The learning concept in the policy sciences: not too elusive to be meaningful in practice

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A comment on Biegelbauer

From the 1980s onward, the notion of learning in political science has come to complement – and rival – power as an explanatory factor of policy change. Since Heclo's (1974) observation that policy-making is a matter of 'puzzling' in addition to 'powering', a wide spectrum of theories on knowledge utilization and on the role of ideas and cognition has been developed. Biegelbauer's expose on learning in the 2007 spring issue of this Newsletter[1] may be considered a brave attempt to bring order in this plethora of ideas on ideas. His account brought to mind Minsky's famous dictum that "we use the single word 'learning' to cover too diverse a society of ideas" (1987: 120). Where Minsky wrestled with the learning concept in view of artificial intelligence, Biegelbauer's intent was to pin down the notion in order to keep it from loosing its meaning for the policy sciences for sheer ubiquity: "everything can be understood as learning. One must be able to differentiate …; the term learning otherwise becomes meaningless" (2007:4). Indeed a comprehensive and systematic account of learning theories could be useful. It is therefore unfortunate that Biegelbauer presents a very limited take on the concept as if it were the only valid reading possible. He proposes to use the phrase policy learning for "the change of policy relevant knowledge, skills or attitudes, which are the result of the assessment of past, present or future policies" (2007:3). This is not so much an erroneous view as a blinkered one. Firstly, with the exclusive focus on policy design it fails to acknowledge the implications of the empirically informed dictum that policy implementation is the continuation of politics by other means (Majone and Wildavsky, 1984). By identifying learning as a distinct activity that one can engage in "alongside other daily prac-

tices…" (2007:4) the interpretation of the learning concept offered, furthermore, falls short of providing insight in how power and knowledge intersect in understanding policy change. In addition, with the implicit focus on cognition in policy design one of the most crucial questions for the policy sciences is bracketed altogether, namely the question how knowledge and action relate to one another. It is my contention – based on empirical work (e.g. Loeber, 2003) as well as on theoretical explorations (e.g. Loeber et al, 2007) – that it is in this respect that learning theories may contribute substantially to understanding complex political and societal dynamics (such as the possibility of fundamental institutional transformation e.g. in the face of 'sustainability' challenges). I am therefore happy to answer to the Newsletter's kind invitation to write on the concept of learning in reply to Biegelbauer's work. Let me below first address briefly how to answer the seemingly simple question, phrased by Biegelbauer, of what policy learning actually is, that is, how to bring some order in the society of ideas. Any answer to the question how to make the learning concept operational in actual empirical research, also put up for discussion by Biegelbauer, is highly contingent on how you cut the cake.

Order in the 'society of ideas'

Given the two-and-a-half decades of theory development on the subject, obviously it is not possible to cover the full scope of the notion's meanings that have been found contributory to the policy sciences. For an overview I refer the reader, with all due modesty, to the contribution on learning written by John Grin and myself to the 2007 Taylor & Francis Group's Handbook of Public Policy Analysis edited by Fischer, Miller and Sidney. There we take up the challenge of systematizing the various learning approaches with the intention of assessing their merits for the conceptualization of 'governance' (Grin and Loeber, 2007).

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1 Wrestling with Methodology: Considerations about Policy Learning. *Concepts & Methods,* vol. 3, Issue 1; Spring 2007.

To that end, we distinguish between approaches that consider learning *across* policy domains – that is, with a focus on the transfer of insight and information produced within one policy area to another located elsewhere in space and/or time – and those that address and conceptualize learning *within* a policy area. In addition we discuss the upshot of theories on organizational learning for the policy sciences.

Secondly we discuss the thus categorized theories by answering for each three questions: *i)* who are included as learning actors and how are these situated in relation to each other and to social and political institutions?; *ii)* what is considered to be actually changing when learning takes place?; and *iii)* to what kind of dynamics (policy change as well as e.g. institutional transformation) is learning supposed to contribute to?[2] Here, I take these questions as a point of departure to systemically comment on Biegelbauer's take on the issue. These comments in turn serve as a stepping stone to address the question which is of course 'des Pudels Kern': why would we, researchers of political dynamics, at all bother with a concept that, if not meaningless, is elusive to say the least?

Who's learning?

A first issue to be addressed when scrutinizing a particular brand of learning theory is the question who is considered to be the learning subject. It is telling perhaps that Biegelbauer in the first two sections of his text nowhere mentions specifically who is doing the learning in his view. Only in the second part of the piece the learning subjects are identified as 'political actors'; the later mentioned 'members of parliament' are a case in point. While the focus on the individually learning policy-maker is seemingly so self-evident that it needs no explication, the choice is surprising.

In his exploration of what policy learning is, Biegelbauer refers to a variety of authors of which none would endorse this choice. Interesting about the work of the invoked Peter Hall (1993) and Paul Sabatier (1986; 1987; 1999), who both write from a perspective on learning *within* policy domains, is that they include a wider set of learning subjects. To Hall, these include among others experts located at the "interface between the bureaucracy and the intellectual enclaves of society" (1993: 277). To Sabatier, the unit of analysis is what he calls the 'policy subsystem', which comprises "those actors from a variety of public and private organizations who are actively concerned with a policy problem or issue" (Sabatier 1987:652) among them e.g. journalists and other opinion leaders, scientists and grass-root activists in addition to government actors.

Regardless of the differences in their approaches, both authors hence step away from the narrow under-

standing of learning in terms of an individual act of error correction or improved knowledge utilization by policy-makers. Admittedly, the learning subject with Sabatier – analytically distinguishable subsets of actors who "share a particular belief system" (see below) which he dubs "advocacy coalitions" – are still groups of learning individuals, but the act of learning is per definition a social one which takes place in relation to and under the influence of others, both political actors and non-state actors.

By shedding a light on how policy actors and non-government actors can mutually engage in processes of learning, learning approaches provide an integral theory of the policy process that takes into account the role of ideas and arguments in addition to authority and other resources of power in explaining policy change. In addition, they provide a basis for understanding how political and societal dynamics in mutual constitution come to bear on policy design. The more sophisticated theories (e.g. Grin and Van de Graaf, 1996) furthermore take such an explanatory framework beyond the assumed caesura between policy design and implementation to understand how policy change and societal change in practice are mutually shaping and reinforcing.

In order to fully grasp how learning theories may be useful in analyzing how political and social dynamics co-evolve, we have to take into consideration whàt it is that is at stake in the act of learning.

What is changing when learning takes place?

The question as to what the object of learning is can be answered as variedly as can the question on the learning subject. Biegelbauer mentions "decisions (made in the past), as well as knowledge, skills and attitudes … which might lead to decisions in the future" (2007:3). With such a focus, Biegelbauer's interpretation of learning comes closest to the approach developed by Richard Rose (1993) whose work laid the foundations for the growing literature on learning *across* policy areas. Rose holds that policy-makers can draw lessons from the experiences of their counterparts in other cities, regional or national governments in regard to comparable problems that will help them deal better with their own issues (Rose 1991: 4)[3]. Learning in this strand of theory building hence entails the process of developing an improved understanding of policy-related issues and as a consequence an improvement in the quality of decision making.

Although increased knowledge is at issue too in the work of the aforementioned authors writing on learning *within* a policy domain, their take on the object of learning is entirely different. To Sabatier, what is at stake is what he dubs "policy beliefs", that is a set of basic values, causal assumptions, and problem perceptions

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2 With these questions we build on Bennett & Howlett's (1992) idea of bringing some order in the sea of stories on learning by submitting them to a set of descriptive questions..

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3 In contrast to Biegelbauer, to Rose, the learning agents are civil servants and maybe their external advisers, but certainly not politicians.

(Sabatier 1987:660) that pertain to the issue at hand ("secondary aspects") and underlying normative commitments and values that hold for an entire policy domain ("deep-core beliefs"). Learning to him, then, is conceived of as lasting changes in the policy belief system.

It is this understanding of the object of learning on which Grin and Van de Graaf (1996) build when they argue that non state actors ("policy target populations") are equally involved in learning processes yet do not necessarily share a *policy* belief system. They may be characterized by belief systems ("theories of action") which are rooted in the sort of practices they are professionally engaged in when contributing (or not contributing) to policy implementation: managing a firm, farming, developing technology and so on. In developing this approach, Grin and Van de Graaf link up Sabatier's concept of belief system to the notion of 'theories-in-use' (or 'frame') as elaborated by Schön (1983; Argyris and Schön 1974, 1996).

Although at first sight perhaps an unlikely amalgamation of ideas (in terms of research approach and basic ontological convictions Sabatier and an author such as Schön have very little in common), it is by probing in this direction that learning theories in my view gain sufficient explanatory power to help shed a light not only on the relation between knowledge and power but also between knowledge and action. The underlying idea here is that the object of learning is understood as a mental map of theoretical, normative and empirical considerations that professionals, be they state actors or non-state actors, invoke and put to use in their professional work. It is this 'metal map' that is changing when learning takes place. The map is being reviewed in the process of learning as an *integral aspect of* daily practice (rather than "along side" of it as in Biegelbauer's reading): observation and experience provide a continual flow of information through which an actor comes to reflect on his goals and actions, and on the way in which these relate to one another in relation to the context in which he operates. Understood in these terms, the act of learning then may be defined as the process of inducing changes in the theoretical, normative and empirical considerations that an actor brings to bear on his or her problem solving activities and which come out in changes in the way he or she perceives and acts upon the world.

This understanding of what learning entails prompts us to pose the question, on a meta-sociological level, what the relation is between the knowing and acting (and 'meaning-making') individual and his or her context. Considerations as to how to make the concept of learning operational strongly depend on how this question is answered. Before bringing up the methodological implications, yet, let us first proceed to the third and arguably most relevant issue to be discussed: what is the purpose of learning? And with that, why should we, researchers, employ the concept in the first place?

Learning to what end?

In Biegelbauer's interpretation of the learning concept the purpose is quite straightforward: the learning political actor engages in reflection on policy-related decisions taken in the past (or elsewhere) in order to improve future decision making. In the more inclusive reading of the notion as outlined above, the purpose of engaging in learning processes, if at all a conscious act of will, is to develop and continually adjust a strategy for shaping and implementing policies, and more generally, solving problems that is contingent on and optimized for the situation encountered. Since 'the situation' is inherently transient and dynamic, the learning actor is continually engaged in such processes of reflection. These may occasionally rescue him from the flux of time ("reflection-on-action" in Schön's terminology) yet generally will involve a constant conversation with the world around that translates into action ("reflection-in-action") on the spur of the moment.

It is this conceived contingency between action, ideas and context that makes the learning concept useful and challenging for the researcher of policy-making practices. In the more traditional reading (say, Biegelbauer's interpretation of developing cognitive sophistication) learning is *added* as an explanatory factor *to* power resources and interests in explaining policy change. In the reading stipulated here, the focus on learning provides a way to perceive power and interest based actions ("powering" in Heclo's words) *in interplay with and mediated through* processes of reflection and meaning-making("puzzling"). That means, first of all, that the role and relative relevance of power resources and the formulation of an actor's specific interests in an issue at hand can, rather than as *a priori* given, themselves be made the object of research that need explanation.

Secondly, it opens the door to exploring not only the causes of policy change but rather, more broadly, the relation between policy and the reproduction and transformation of institutions or, put more conceptually, between agency and structure. This is an interesting road ahead as, after all, among the most fascinating challenges in both policy-making and the policy sciences alike is the question how to deal with so-called tenacious or 'persistent' problems. Such problems seem to defy any attempt at resolving through policy-induced solutions as their "wickedness" (Rittel and Webber, 1973) not only roots in their interlacing with other problematic situations but also, more importantly, in their embeddedness in institutions and routines which are considered perfectly legitimate and desirable. Let me clarify this statement with an example. The questionable tenability of health care systems in view of rising costs and increasing demands provides a case in point: the rules and conventions that are invoked in cost-reduction policy measures may themselves support features of the health care system that lead (eventually) to cost increases. The problem here is not that a policy design as such is flawed or implementation is wrongful, but rather that in designing and implementing cost-reducing policy measures, the involved actors think and act through institutionally and culturally paved pathways, and thus underscore and effectuate in their actions the very features of the system

they seek to change (cf. Schuitmaker, forthcoming; cf. Grin & Van Staveren, 2007).

This (and comparable empirical) insight builds on Giddens theorem of the 'duality of structure': Actions of actors ("agents") are informed by their own motivations and intentions (and interpretations of the intentions of others) as well as moderated and guided by structure, that is, by concepts of rules, resources and other expressions of social institutions. According to Giddens(1984), such structure presents a "virtual order" that exists beyond time and place, and that comes into being only by an "actualisation" or "instantiation" through the actions of actors. In other words, action (human conduct) and structure (social institutions) presuppose one another, and it is through action that structures are reproduced. Fundamental institutional reform then implies the need for changing reiterative patterns of conduct (to Giddens, institutions are "those practices that have the greatest time-space extension") which, in turn, requires a revision of the 'mental maps' that actors bring to bear on their problem solving activities. In other words, it requires learning!

For the policy-maker, this interpretation of the learning concept may have instrumental value in policy design that seeks to contribute to fundamental institutional change (see e.g. Loeber et al., 2007). For the researcher, learning – understood as a process of reflection on and reviewing of an actor's theoretical, normative and empirical considerations regarding e.g. existing routines, rules and values in practice – offers a practical concept to make the rather abstract notion of 'structuration' operational. But how then would one make the learning concept itself operational in research?

By way of conclusion: some methodological reflections

As observed, any statement about how make to the learning concept operational presupposes some notion of what it is and of how the various units of analysis involved are defined. However, the described shift in focus that is observed in policy-oriented learning theories, from governmental actors to including societal actors, did not as such have methodological implications. Like the government-focused theories (e.g. Rose, 1991), the early theories that had a more inclusive take on learning (e.g. Sabatier, 1986) adopted a neo-positivist, hypothesis testing approach to analysing learning and policy change. Sabatier and colleagues, for instance, used extensive surveys (questionnaires) to map changes in policy beliefs over time. Yet the methodological aspects of learning theories have become a topic of discussion. Interpretivist (phenomenological, constructivist) perspectives on learning are winning ground. The basic constructivist assumption that while reality may be 'out there', it can only be known 'through the eye of the beholder' has implications for the practice of doing research on learning. Learning may be said to be observed when in interviews actors themselves report a revision of their mental maps. A major problem with using interviews as a basis for investigating learning, however, is that as soon as one sits down to interview someone on the topic, a situation of 'stop-and-think' is created: the often implicit, continual flow of 'conversation with the situation' in action is interrupted to make place for a conscious and explicit reflection (and explication) of one's motives for action, which results in a different take on what learning entails. A creative and interesting solution to this problem was invented by Schön (1983) who sat professionals together in a teacher – student setting. Schön investigated the processes of learning that took place by analysing the transcripts of their conversations on the motives for action that they engaged in. In my own empirical research on learning processes and the conditions under which learning takes place, I resolved the problem by combining interviewing with participant observation over longer periods of time. Analysis of the (speech) acts of the actors involved in a project (on corporate social responsibility in this case) indicated whether learning took place; inferences to such end I checked and put up for discussion in interviews with those involved when the project was finished (Loeber, 2003).

There is yet another, more fundamental problem. When learning is looked upon as a social rather than an individual act, the question is what the unit of analysis should be. The shift in focus (from the learning individual to the learning collective) can be accompanied by a shift in locus: rather than focusing on the 'meanings' (as in the theories-in-use of a professional, or in the belief system of an advocacy coalition) located in the mind of the learning actor, the researcher may wish to focus on the relation between the meaning-making individual and his or her context. This issue is at the heart of a heated debate between those who situate the metal map as an a priori given within the acting and learning individual (as does e.g. Sabatier) and those who hold that perceptions of a concrete situation are *in situ* produced in a reciproque relationship between contextual phenomena and the individuals' attempts at constructing meaning in regard to those phenomena, mediated through linguistic systems ('vocabularies', 'repertoires', 'narratives'; e.g. Hajer, 1995).

Yet as researchers I don't think we have to take the suggestion of a dreary dichotomy between an individualist ontology versus a collectivist ontology for granted. In line with the structuralist (Giddensian) position outlined above, it is my contention that with a sophisticated mix of methods (e.g. interviewing in combination with forms of discourse analysis) one is able to capture the dualist character of the meaning making individual and the 'collectivity' of sets of rules and resources (structure, 'regime', including language) that influence actors and on which they draw as they produce and reproduce meaning (and*,* with their actions, society). Thus defined and operationalised, the learning concept may add to our understanding of the relation between ideas and power in policy change, as well as of the interaction between government and society in policy design and implementation. Yet it is specifically for its explanatory power in analysing the relation between knowledge and action that the notion of learning may prove of practical valuable for the researcher of political and social dynamics. ■

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