

Virtual Special Issue: Public Policy and Administration and COVID-19

Keith Baker, Claire A. Dunlop, Edoardo Ongaro

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Introduction

We recently elaborate on seven analytical themes that are central to the challenges presented by COVID-19: policy design and instruments; policy learning; public service; organisational capacity; public governance; administrative traditions; and public sector reforms in multi-level governance (MLG) (Dunlop et al. 2020). In this virtual issue, we provide access to recent *Public Policy and Administration* articles that reflect these research themes related to high impact crises such as COVID-19.

Theme 1 Policy design and instruments

Categorising and comparing the mix of policy tools deployed by governments in response to COVID-19 will be an important first step in assessing the effectiveness of different policy designs. The performance of one particular category of tool is likely to come under the microscope: behavioural policy instruments. Ewert's (2020) recent exposition suggests the use of behavioural science has the potential to lead to a wide-ranging reassessment of policymaking and public administration. However, behavioural public policy remains a policy paradigm 'under construction'. The extent to which it has come of age in government responses to COVID-19 warrants investigation. Continuing on this theme, Strassheim (2019) examines the policy failures associated with nudge tools, concluding they are the result of a deficit in understanding the links between cognitive and social mechanisms on multiple levels. The extent to which these biases created unintended effects in policy designs on COVID-19 will be a lively topic of research.

Theme 2 Policy learning

COVID-19 poses governments with one of the most complex and dynamic learning challenges of the age. An enduring demand for policy and administration scholars is to advance what learning analyses can offer policy-makers, citizens and societies in the aftermath of crises like COVID-19. One obvious place to start is in examining the link between failure and learning. Through a longitudinal study of corporate board gender quotas in Spain, Verge and Lombardo (2019) suggest failure can be the beginning rather than the end of learning. Their article shows that resistance by status quo actors undermined policy legitimacy and weakened its design. Yet, this failure ultimately triggered actors' policy learning and yielded interest realignments of advocacy coalitions aimed at reformulating the policy to enhance its effectiveness. Exploring the darker side of learning, blockages and contextual factors frequently result in lessons from other places being ignored and policy transfers sub-optimal. Dolowitz et al's (2019) account of the micro-processes of policy transfer get under the skin of how individual actors shape outcomes and mediate what is transferred over time.

Theme 3 Public service

The response to COVID-19 has been driven by those in public services – the street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) on the front lines who continue to do their jobs at risk to themselves. To understand the impact of these actors, we need to know much more about the impact of their attitudes towards their clients on the decisions they take. Keulemans and Van de Walle's (2020) measurement instrument provides a much-needed scale to capture SLBs' attitudes towards their clients. These attitudes consist of four

different components: a cognitive attitude component, a positive affective attitude component, a negative affective attitude component and a behavioural attitude component. The balance between these components struck by different SLBs in COVID-19 where stress levels are high will reveal a good deal not just about service provision but also how to better support SLBs during and after crises.

Theme 4 Organizational capacity

Effective responses to novel policy problems requires appropriate types of organizational capacity – how policy is understood, analysed, delivered and communicated all depends on capacity building. In COVID-19 analytical capacity will come under particular scrutiny. The survey of UK Scientific Advisory Committees which found experts worked at arm's length from politics as opposed to policy advocates ('politicians in white coats') warrants further attention post-pandemic (LSE GV314 Group 2018).

The huge differentiation in the impacts of COVID-19 across different social groups also suggests that one central challenge is for governments is to develop agile organisational capacities which respects that one size does not fit all. For example, Shore and Tosun's (2019) account of how young people evaluate their interactions with employment services in Germany underlines the centrality of flexible organizational capacities. Their case demonstrates that despite being regarded as an exemplar in this area, the young people who interacted with the employment advisory services were dissatisfied with their experience. Administrative and communicative mechanisms were not suitably tailored to the needs of younger citizens and risked not only dissatisfaction but also withdrawal from the service entirely.

Theme 5 Public governance

Our fifth theme focusses on public governance encompassing collaborative working and risk governance. Taking collaboration first, Scott and Boyd's (2020) recent analysis of New Zealand's 'Results Programme' offers a rare and welcome example of the successes of joined up working. They are explained here as methods for engineering a sense of joint goal commitment, that provides the sustained impetus to succeed despite the barriers encountered. Waring et al. (2020) portray the other side of collaborative working. Using a healthcare case, they trace the tensions and incoherence between the different narratives laid down for local policy practitioners by their governance stakeholders who expect them to carry out world-class research; ensure research meets local needs and while also developing new understandings about the implementation of research into practice.

Another major area of inquiry in the public governance sphere is risk governance and blame shifting, notably at the interface between policy-makers and policy takers. Brown's (2018) study of interactions between service users and frontline staff of two public services (a housing benefit service and an NHS general practice) underlines the role that trust can play as a mechanism of accountability of the state to the citizen and, as a consequence, improving their mutual cooperation. This raises a challenge for the state in times of crises – to be trusted by the citizen requires being trustworthy in the eyes of the citizen.

Theme 6 Administrative traditions and policy responses

To what extent have governmental responses to COVID-19 been shaped by national administrative traditions? China presents a key case in two regards. Not only did it mark the starting point of the pandemic. But, the government response to COVID-19 will tell us a good deal about the progress of multi-level governance reforms in China. Ongaro et al (2019) outlined how these devolved arrangements have been pursued with enthusiasm, in many areas. Indeed, the reach has been extensive enough for scholars to argue that there has been a reshaping the traditional view of public policy and administration in China that relies solely on mechanisms of hierarchy, publicness, and sovereignty. COVID-19 provides a fascinating case to assess progress.

Theme 7 Public sector in multi-level governance (MLG)

Finally, COVID-19 presents fundamental challenges to the delicate balance in MLG systems. Cairney's (2020) recent account of myth of evidence-based policy-making the decentred state lays bare the acute challenges governments face in trying to combine transparent policy-making with less centralised approaches. At the EU level, this line of analysis has triggered investigation into the asymmetric influence that EU institutions that have been able to exert on the dynamics of administrative reforms of EU Member States operating under conditions of fiscal consolidation (Ongaro and Kickert 2020). This impact may be better appreciated when considering the new and pervasive EU influence on public sector reforms has occurred without alteration to the EU treaties, which assign the Member States, not the EU level, nearly exclusive competence in matter of organisation of the public sector. The COVID-19 epidemic may result in another major change in EU governance.

Articles

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