

This is the peer-reviewed, accepted manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in the *Journal of European Public Policy* on March 10, 2014. The final version is available online (<https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2014.893080>): Daigneault, Pierre-Marc (2014). 'Puzzling about policy paradigms: Precision and progress'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 21, n° 3, pp. 481-484.

Puzzling about Policy Paradigms: Precision and Progress

Pierre-Marc Daigneault

The growing interest in 'ideas' is a positive trend because they are fundamental to a better understanding of public policy (Béland 2009). However, understanding cannot be improved without clear and precise concepts (Daigneault and Jacob 2012). In this reply, I discuss the comments made by three distinguished scholars to my seven propositions to improve the concept of *policy paradigm* (see Daigneault 2013; Baumgartner; Princen and Hart; in this volume).

Unpacking the concept of policy paradigm

Frank Baumgartner argues that policy paradigms constitute a small but quite significant subset of all policy ideas, namely 'ideas on steroids' (p. XX). He also pointed that my interpretation of the concept goes beyond Peter Hall's (1993) seminal contribution. I agree with him on both counts, though I argue that my conceptualization is consistent with Hall's. Baumgartner's argument that we should build a theory about ideas rather than policy paradigms, however, shows that he misunderstands my propositions. In fact, I have never argued or implied that scholars should focus on paradigms to the detriment of other, more general, ideas. Rather, my argument is that we should study various policy ideas not only because they matter for understanding policy, but also because they are the 'building blocks' of paradigms. Within my framework, studying ideas in terms of the four dimensions — in short, values and principles, ideas about policy problems, ends and instruments — is a necessary first step in determining *whether* a policy paradigm characterizes a given setting. Indeed, scholars should never assume the presence/absence of a policy paradigm, but rather empirically test that hypothesis.

A useful 'middle-range' concept

Why do policy paradigms matter? First, the presence of a policy paradigm, namely a set of coherent and well-established policy ideas, suggests an impact on the content of public policy. The absence of a paradigm, by contrast, simply means that ideas — while present — are less likely to influence policy: this is clearly a point of agreement between Baumgartner, Princen, Hart and I. Second, a crucial function of concepts is to convey information (Sartori 2009 [1975]). In that regard, the concept of policy paradigm has the definite advantage over that of ideas of simplifying reality more effectively in that it refers only to policy ideas that are coherent and powerful.

I argue that my revised conceptualization fills a gap between the concept of ideas and Hall's (1993) restrictive version of the concept of policy paradigm. As seen in the literature, many scholars use the concept of policy paradigm quite liberally at a 'middle range' level of analysis, that is to describe a set of coherent and influential policy ideas lying between individual ideas and narrow and loosely knit policy theories, on one hand, and highly integrated ideologies or theories such as

Keynesianism, on the other. The argument is not that ‘everybody does it’ but rather that they do it for the right reason, that is, the fact no other concept is available to designate these important policy ideas¹. Now, I agree with Princen and Hart that the distinctions I draw between policy paradigms, policy theories, and public policies can at times be confusing: ‘drawing a line somewhere on this continuum and calling everything on one side “policy paradigm” and everything on the other side “policy theory” feels arbitrary’ (p. XX). Now, my intention was certainly *not* to dichotomize policy ideas but, rather, to underline their diversity. Admittedly, this dimension of my argument will require further clarification. Moreover, my methodological proposition that scholars should focus on the ‘material’ aspect of public policy is clear and sound; it is simply a pragmatic decision that should further enhance the rigor of ideational research.

Rethinking incommensurability

Princen and Hart criticize my rejection of the incommensurability of paradigms as defended by Kuhn (2012[1962]) and Hall (1993), arguing that ‘this tension [between incompatible ideas] is precisely what caused the seismic shift between macroeconomic policy paradigms that Hall analysed: policy-makers had to choose between two mutually exclusive philosophical bundles’. Whereas I do not believe that all ideational elements of a policy paradigm are compatible with one another, I think that considering them as mutually exclusive goes a step too far. First, unpacking policy ideas in terms of the four dimensions I have proposed helps to show that individual ideas are often ‘fungible’ (i.e., they are compatible with different policy paradigms and policies). Whole paradigms, by contrast, are frequently depicted in Manichean terms by policy entrepreneurs (and academics). Second, Princen and Hart’s examples of ‘mutually exclusive bundles’ are in fact more compatible than they seem². This is even so for the ‘paradigmatic’ example of macroeconomic policy; apparently, there is a ‘new synthesis’ between neoclassical and Keynesian economics (Woodford, 2009). Similarly, different research paradigms — in a Kuhnian sense this time — can give rise to a new one, the ‘mixed methods’ paradigm for example (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Improving the rigor of ideational research

I argue that the revised concept of policy paradigm is not only clearer and more precise than Hall’s (1993) original concept defended by my critics, but also the more general concept of ideas. Additionally, this revised concept is unaffected by the confusion between paradigm shifts and third order policy change that has plagued ideational research, and its operationalization allows for a better measurement of the various types of policy ideas. The research practices suggested by Baumgartner appear to underestimate the complex nature of ideas and the difficulties associated with measuring paradigm shifts (i.e., how do we know when we see one?) but they are certainly a step in the right direction³. Similarly, and although they are based on a more restrictive conceptualization, the hypotheses put forward by Princen and Hart should contribute to understanding the relationship between policy paradigms and policy change.

Acknowledgements

I wish to sincerely thank Jeremy Richardson and Berthold Rittberger for their openness to my suggestion of a mini-symposium on policy paradigms, as well as Frank R. Baumgartner, Sebastiaan Princen and Paul ‘t Hart for their invaluable participation in it. I thank Daniel Béland for his comments on this reply and Sara McPhee-Knowles for linguistic revision. Postdoctoral funding from the *Fonds de recherche du Québec – Société et culture* and the Canada Research Chair on Public

Policy, Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Saskatchewan Campus, is also acknowledged.

Notes

- 1 Even the concept of *public policy* differs significantly from the concept of policy paradigm in that it designates not only ideas but also a set of *actions* and because the ideas undergirding policy are not necessarily coherent (see Daigneault, 2013).
- 2 Naturally, ideas are not always compatible. For instance, Hibbert (2007) has shown that workfare cannot be justified from an egalitarian framework (on the various paradigms that characterize welfare policy, see Daigneault, in preparation).
- 3 I am not quite sure as to what Baumgartner means by separating ideas from actors. If this means that we should prefer 'objective' data to 'subjective' (i.e., self-reported) data, this point is methodologically ill-founded as qualitative methods can be used to generate credible inferences.

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