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Reassessing the concept of policy paradigm: Aligning ontology and methodology in policy studies

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Abstract: The concept of policy paradigm, which was developed by Peter Hall (1993), has given rise to an abundance of literature on ideas and policy dynamics. Despite its theoretical value, however, the original concept was insufficiently specified and has been used in problematic ways by many policy scholars, thereby undermining the validity of their descriptive and causal inferences. The main argument defended in this article is that scholars studying policy paradigms should devote as much attention to the ideas of policy makers as to the policies they adopt, while distinguishing between the two constructs as much as possible. This article reviews these issues and put forward seven guidelines that aim to better circumscribe the concept of policy paradigms and improve research on ideas and policy dynamics.

Keywords: Conceptual analysis; ideas; ideational approach; methodology; policy dynamics; policy paradigm.

Ideas and policy dynamics

It is now common to speak of the *ideational turn* of social science, as 'ideas' have recently received much attention from scholars (see e.g., Béland and Cox 2011, 2013; Blyth 2013; Campbell 2004; Carstensen 2011; Lieberman 2002; Parsons 2007; Skogstad 2011). This trend can in part be traced back to Hall's (1993) seminal contribution on *policy paradigms*, which has inspired a whole generation of scholars.¹ After two decades, what could be loosely labelled the 'ideational approach', which aims at 'explain[ing] actions as a result of people interpreting their world through certain ideational elements' (Parsons 2007: 96), has come of age. The question is no longer *whether* ideas matter, but *how* (Carson, Burns and Calvo 2009; Mehta 2011). While this statement holds true for political science in general, it probably applies even more forcefully to the subfield of public policy. Indeed, three of the most influential frameworks of policy dynamics — the advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier and Jenkin-Smith 1993), the multiple streams approach (Kingdon 2003) and the punctuated-equilibrium theory (Baumgartner and Jones 2009) — 'emphasize the causal role played by ideational factors (that is, actors' interpretations, ideas, and beliefs about public policies)' (Real-Dato 2009: 118). This list is not exhaustive, as Peter Hall's (1993) work on policy paradigms is both policy- and ideas-oriented.

At the same time, the growing influence of ideational scholarship makes some of its problems more visible. First, the nature of ideas and the process by which they become influential or fade away remains elusive (Berman 2013; Campbell 2004; Lieberman 2002). Second, the role of actors,

the 'bearers of ideas', is sometimes neglected in ideational analyses (Berman 2013; Campbell 2004; Carstensen 2011). Third, ideational explanations typically rely on intangibles that are difficult to define and measure (John 2003; Parsons 2007). Finally, and related to the previous problem, there is an ambiguous relationship between ideas and institutional change, including policy change (Campbell 2004; Surel 2000).² Taken together, these problems can preclude rigorous descriptive and explanatory work geared to ideas in policy studies.

Of all the ideational concepts used by scholars — norms, worldviews, public sentiments, culture, ideology (Berman 2013; Campbell 2004; Mehta 2011) — that of policy paradigm is both one of the most popular and one of the most problematic. This concept has given rise to various interpretations of not only its meaning but also of its referent, the class of 'empirical' objects to which it refers (on conceptual analysis in political science, see Adcock and Collier 2001; Daigneault 2012; Daigneault and Jacob 2012; Gerring 1999; Goertz 2006; Sartori [1984]2009; Schedler 2011). The original concept of paradigm is indeed underspecified and insufficiently operationalized: 'With only a few exceptions, [...] relatively little has been done to elaborate the concept of paradigm beyond Hall's adaptation' (Carson *et al.* 2009: 18). Consequently, it is easy to conflate ideas and policies when using the concept of policy paradigm in its current, unspecified form. Given that concepts are essential to making sense of the world we live in and serve as 'building blocks' in our hypotheses and theories, these conceptual problems are likely to stifle progress within policy research (Daigneault 2012; Goertz 2006). Adding to the confusion, the methodological practices of scholars who have studied paradigm shifts are not always as rigorous as one may expect.

Research perspective and purpose

This article aims to alleviate the problems outlined above by providing an in-depth analysis of the concept of policy paradigm. It adopts a 'meta' or 'second-order' perspective in that it focuses on 'how political scientists themselves understand and conceptualise politics' (Stanley 2012: 94). First, it reviews the conceptual and methodological issues associated with the concept in light of its original formulation by Hall (1993) and its subsequent use by other scholars. The main argument defended here is that scholars studying policy paradigms should devote as much attention to the ideas of policy makers as to the policies they adopt, while distinguishing between the two constructs as much as possible. Second, it proposes several theoretical and methodological guidelines that are expected to overcome these problems.

This article is in line with other theoretically and methodologically-conscious contributions to political science and public policy (e.g., Campbell 2004; Capano 2009; Carson *et al.* 2009; Howlett and Cashore 2007; John 2003; Kay 2006, 2009; Parsons 2007; Real-Dato 2009; Sabatier 2007a). It follows the general spirit — if not the letter — of the guidelines put forward by Sabatier, such as 'be clear enough to be proven wrong', 'think causal process' and 'work on internal inconsistencies and interconnections' (2007b: 327-8).

Back to Hall's original framework

Before turning to a review of the problems associated with the use of the concept of policy paradigms by political scientists, it is necessary to return to Hall's (1993) original study of institutional change in the field of macroeconomic policy in Britain. In this oft-quoted definition, Hall circumscribes what he means by policy paradigm:

...policy makers customarily work within a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and the kind of instruments that can be used to attain them but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing. Like a *Gestalt*, this framework is embedded through the very terminology through which policymakers communicate about their work, and is influential because so much is taken for granted and unamenable to scrutiny as a whole. I am going to call this interpretive framework a policy paradigm. (Hall 1993: 279)

Moreover, Hall (1993: 293) distinguished between three modes of policy change that are lexically-ordered (i.e., each mode builds up on and extends the characteristics of the preceding mode). First order change is characterized by adjustments in the settings or levels of the instruments used to achieve the goals of policy. Second order change occurs when new types of policy instruments are mobilized (including adjustments to their settings), while the hierarchy of goals behind policy remains stable. Third order change is characterized by a shift in the goals behind policy, in addition to a shift in the type and settings of policy instruments. In reference to Kuhn's conception of scientific progress, first and second order change are associated with 'normal' (i.e., within-paradigm), incremental, policymaking. Third order change, by contrast, marks a substantial departure from normal policy and involves the shift from one paradigm to another: 'Third order change [...] is likely to reflect a very different process, marked by radical changes in the overall terms of policy discourse associated with a "paradigm shift"' (Hall 1993: 279).

Now, the relationship between Hall's (1993) characterization of policy paradigm and policy change remains elusive. Indeed, the positive association between paradigmatic change and radical policy change can be interpreted in four different ways: (1) third order change and paradigm shift are ontologically related (i.e., they both constitute dimensions or attributes of the same phenomenon); (2) a paradigm shift is a cause of third order policy change; (3) third order policy change is a cause of a paradigm shift; (4) the relationship between third order change and a paradigmatic shift is spurious (i.e., a third, antecedent, variable influences both variables). In short, was the monetarist paradigm a dimension, a cause, a consequence or simply a correlate of radical macroeconomic policy change in Britain during the 1979-1989 period? Now, it seems reasonable to infer from Hall's account that ideas *cause* or at least are *a* cause of policy change (i.e., interpretation 2).

Hall (1993) borrowed the concept of paradigm from the well-known philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn ([1962]2012) who developed the concept to explain the nature of scientific change in the natural sciences. In its original Kuhnian sense, a paradigm is an *exemplar* of good science characterized by consensus on the disciplinary matrix (i.e., the theories and assumptions, legitimate puzzles, and legitimate tools and instruments to solve these puzzles, see Bird 2012). To achieve paradigmatic status, scientific achievements must be 'sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity' and 'sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve'. (Kuhn [1962]2012: 10-11). However, it is probably a mistake to rely too closely on Kuhn to interpret Hall (but see Carson *et al.* 2009: 11). First, the original concept of scientific paradigm is itself polysemic and has given rise to many misunderstandings among philosophers of science (Bird 2012; see also Hacking's introductory essay in Kuhn [1962]2012). Second, even if one wishes to apply the Kuhnian concept of paradigm to public policy, it must be stressed that physics have few things in common with the 'messy' world of policymaking. Indeed, defining what constitutes an 'unprecedented achievement' in terms of public policy is a challenge both politically (i.e., achieving consensus on conflicting policy ends) and technically (i.e., producing credible evidence in sufficient quantity to evaluate policies). Third and more importantly, Hall's use of the concept seems to be more

metaphorical than analytical, thus preventing a rigid application of Kuhnian thought to the conceptual analysis of policy paradigms. Most scholars also appear to have followed Hall in their metaphorical use of the concept of policy paradigm as a set of ideal-typical ideas, beliefs and principles that guide policy, rather than a specific policy that has acquired an exemplar status. Looking at later work on paradigms by Hall and other scholars thus appears to be a more fruitful strategy for interpreting the concept. In that regard, the following commentary, which is one of the only works on policy paradigms published by Hall after 1993, is consistent with interpretation (2) presented above:

By themselves, of course, those [Keynesian and neoliberal] paradigms were not enough to shift politics so dramatically, but they were *indispensable concomitants* of a new politics with important distributive implications. It simplifies only slightly to note that each of these transitions required a motivation, means, and a motor. (2013a: 189, italics added; see also 2013b)

In other words, policy paradigms seem to be characterized as a necessary but insufficient condition of transformative policy change. Hall (2013a) characterized paradigms as the *means* through which policy change occurs. Policy change requires an additional *motivation*, in the form of a crisis, or at least an important policy problem, as well as a *motor*, the political actors who drive the change — note the similarity to Kingdon's (2003) three streams of problems, policy and politics, as well as to the three conditions of ideationally-led policy change of Somers and Block (2005: 266). Frank Baumgartner's (2013) understanding of Hall (1993), discussed in light of his own punctuated equilibrium theory, is also consistent with the 'paradigm shift causes policy change' line of interpretation:

Hall is clear in his 1993 article that the dependent variable is policy change [...] Ideas are the key in explaining his conclusions, and the conclusions are that policy change is typically highly constrained because the ideas that support the status quo remain extremely powerful but that in the presence of paradigmatic shifts the policies themselves can be transformed, creating a new equilibrium and a stark break from the past. (2013: 24)

The substantial and lasting contribution that Peter Hall has made to the political science literature with its typology of policy change has rightly been acknowledged (see, e.g., Béland and Cox 2013). I believe that the main reason behind his substantial influence was the intuition — typically neglected until then — that ideas matter in explaining policy change. In addition, the elegant operationalization of policy change developed by Hall (1993) offered a much-needed bridge between incremental and radical change. Yet significant ambiguity remains with respect to how Hall conceptualized the general relationship between ideas and policies and, in particular, the more specific relationship between paradigm shift and third order change. At heart, the concept of paradigm is not developed enough to be used in a consistent and rigorous way by policy scholars in both descriptive and causal analyses (on this latter point, see Carson *et al.* 2009). This problem adds up to the fact that the nature of paradigms and policies is in reality more similar than it looks like at first glance. Ironically, the popularity of the concept of paradigm among policy scholars may stem precisely from its ambiguous and abstract nature (Cox and Béland 2013; Jenson 2010, 2012; McNeil 2006) just as Hall (1989) once argued about Keynesianism: 'the very ambiguity of Keynesian ideas enhanced their power in the political sphere. By reading slightly different emphases into these ideas, an otherwise disparate set of groups could unite under the same banner' (367; as cited in Jenson 2012: 80). Yet after twenty years of scholarship on policy paradigms, it now seems necessary to circumscribe and operationalize the concept in a way that will foster fruitful theoretical and empirical developments.

Problematizing policy paradigms

The 'Siamese twins' of paradigms and policies

The proposition that ideas may exert an influence on policy change is not as contentious as it used to be (Mehta 2011; Parson 2007). However, it is difficult to test in practice because the concept of policy paradigm is underspecified in its current form. Moreover, the characterization of policy paradigms made by Hall (1993) appears very similar to the ideational component of public policies, leading to obvious measurement and explanatory problems. Metaphorically, paradigms and policies are 'Siamese twins' that are conjoined at the level of ideas. As a result, the point at which a policy paradigm ends and an actual policy begins is unclear, thus preventing credible analysis of the role of ideas in the formation of public policy. The Siamese twins' issue is in fact a special case of the larger *problem of the explanandum*, in which policy scholars have difficulty identifying with precision what changes when policy changes (Real-Dato 2009).

The ideational nature of paradigms is obvious, but it is easy to forget that public policies share a similar ideational component with paradigms (but see Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Capano 2009). Policies are not only 'material' and 'institutional' — made of resources, activities, laws, official declarations, rules and regulations — but also ideational, in that they minimally embody a conception of the problem to be solved and goals to be pursued. Policymaking is indeed a problem-solving activity (Howlett and Ramesh 2003). Scholars in the field of evaluation have coined the term *policy theory* (or program theory) to designate the conceptual model that underlies a policy (Leeuw 1991; Rossi, Lipsey and Freeman 2004):

A policy theory is a system of social and behavioral assumptions that underlie a public policy which have been formulated in the form of propositions. These propositions reflect beliefs of policy makers about the cognitions, attitudes and behaviors of the policy's target group: the people whom the policy is to affect. But they also refer to more structural factors on which policy makers have been making assumptions. (Leeuw 1991: 74)

This theory, which has various components such as program resources, activities, target groups, outputs, short- and long-term outcomes, emphasizes the causal mechanisms that produce change. Like policy paradigms, policy theories are rarely explicit and therefore need to be reconstructed (Leeuw 2003; Patton 2008). The similarity between the concepts of policy theory and policy paradigm is striking, although two important differences should be noted. First, policy paradigms have a larger scope than policy theories in that they span entire policy sectors (in the case of sectoral paradigms) or even multiple policy sectors (in the case of overarching paradigms, see Hall 2013), whereas a policy theory is always specific to a policy. In other words, there are as many policy theories that there are policies (though policies can be designed around the same general theory). Second, paradigms are abstract in that they incorporate values, philosophical principles and a worldview (Campbell 2004; Huo 2009); policy theories, by contrast, are 'blue prints' that specify in operational terms how a policy is supposed to achieve its objectives.

To elaborate on the Siamese twins' metaphor, it is time for each twin to be allowed to pursue a life of its own by surgically separating the two concepts. Indeed, ontologically (on ontology, see Goertz 2006), paradigms and policies are distinct. Analytically, it is useful to distinguish between paradigms and policies to assess the influence of these elements on one another (Skogstad and Schmidt 2011: 8), as conflating paradigms and policies introduces obvious circularity problems. Before tackling the delicate issue of separating ideas from policies, let us turn to the distinct — albeit related — issue of how scholars have attempted to measure paradigm shifts.

The 'revealed ideas' strategy

The methodological practices of scholars who empirically study paradigm shifts often problematically neglect the *actual* normative and cognitive ideas of policy actors in favour of those *revealed* by the adopted policies (the expression 'revealed ideas' highlights a parallel between the structure of their argument and the revealed preferences approach in economics). The revealed ideas strategy is rarely spelled out in explicit terms in studies dedicated to paradigm shifts but is nevertheless apparent when one analyzes the practices of policy scholars. First, the content of the 'contending' policy paradigm (*a*) is outlined and the public policy that is expected from this paradigm (*b*) is discussed in a theoretical section of the study (although a distinction between policy paradigm and policy is rarely established in such unambiguous terms). The 'challenging' paradigm (*c*) and the policy associated with it (*d*) are also discussed in the same section. Second, the empirical part of the study compares the actual public policies adopted by one or more states (*e*) to the policies that would be expected under the old and new paradigms (i.e., *b* and *d*). When *e* corresponds closely to *d*, scholars conclude the existence of a paradigm shift from *a* to *c* that is not directly studied. Conversely, when *e* corresponds closely to *b*, scholars tend to typically discard the paradigm shift hypothesis even though, again, the relationship is not directly studied. This strategy is presumably common insofar as concrete policies are easier to measure than abstract ideas. To use another metaphor, the 'revealed ideas' strategy is somewhat like the drunk person looking under a lamppost for his/her keys that were lost elsewhere simply because it is easier to look for them there. For instance, such a strategy underlies the otherwise excellent comparative work of Huo (2009) on the Third Way paradigm in the field of employment and social policy (for another example related to social investment, see White 2012).

The similarity between the revealed ideas strategy and the interpretivist critique of rational choice theory is striking: '...it is poor social science to construct a model in which observed behaviour maximizes the interests of agents, and then assume that fit between the interest and the behaviour explains the behaviour. It may be just a coincidence...' (Kay 2006: 66). The revealed ideas strategy can lead to invalid inference; it should, in fact, only be used when all other avenues have been exhausted. Indeed, one might arrive at the wrong diagnosis unless one clearly distinguishes between these two levels of analysis. The deductive segments *a-b* and *c-d* are the weak links in the revealed ideas strategy, in that similar policies may be adopted for entirely different reasons (as are concepts, as discussed above). As Lindblom argues in his seminal article:

It has been suggested that continuing agreement in Congress on the desirability of extending old age insurance stems from liberal desires to strengthen the welfare programs of the federal government and from conservative desires to reduce union demands for private pension plans. If so, this is an excellent demonstration of the ease with which individuals of different ideologies often can agree on concrete policy. Labor mediators report a similar phenomenon: the contestants cannot agree on criteria for settling their disputes but can agree on specific proposals. (1959: 83)

Similarly, Palier commented on the role of ambiguous agreements in transforming the French welfare state:

New measures are accepted by a wide range of different groups (political parties, administrations, trade unions, employers and others) who agree on the new measure, but for different reasons and with different interests. They share neither a common vision of the reforms nor the same interests in the measures. During the decisionmaking process, the measure which is selected from the alternatives is the one which is able to aggregate different visions and interests. (2005: 131)

Similarly, *activation*, by which is introduced ‘an increased and explicit linkage between on the one hand, social protection, and on the other hand, labour market participation and labour market programmes’ (Barbier and Ludwig-Mayerhofer 2004: 425-6), is another relevant example drawn from the field of social policy. It spans the entire political spectrum (Béland 2010) but its goals are extremely diverse — for instance, fighting welfare dependency, promoting social inclusion and citizenship, fostering economic competitiveness, or cutting welfare expenditures — as are the policy instruments mobilized to achieve those ends (van Berkel and Møller 2002). The point is *not* that affinities between certain ideologies and certain policies do not exist, but rather that there is no law-like covariation between the two. Therefore, only an in-depth and direct analysis of the cognitive and normative ideas of decision makers allows for a full and accurate understanding of policy dynamics, one that focuses on the ‘why’ of policy theories as much as the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of policy instruments. To borrow an expression used by Hall (2003) to discuss the practices of comparative scholars, it is time to ‘align ontology with methodology’ in the empirical study of policy paradigms.

Unpacking paradigm and policy change

In this section, I present and discuss seven guidelines that are expected to improve the rigor and validity of studies devoted to policy paradigms. While some of these propositions are relatively novel, other are borrowed from the literature. To my knowledge, however, this is one of the first times that these propositions have been assembled and discussed in a systematic fashion.

1) *Policy paradigms are normative and cognitive ideas, intersubjectively held by policy actors.* I argue that it is fundamental to circumscribe the ontological nature of policy paradigms to the ideational level. They are indeed ‘made of’ values, assumptions and philosophical principles that allow actors to interpret the world and attribute meaning to their actions (Parsons 2007; Skogstad and Schmidt 2011; Surel 2000). It is worth stressing that the ‘intangible’ nature of paradigms does not mean that they are not important or that they cannot be measured (Parsons 2007); on the contrary, the process of assigning meaning and constructing worldviews must inevitably generate ‘tangible’ (i.e., material) consequences. Moreover, paradigms are intersubjective, meaning that a certain number of policy actors must share the same ideas.

2) *Policy paradigms possess four fundamental dimensions: i) values, assumptions and principles about the nature of reality, social justice and the appropriate role of the State; ii) a conception of the problem that requires public intervention; iii) ideas about which policy ends and objectives should be pursued; and iv) ideas about appropriate policy ‘means’ to achieve those ends (i.e., implementation principles, type of instruments and their settings).* Hall’s (1993: 279) original account mentioned dimensions ii) to iv) which, according to Carson *et al.* (2009: 143-4) constitute the ‘problem-solving complex’ of a policy paradigm. Again, it is important to stress the ideational character of these elements; otherwise, it is relatively easy to slip into a ‘materialist’ perspective, which conflates, for example, actual policy instruments with *ideas* about policy instruments. Furthermore, including the values, philosophical principles and background assumptions that relate to social justice or the role of the state in the conceptualization of policy paradigms permits recognition of their influence on policies. This characterization of the concept of policy paradigm is consistent with the literature (Campbell 2004; Carson *et al.* 2009; Huo 2009; Surel 2000), including Hall’s seminal article, even though he made no explicit mention of this more abstract dimension. For instance, Surel (2000) has included ‘metaphysical principles’ in his conceptualization of Hall’s policy paradigms. Unlike Campbell (2004), however, I see no valid reason to restrict paradigms to background ideas that are ‘taken for granted and unamenable to

scrutiny as a whole' (Hall 1993: 279). On the contrary, 'programmatically ideas' about what should be done and how are major components of paradigms as well. The explanatory power of the background/foreground dimension proposed by Campbell (2004) thus appears questionable. In this regard, it is significant that this dimension was not part of the four that Parsons (2007) used to chart varieties of ideational explanations.³ Furthermore, adding a structural/organizational component to policy paradigms (Carson *et al.* 2009) seems to be 'overkill' in practice. Although the relationship between policy actors, expertise and decision making is relevant to understanding policy change, it unnecessarily complicates the study of paradigms. Similarly, Cashore and Howlett (2007) injunction to decompose policy ends into larger goals and operational objectives seems tedious. In fact, the fourfold conceptualization of policy paradigms proposed here represents a nice trade-off between the need to capture the full content of the concept and practical considerations regarding data collection and analysis; it is possible to improve either the analytical sophistication of the concept or its simplicity, but not both (for a concrete example of trade-offs involved in conceptual analysis, see Daigneault and Jacob 2009).

3) *Internal coherence is a necessary condition for the existence of a policy paradigm.* Without a sufficient prima facie level of internal coherence, 'paradigms' are simply a loose collection of ideas. Many definitions of policy paradigms indeed emphasize this attribute (e.g., 'a relatively coherent set of assumptions', Kay 2007: 583; see also Carsons *et al.* 2009: 17). Whereas internal coherence as a defining attribute is contentious (see Skogstad and Schmidt 2011), this controversy might result from the practical difficulty in establishing a precise threshold, rather than an opposition in principle. At minimum, the contents of the four fundamental dimensions must be compatible and logically consistent. For instance, in the field of social policy, there is tension between a minimal conception of the state, the belief that welfare dependency is the main problem to be solved, and the belief that the state should only protect the worst-off from economic shocks while favouring a generous universal cash transfer to all (i.e., a basic minimum income) as a policy instrument. Besides internal coherence, the four dimensions of policy paradigms are likely to be related in other ways. One possibility would be for certain ideational elements to coalesce into specific paradigms because of affinities — 'ideas are rarely independent of other ideas' (Kay 2009: 56). Another would be that ideational influences are subject to a 'cascade effect' in which ideational influence extends beyond the more abstract dimension of values, beliefs and assumptions, to the intermediate dimensions of policy problems and ends in addition to the more concrete policy means. Whatever the exact relationship between the dimensions, the number of ideational combinations that display a certain level of internal coherence is likely to be very large. Furthermore, ideational elements drawn from various policy paradigms can even merge into a synthetic paradigm (see Kay 2007). Therefore, it is a good idea to consider the interrelatedness of the dimensions of the concept of policy paradigm as an empirical question.

4) *Significant changes on all four dimensions of the concept of policy paradigm are a necessary and sufficient condition for a paradigm shift.* This proposition contains two important components. The first is qualitative: the change on the dimensions must be *significant*, by which I mean a substantial departure from a given policy equilibrium (Cashore and Howlett 2007). Contrary to what Cashore and Howlett argue, however, paradigm shifts do not necessarily have to unfold rapidly; they can indeed be gradual and cumulative (Carson *et al.* 2009; Coleman *et al.* 1996; Palier 2005). Besides these considerations, operationalizing the significance of a change should be an inductive and open-ended process based on intimate knowledge of the policy sector. The second element, which is quantitative, specifies 'how much' change is required to qualify ideational change as paradigmatic. Because the concept of 'paradigm shift' has commonly been used to describe major and substantial changes, I suggest that change is required across all four constitutive

dimensions of the concept. This is admittedly a provisional rule, as further research might find that a conceptualization based on a 'family resemblance' logic (see Goertz 2006) is more theoretically and empirically fruitful.⁴

5) *Descriptive studies of policy paradigms should primarily rely on direct evidence of policy actors' ideas and beliefs, which can be supplemented with, but not replaced by, indirect evidence of policy change in the expected direction.* This point seeks to address the 'revealed ideas' strategy criticized earlier in this article. Because ideas and policies do not perfectly coincide, indirect evidence concerning changes at the institutional level regarding policy ends and means cannot entirely replace direct evidence regarding the ideas of policy actors expressed through interviews; official documents such as parliamentary proceedings, speeches and press release; newspaper articles; memoirs; and scholarly literature. In fact, framing an explanation in ideational terms first requires establishing the existence of certain ideas (a policy paradigm, in the present case). Naturally, indirect evidence of a paradigm shift found in policy changes consistent with the new paradigm can supplement direct evidence in descriptive studies that seek to examine a paradigm shift in a given policy sector. While measuring ideas is not as straightforward as 'counting beans', the difficulties should not be exaggerated either. As Kay argues, 'the measurement of beliefs is, of course, notoriously difficult, but in policy studies we have developed a range of qualitative research methods from elite interviewing through to large scale attitudinal social surveys that can contribute to this post-positivist ambition' (2009: 49). In addition, because actors can lie, reframe their discourse, reinterpret their behaviour or have memory problems, a convincing case has to be based on the triangulation of respondents, data sources and methods (Campbell 2004).

6) *Studies of policy change should focus on the 'material' dimension of policy as much as possible.* The purpose of this guideline is to overcome the problem of the explanandum discussed earlier and thus avoid equating the ideational content of policy paradigms with policy theories. This pragmatic proposition to focus on the more readily observable parts of public policy is in line with the recommendations of Rose and Davies (1994) and Real-Dato (2009). Worth particular consideration is the suggestion Real-Dato's suggestion of focusing on *policy designs*, namely, 'observable phenomena found in statutes, administrative guidelines, court decrees, programs, and even the practices and procedures of street level case workers as they interact with policy recipients' (Schneider and Ingram 1997: 2; as cited in Real-Dato 2009: 122). Though I concur with Kay on the importance of studying actors' beliefs, I disagree with his interpretive approach; policy change should *not* be defined as a 'shift in the framework of agreed and shared meanings amongst influential policy stakeholders' (Kay 2009: 49). However, this does not mean that policy theories should never be analyzed by themselves or as an intermediate variable between paradigm change and policy change. In fact, because of the purposive nature of public policy, it is impossible to study this phenomenon without at least acknowledging the existence of a minimal theory holding together the various elements of public policy. This point is mainly pragmatic: let us not add an unnecessary layer of complexity in the analysis of the causal chain between ideas and institutions.

7) *Ideas, including policy paradigms, influence policy dynamics through a 'logic-of-interpretation'.* At the individual level, a change in knowledge, beliefs and attitudes often translates into a change in behavior. In fact, most social programs are based on this assumption (see e.g., Patton 2008; Rossi *et al.* 2004). The influence of ideas on policies is also well established at the macro and meso levels: 'First, such processes help to construct the problems and issues that enter the policy agenda. Second, ideational processes shape the assumptions that impact the content of reform proposals. Third, these processes can become discursive weapons that participate in the construction of reform imperatives' (Béland 2009: 702). Whatever the level of analysis, the

influence of ideas on policy must be traced back to the individual: it is based on a 'logic-of-interpretation' according to which policymakers' actions are explained 'through [their] interpretation of what is possible and/or desirable' (Parsons 2007: 13). What distinguishes this logic, at least in its 'a-rational' or 'multiple rationalities' variant, is that rational individuals can pursue divergent courses of action:

[T]he objective conditions around certain people are highly ambiguous or uncertain, such that even rational people depend to some degree on interpretive filters to organize their preferences, priorities, and problems. [...] They could rationally adopt a wide range of interpretations, and just inherit one from pre-existing culture or creatively invent it—but it then shapes how they act. (Parsons 2007: 98)

There are interesting parallels to note between Parsons' (2007) logic-of-interpretation and Kay's (2009) version of the concept of 'practical reason' that emphasizes the situational and contextual nature of rationality. Additionally, and although it is beyond the scope of this article, the possibility that existing policies could affect the ideas of policy actors should not be neglected.

Towards a paradigm shift in the study of policy paradigms?

Developed more than two decades ago by Peter Hall (1993), the concept of policy paradigm has given rise to fruitful debates and research and has certainly contributed to the consolidation of what has come to be known as the 'ideational' approach in political science. But from the beginning, this concept was insufficiently theorized and operationalized, and has since been used in a problematic way by many policy scholars. I argued that we need to distinguish, both ontologically and analytically, between policy paradigms, on one hand, and actual public policies, on the other. The explicit, coherent and well-bounded conceptualization of policy paradigms proposed in this article will prevent misunderstandings between social scientists and facilitates the production of sound descriptive and causal inferences.

However, this study suffers from a number of limitations that further research will need to address. The main limitation is that the seven guidelines are only a first draft that will require further refinements and extensions, as well as applications to concrete cases of policy dynamics. For example, we still know comparatively little on where ideas — including policy paradigms — come from and how they evolve (e.g., actual policymakers may 'learn' or be replaced by new actors with different ideas). In addition, the 'incommensurability thesis' will need to be examined. After all, Hall's (1993) conception of policy paradigms is an offshoot of Kuhn's conception in which scientific paradigms are incommensurable. At least in its stronger version, I find this position hard to defend: though I concede that some ideational elements of different paradigms such as background values and philosophical principles often clash, elements from one paradigm can still be understood by people who subscribe to another paradigm. A strong conception of incommensurability would also preclude gradual, cumulative, incremental — albeit transformative — paradigm shifts that have already been shown to occur (see Coleman *et al.* 1996; Palier 2005). As stated earlier, sticking too closely to Kuhn ([1962] 2012) to interpret Hall (1993) is probably counterproductive.

Given the influence of the concept of policy paradigm and the size of the literature that has sprung from it, change in scholarly practices is likely to take time. To use another metaphor, the literature on policy paradigms is a celestial body that, because of its mass, generates its own gravitational field. As result, the few propositions presented in this article are definitively insufficient to radically alter the trajectory of this body of research in the short term. Yet, as policy scholars become acquainted with these rules, apply them, and improve them, one might observe

a slow and gradual paradigm shift among policy scholars that will ultimately translate into better research practices.

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Notes

1. This is not to deny the existence or diminish previous scholarship centered on ideas, but only to emphasize the path-breaking influence of Hall's work which, metaphorically speaking, has introduced what, in retrospect, looks like a paradigm shift in the field of political science.
2. Policy is often considered a type of institution or at least as having an institutional dimension, but the two concepts are not identical (see Baumgartner and Jones 2009: xx; Campbell 2004; Capano 2009; Kay 2006: 13). To avoid additional semantic confusion in an already complex topic, the term 'institution' is avoided as much as possible in this article.
3. The four dimensions are (i) affective vs. cognitive; (ii) ends vs. means; (iii) tight/consensual vs. loose/contested; (iv) coherent vs. incoherent (Parsons 2007: 121-3).
4. For instance, some may argue that a significant change in the ideas related to the basic values and principles, conception of the problem and policy ends is sufficient to constitute a paradigm shift. This may indicate that the concept is based on a family resemblance logic based on three dimensions or, alternatively, that the policy means dimension is not as fundamental as the other dimensions, thereby calling into question the second proposition presented in this section.

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