ‘institutional bricolage’ captures the recombination and reshuffling of pre-existing components to serve new purposes (Lanzara, 1998). This serves as an important reminder: the academy has much to learn from practice and must continue to nurture a two-way dialogue in the production of knowledge and evidence.

Finally, Flinders (2013: X) returns to a core theme: how the academy should engage with policy and practice. He argues for reconnecting with practice at several levels and issues a challenge to the academic community. He calls for ‘engaged scholarship’ that is ‘more visible and relevant in terms of informing public debates, promoting engaged citizenship or assisting in the design of public policy’ (X). The challenge will be to overcome the barriers to engagement. Some barriers are about disciplinary priorities: engagement may be advocated but it is not necessarily valued. Some barriers are about approaches to research: academics need to utilise the full range of tools available in order to produce meaningful and relevant knowledge to help ‘individuals, communities and groups make sense of their position in the world and the nature of the challenges that confront them’ (X). Some barriers are about communication: Flinders advocates ‘Triple Writing’ for academic, practitioner and public audiences to extend the influence of social science beyond the academy.

Flinders argues forcefully that engaged scholarship cannot be considered an optional extra. Rather he conveys a sense of urgency: extending and strengthening the links between social science research and practice is of fundamental importance to the survival of the academy. In order to fully grasp the engagement agenda Flinders calls for scholars to realise their ‘political imagination’ by embarking on a different type scholarship: not only more accessible but also more expansive. One does not have to accept Flinders’ claim that engagement is essential to disciplinary survival to agree that it is important. One aspect of this discussion we lack is extended examples of what this model of engaged scholarship looks like in practice. There are those within the academic community who are willing, and no doubt able, but do not have a clear idea of what to do or how to get started. Flinders sketches some illuminating, albeit fleetingly brief, examples from his own

experience. There is a strong case for developing fuller statements of what this model of scholarship looks like in the digital age.

Transforming structures and processes

The majority of the articles in this Special Issue explore some aspect of transforming structures. Several authors offer new insights relating to well-established debates about the balance between modes of governance - markets, hierarchy and network - in pure and hybrid forms (Peters, 2013; Martin and Guarneros-Meza, 2013 and Pollitt, 2013). Others explore structural transformation in a new policy environment, characterised by austerity and crisis (Newman, 2013; Davies, 2013 and Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013).

A strong theme is hierarchy and hybridity. Pollitt (2013) observes that the strongly centralised top-down style of UK politics makes possible the repeated introduction of large scale public management reform. Guy Peters (2013: X) reflects on the challenges of achieving coordination in multi-agency partnerships and observes that often 'hierarchical coordination is the default option'. In other words, networking or collective action might not happen in the absence of hierarchy where 'central actors have the capacity to produce the behaviours that they demand from others' (X). While this may preserve the dominance of the State, hierarchical methods for producing coordination are also resource intensive. This provides a clear incentive for governments to promote self-steering when possible. Martin and Guarneros-Meza (2013) also argue central government can play a key role in catalysing local collaboration, but here the emphasis is upon 'soft steering' in the form of advice, expertise, legitimacy and resources. Strategically deployed these can have a powerful and positive effect on the success of local partnerships and networks. These two examples demonstrate, in different ways, the resilience and continuing value of hierarchy in the so-called transition to networked governance.

These contributions provide further evidence of the complex interplay between different governance modes. Pollitt (2013: X) notes that: 'transition from hierarchy, market to network as a "parade of the paradigms", though not entirely fictitious, and certainly handy for textbooks and classrooms, is flawed'. This parade of 'label changes' and 'counter-trends' can undoubtedly result in tensions and contradictions both in practice between modes of governance, as one overlaps another, and at the level of mapping analysis on to practice. However, contributors to this Issue also point to the complementarity of governance modes: one mode supporting or enabling another in the right environment or context. What is clear is that questions of coherence, contradiction and complementarity across governance modes are evolving, and much remains to be done to arrive at a broad-based, robust conclusion.

From a different perspective, there is no doubt that the global financial crisis and austerity politics have prompted critical reflections on modes of governance and dominant ideologies. At first glance, the recent economic downturn and austerity measures have done little to quell the apparent appeal of market-based solutions to contemporary governance problems. Davies (2013: X) argues that 'despite a profound and enduring economic crisis, neoliberalism continues to dominate'. He endorses Colin Crouch's (2011) contention that we are likely to remain trapped in neoliberalism for many years. Indeed, it is arguably the case that neoliberalism has not simply survived the crash. Rather we have witnessed an intensification and extension of neoliberal practices and market-based solutions. In the UK, as elsewhere in Europe, at all governance levels there is a drive to implement austerity measures and do more for less (Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013; Martin and Guarneros-Meza, 2013; Newman, 2013).

The absence of an alternative to the neoliberal narrative at a macro political level has been noted for at least a decade (Watson and Hay, 2003). In the absence of a credible challenge to neoliberalism, attention has increasingly turned to the potential for change at the local level. This contemporary turn is well represented in this Special Issue. Newman (2013: X), in particular, explores the spaces and possibilities for radical or progressive interventions that can ‘help to generate new performances within the constraints of the present, and how those with a commitment to progressive politics might engage with the policy process in hard times’. Rather than portray a system that is beaten and broken by neoliberal ideology, Newman searches for new possibilities that evoke collective action, entrepreneurship and citizenship as an antidote to marketization and the politics of austerity.

Likewise, Lowndes and McCaughie (2013) refer to the creative responses of local government in managing austerity. Interestingly, Lowndes and McCaughie agree with Newman (2013) and Davies (2013) in observing a surprising lack of overt political crisis so far in the UK. Given the impact austerity measures are having on formal governance structures, public actors and vulnerable citizens, one might have anticipated greater resistance or open contestation. Instead, local initiative and strong leadership appear to be producing resilient responses to wicked issues and austerity politics (Martin and Guarneros-Meza, 2013). These articles demonstrate that the lack of a well-articulated political vision or unifying ideology does not necessarily preclude positive, creative and effective action.

Davies (2013) develops an argument of a different order. He notes the turn to the concept of ‘everyday making’. Everyday makers see ‘doing things differently’ as a means of contesting the existing social order and charting a path beyond capitalism (Holloway, 2010). Rather than trying to contest neoliberalism at a systemic level, everyday maker-activists instead enact political action and resistance by changing small behaviours which might in turn have some cumulative impact. However, Davies rejects the idea that ‘we need to choose between everyday and systemic orientations, arguing that they are complementary’ (2013: X). Retaining a perspective on capitalism as an unstable and crisis-prone social system has value. Davies argues that ‘the challenge for policy and politics is not to jettison “everyday” or “system” but rather to grasp the enduring relationship in its myriad contexts’ (X). For Davies (2013: X), one of the future challenges is ‘grasping the dynamics of scale - the systemic implications of everyday struggles and vice-versa’.

Davies’ paper represents an important counterpoint to articles focusing on the local and everyday. There is a real danger that the busyness associated with responding to the acute problems generated by budget cuts means that service providers and communities have no time to reflect upon the broader context. The agenda is reactive. This places greater responsibility upon scholars to render the broader context legible and provide additional intellectual resources to facilitate proactivity. Davies’ contribution raises the issue of the aspirations for progressive politics. Has the ground upon which systemic analysis and critique can occur been vacated too readily? Or, in highlighting the link between the everyday and systemic transformation, has Davies pinpointed the most likely route through which to effect transformation? If so, then does it represent an area urgently requiring more rigorous theoretical and empirical interrogation?

Implementation and practice

The articles in this Issue touch on several of the dimensions of the implementation debate. Both the role of central government in shaping policy top-down and the role of local resistance in shaping policy bottom-up feature prominently.

Regarding the influence of central government, Pollitt (2013: X) refers to the ‘almost ceaseless procession of reforms’ in the UK over the past forty years. One of his key findings is the apparent ease with which reform can take place is a result of the institutional characteristics of the political system: light touch legal procedures, one-party governments, powerful Prime Ministers and submissive parliaments mean that ‘the window of opportunity for large-scale management reform is almost always at least half-open’ (ibid: X). Likewise, Rhodes (2013) affirms the enduring nature of the Westminster model in shaping policy and politics in Whitehall. At the top of government departments, Rhodes (2013: X) describes ‘a class of “political-administrators” ... Their priority and their skills are about surviving in a world of rude surprises. The goal is willed ordinariness’. He suggests that ‘civil service reform is not, therefore, a matter of solving specific problems but of managing unfolding dilemmas and their inevitable unintended consequences. Strategic planning is a clumsy add-on to this world’ (X).

A strong theme of the articles in this Issue is the significance of individual action and the local in shaping policy and its outcomes. Davies (2013), Lowndes and McCaughie (2013) and Newman (2013) all argue that within old narratives and ideologies, new ‘local’ spaces for creativity, repositioning and survival open up. Lowndes and McCaughie (2013) refer to the work of Coleman et al (2010: 290) who suggest that processes of ‘local sense making’ are ‘required to reconcile old assumptions and identities with new realities’. Their study of local government offers an intriguing insight into how ‘practice’ and ‘doing’ can drive change at local level and lead to creative responses to implementation problems and resource shortfalls. Newman also ‘highlights the significance of local authorities as creative and innovative actors’ (X), while Davies (2013: X) suggests that ‘every-day making is concerned with small-scale, gradual change accomplished by constructing new ways of living and doing politics from the bottom up’.

Van der Steen et al (2013) similarly focus on the local and contingent. Their analysis of ‘weak schools’ in the Netherlands poses two central questions: What causes the differences in outcomes of similar policies in similar contexts? Can patterns and causation be found in what seem to be unpredictable, unstable, and chaotic systems? Their study shows that contextual factors and local circumstances can have a substantial, and sometimes unintended, impact on policy implementation and outcomes. In their view, only local actors are in a position to identify, predict and ultimately manage these causal influences and outcomes. This ‘moves the attention of policymakers from analysis *ex ante* towards the local knowledge of the process as it emerges’ (Van der Steen et al, 2013: X). This position raises fundamental questions about policy implementation and analysis. It suggests a move from the rational, rigid, managerial approach to the use of a more interpretivist sensibility that can account for complexity, emergent knowledge and context-specificity. This position resonates with Rhodes’ (2013) justification for the use of ethnography to study Whitehall.

The central role of individuals, leadership and ‘agency’ in shaping policy emerges clearly from the articles. In this respect they echo recent developments in the theorisation of policy change (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). Lowndes and McCaughie (2013) recognise the importance of specific people (or agency) in developing creative responses to austerity. However, they also recognise the conceptual limitations in examining the role of individuals and understanding the characteristics, traits and behaviours that make their actions so important in context. They observe (2013: X) that,

‘Our case study revealed the importance of “special people” in undertaking the work of institutional bricolage, but we have very few conceptual tools to deal with this finding. Despite our academic obsession with the structure/agency relationship, we are actually not very good at analysing agency, particularly in its embodied form. There is

a tendency for academics and practitioners alike to feel embarrassed when confronted with the truism that personality and passion and individual qualities matter’.

While several articles in this Issue signal the role of public entrepreneurs, boundary spanners and leaders there is perhaps less detail on what those characteristics look like in practice. This observation leads to a bigger set of questions, including: Can these characteristics be satisfactorily identified and categorised? Can skills be taught and replicated? Can they be incentivised by organisational structures and procedures? What shapes the scope of agency and in what circumstances can agency transform structure? If one accepts the important role of the ‘individual’ in policy studies then these questions require further exploration. While agency - including ‘leadership’ - is repeatedly noted as important, Lowndes and McCaughie (2013) rightly highlight the challenges we face in coming to terms with this theoretically. This is, perhaps, in part the shadow of the prolonged theoretical dominance of historical institutionalism and a preoccupation with structure. However, this is an area of active theoretical development (Sullivan et al, 2012). The contributions to this Issue strongly point to this as a fruitful area not only for further theoretical refinement but also for detailed empirical inquiry.

Finally, Peter John’s (2013) work on the ‘tools of government’ captures the technological, methodological and scientific developments that have taken place in this field over the past forty years. John notes that it is typically argued that the range of tools available to policy makers has been supplemented by the use of ideas such as ‘nudging’. ‘The attractiveness of nudging has been due in part to the low cost of behavioural interventions, which appear much more applicable in an era of fiscal austerity, and also because it is a complement to conventional policy instruments, such as legislation and regulation’ (John, 2013: X). In essence nudge is the idea that ‘information may be used in a clever or smart way to encourage citizens to behave in ways that is in their own or society’s interest’ (John, 2013: X). Nudge is about shaping the choice architecture and providing decision makers with cues that take advantage of known decision making biases. But basic to the nudge argument is the point that any choice will be affected by the way information is provided, whether designed or not. John’s key argument is that this distinction between nudge and traditional tools of government becomes hard to sustain once this central role for information is recognised.

Conclusion

The fortieth anniversary of *Policy & Politics* provides an opportunity to reflect on critical debates in policy studies. The past forty years have witnessed significant changes in the social sciences, policy and practice. This article has sought to reflect on theoretical and practical developments pertinent to *Policy & Politics* during this period and to suggest some steps to advance the debate. We conclude with five key arguments.

First, we urge the academy to be continuously reflexive in relation to foundational assumptions. We do not advocate a particular approach. We stand with Rhodes (2013) and Flinders (2013) in supporting the call for tolerance of greater diversity in theoretical and empirical enquiry and advocate the appropriate use of the full range of available research methods. While positivist, hypothesis-driven research might be ascribed pre-eminence in some quarters, articles in this Issue demonstrate once again the valuable insights to be gleaned from qualitative and interpretivist approaches (Newman, 2013; Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013; Martin and Guarneros-Meza, 2013; Rhodes, 2013). Yet other contributions have worked productively with non-linear approaches to policy analysis (Van der Steen et al, 2013) and have drawn inspiration from the natural sciences (John, 2013). These very different approaches have served to produce knowledge appropriate to task. The articles serve as a useful reminder that one’s choice of research method should be

dictated by a judicious mix of a rigorous ontology and nature of the research problem. It should not be driven simply by disciplinary presumptions.

Second, several articles in this Issue have identified potential barriers to evidence-based policy and the limitations of the social sciences in informing contemporary policy and politics. This prompts reflection on what appropriate evidence should look like and whether current approaches are fit for purpose. It raises significant epistemological questions: can orthodox evaluation models based on *ex ante* objectives can be relied upon in politically charged (Pollitt, 2013; Rhodes, 2013) and complex (Van der Steen et al, 2013) environments? The importance of practice-informed knowledge emerges clearly; it demonstrates that the academy has much to learn from colleagues working in the field. Indeed, in the absence of evidence and big ideas, practitioners' capacity for creative behaviours and coping strategies can deliver valuable learning by doing (Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013; Newman, 2013; Davies; 2013). The challenge for the academy is to strengthen the link between research and practice to look for innovative solutions to complex problems.

Third, we reaffirm the enduring importance of the analysis of governance structures and processes in policy analysis. Indeed, such analysis forms the basis of the majority of articles in this Issue. One aspect of this discussion warrants further consideration. A number of authors have referred to an absence of an alternative to the neoliberal narrative at a macro political level and the importance of the 'local' as an environment for progressive politics, resistance and change (Newman, 2013; Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013; Davies, 2013). Davies (2013: X), in particular, argues that a future challenge for the academy is to think about 'grasping the dynamics of scale' - how micro level activity can have a cumulative impact on macro ideology and practice and vice versa. Indeed, we feel the academy has a public duty (Flinders, 2013) to offer insights that harness local knowledge and set it within its broader context. Thinking about 'scalability' could serve to generate the 'big ideas' and vision deemed lacking in the current period of austerity politics.

Fourth, the central role of individuals, leadership and 'agency' in shaping policy implementation emerges strongly from this Issue. In particular, Lowndes and McCaughie's (2013) observation that there are few conceptual tools to examine the role of agency in context suggests a potentially rewarding avenue for future investigation. If agency represents such a significant driver for change, resistance and entrepreneurship then we need to develop our theoretical and conceptual understanding of this phenomenon. In doing so, it could also address Davis' (2013) calls for a closer consideration of scalability by examining the link between 'structure' and 'agency'.

Finally, as Flinders (2013: X) notes, 'the fortieth anniversary of *Policy & Politics* represents far more than an opportunity to mark the achievements of a journal but an opportunity to review the broader intellectual landscape within which that journal exists'. *Policy & Politics* has made significant contributions to the debate over the past four decades and this article has identified a number of areas for advancing the debate in the coming years. The challenge for the future will be to remain reflexive, open minded, responsive to trends while proactive in setting research agendas - a challenge the journal warmly welcomes.

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