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Policy as process:
the construction and use of analytic formulations

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Abstract

'The policy process' is easy to say, but difficult to clarify. This is not only because of the lack of clarity about what counts as policy, and how it is related to the diversity of activities from which it emerges, but also because of the uncertainty about the extent to which – or the ways in which – these activities can be seen as part of a process. This paper approaches this question from the outside in, as it were, locating the concept of policy within a broader discourse about governing, and exploring the way in which policy is 'put together' in practice, how this practice has been analysed by social scientists, in what ways this can be seen as constituting a system, and how presentations of policy as system relate to the work of practitioners and the work of academic observers.

Analysing the policy process: what is the task ?

The first question for anyone asked to prepare 'a handbook on the public policy process' (as we were – see Appendix) should be 'what is the task of such a handbook ?' Is it to compile a comprehensive coverage of all that has been written about public policy, by practitioners as well as academic researchers - a digest of what is already known ? Or is it to sift through this material and select the analytic approaches which seem to have been the most productive, and offer the best prospects for further learning – a guide to future research as much as a record of past research ? Or is it to offer the reader a comprehensive survey of public policy as a research field, identifying the ways in which researchers have addressed the task, the distinct research foci that have resulted, and how the bodies of knowledge that have resulted from this research have contributed to our developing understanding of public policy and process ? These questions are not always brought out into the open, and the aim of this paper is to interrogate the way in which we addressed them in putting together this handbook. It opens up not only our own theorising of policy, but also the way that it recognises and relates to other forms of theorising. We believe that in this way, we can all learn (from our experience) about the ways in which concepts are mobilised to make sense of practice.

Perhaps the most common (and certainly the safest) way is the first: 'to lay out the field as it has evolved and understands itself', as one commentator put it. In this perspective, the policy process is a complex of related activities, the concern of 'policy-makers', which all are likely to become the focus of specialised research. Commonly, these activities are seen as being linked in a logical, instrumental sequence: the articulation of concerns ('problems') generates a recognisable 'policy agenda', from which flows the identification and systematic comparison of possible responses, negotiation among relevant participants; the making of an authoritative decision, its implementation, and ultimately its evaluation – the 'life cycle' of policy (Parsons 1994: 77). These activities are seen as combining to form 'the policy process', and the task of the handbook as being to show what research has revealed about them.

This approach is ‘safe’ because it is respectful of the academic literature: if scholars are writing about (for instance) ‘agenda setting’ or ‘implementation’, these phenomena must have had a prior existence before they attracted academic attention. It tends to assume that research is an exercise in cumulative knowledge-creation, with new knowledge building on, and enlarging, existing knowledge. And it avoids the problems of method (is the ‘policy cycle’ an empirical observation, a heuristic device, a component of a model, or a normative aspiration ?), Hale (1988: 435) notes that in the 1980s, the standard texts and courses on ‘American Government’ were being renamed ‘public policy’ Is this, then, a new name for the study of government ?. What has the focus on ‘policy’ added to out understanding of governing ?

A more ambitious approach seeks to identify (and promote) the analytic approaches which have been, or promise to be, the most productive – in a sense, asking ‘where has the field advanced to, and where should it go from here ?’. Weible claims that *Theories of the Policy Process,* originally co-edited with Paul Sabatier*,* ‘aims to help advance the study of policy processes by providing a collection of the most promising theories along with thoughtful and critical comparisons’ (2014: 3). This, of course, calls for selection criteria, and Weible merges Ostrom’s distinct categories of ‘approach’ and ‘theory’, requiring potential ‘promising theories’ to clearly define and relate concepts in the form of principles and testable hypotheses and propositions’ (*op. cit.*: 4*)* - that is, they must conform to the criteria applied in contemporary US academic circles. They must also be currently discussed and applied by other researchers, and have ‘a fairly broad scope that seeks to explain a sizeable partition (*sic*) of the policy process’ (*ibid.*) (which would make them ‘causal theories’).

This does enable a clear distinction between ‘promising theories’ and other modes of analysis, though it does not address the problem of defining what is meant by policy, or what is meant by process, and limits attention to a limited number of intellectual approaches. And these approaches are presented in parallel, and essentially, as competitors: while Weible expresses the pious hope that ‘Ideally, scholars would become versed in the use of more than one theory', each theory is introduced by an advocate, and a conference to discuss these alternative theories was described as a 'policy shoot-out' (Eller and Krutz 2009). The development of the analysis of policy is presented as the cumulative growth of knowledge, though it might be also be seen a consequence of the force of competitive innovation in academic career progression.

This approach to the task leaves us with a small collection of intellectual approaches in good standing in US policy studies – the first division, as it were, being those which retain their place in the successive editions on the Sabatier & Weible volumes, with a second division getting an honourable mention in the *Policy Studies Journal* (Nowlin 2011, Schlage and Weible 2013, Petridou 2014). And in this process, the knowledge and discourse of policy practitioners is marginalised. So although policy practitioners constantly talk about their practice in terms of actions and their prospective outcomes, the 'policy cycle' has to be ignored because of 'its ineffectiveness as a causal theory', and while both practitioners and researchers recognise the importance of networking in policy practice, it cannot be part of our theorising because it 'does not form an original theory-based research agenda'.

The third possible approach is that we recognise, as social scientists, that the task is not so much to find the right theory to explain a pre-existent phenomenon called 'the policy process', but to understand the way in which we make sense of the activity, and the achievement, of 'governing', and the way in which the concepts of 'policy' and 'process' are generated both in pursuing, and explaining, this accomplishment – that is, how we theorise governing. This is an exercise in making sense of practice, with the sense-making as part of the practice. 'Policy' is a particular way of making sense of (and in) governing, and 'process' is a particular way of making sense of this practice.

Here, we are drawing on the lead of the organisational theorist Karl Weick, who argued (1979) that it helps to focus on the activity (in his case, organising) rather than on the putative outcome of this activity (organisation)… While we may like to think if governing as a series of discrete decisions by authoritative leaders, the empirical evidence points to a continuing flow of activity by a wider range of participants, a continuing, collective adjustment of practice in areas of concern, sometimes involving public pronouncements by the authoritative leaders, but more often the ongoing, collective and interactive managing of the problematic.

In this perspective, policy has to be understood as a particular way of making sense of governing. What makes up this particular way is our next question, but as we shall see, it is more than ‘whatever government decides to do or not to do’. And ‘process’ is a particular way of pursuing policy, in which activity is patterned in a recognisable and appropriate way, in which the matters to be governed are of shared concern, the relevant participants have been involved, and the matter has been managed in a way which generates acceptance of the outcome: that is, ‘due process’ has been followed. So rather than a distinct activity called ‘the policy process’, we are looking for ‘policy as process’: the way that the shared concept of public authority is mobilised in the governing of the problematic aspects of our collective life (Chapter 1) .

This means, of course, that the sense-making reflects the context in which it is takes place. As this may or may not be recognised by the sense-makers, we should start by recognising that policy as a concept emerged largely among academic observers of governing in the US in the later part of the 20th century, and the development of the concept has reflected taken-for-granted assumptions about authority, organisation, and the instrumentality of action. Even its application to other Western liberal democratic polities was not immediately clear; Sabatier said of his *Theories of the Policy Process*

> much of the book is oblivious to anything outside the US. Thus it is not obvious why this book should be reviewed in this [European] journal, (Dudley *et al.* 2000: 135)

So policy, as an analytic construct, has emerged from the way that American scholars understand their own system of government. With this in mind, we can examine the way in which policy is used in making sense of governing, not only in the US, but generally. What is it that we are examining ? What is it that is assumed to be there ?

What are the conceptual tools ?

A remarkable thing about policy studies as a field of scholarship is how little concern there is for clarifying just what it is that is being studied, and what concepts need to be mobilised in its analysis. In his introduction to the 400-page third edition of a book on theories of the policy process, Weible states that 'at the heart of policy process research is the elusive concept of public policy' (2014: 4), but gives no explanation of why this concept should be so elusive, or in what way the research reported in this particular volume has clarified it. Instead, he offers a succession of unrelated assertions, starting with the nonchalant statement that public policy (and it is not clear whether this distinguishes 'public' from other forms of policy) 'involves the decisions (including both actions and non-actions) of a government' but also includes 'the commonly understood rules-in-use that structure behavioural situations' and 'can include both means and goals and can range in form from procedural to substantive and from symbolic to instrumental', or alternatively 'can be understood by identifying the institutions that constitute its design and content'. Lest this seem too restricted a field, he adds that public policy research consists of 'the study of the interactions over time between public policy and its surrounding actors, events and contests, as well as the policy or policies' outcomes'. (2014: 4-5) To adapt Hale's pungent comment, 'This recalls Twain's description of the River Platte: "A mile wide and an inch deep"' (1988: 436). With so many phenomena being seen as part of 'policy', it is hardly surprising that it is so often described as 'muddled'.

Of course, it is not unusual for constructs used in the analysis of government to be wide-ranging, but this means that the analysis has to show why this is so, and how this affects the analytic utility of the construct. It is clear, for instance, that 'policy' is applied to distinguish a range of rather different phenomena:

- an artefact, with a creator and a clear form (e.g. 'the government's policy on renewable energy sources')

- an analytic category, distinguishing one aspect of governing from others, such as 'administration' or 'politics'

- a mode of state action by authoritative figures – 'policy-making'

- a way of addressing matters of collective concern (‘problems’) – e.g. the demand for a ‘policy response’ to a perceived rise in drug use

- a body of knowledge about a field of governing, encompassing both the area of concern, and the things which have been, or could be, done about it (e.g. ‘health policy’)

- a body of stable practices – ‘the way we do things here’ – e.g. ‘the school’s homework policy’

All of these distinct usages can make sense in context; the task for analysis is to show how, and to clarify what this means about ‘policy’ as a construct, both in the practice of governing and the explanation of that practice. Simply to say that policy is ‘all of the above’ is not very helpful. To paraphrase Wildavsky (1973), ‘If policy is everything, maybe it’s nothing’. Is ‘policy’ a way of distinguishing some particular aspects of governing, or is it an umbrella which covers the whole field of activity, enabling theory-builders to focus on whatever aspects they find convenient in constructing their ‘theory of the policy process’?

The task, then, is to show in what contexts, and in what ways, ‘policy’ and ‘process’ make sense in the explanation of governing. We have seen that there are different characteristics which lead to an identification as ‘policy’. Agamben (2009) suggests that it is helpful to see these characteristics as constituting the ‘signature’ of policy, enabling the observer to allocate it to this category. In this perspective, we could see a number of ‘markers’ that act to make the ‘signature’ of policy: that it emerges from government (Chapter 2), exists in written form (Chapter 3), is a response to problems (Chapter 4), is a clear form of ‘standard practice (Chapter 5), and reflects a body of accrued specialised knowledge (Chapter 6). How much of each characteristic will be present in any particular case is an empirical variable, but these are the sources of the identification as policy, and we chose to begin the handbook (in Part I) with an exploration of each of these policy-signalling characteristics, and in so doing, started to expose the reasons that the theory-builders found it difficult to define the subject matter. While the claim that policy was made by ‘the government’ would not be publicly disputed, it is recognised that it emerges from a ‘policy bureaucracy’ (‘a cast of thousands), not all of them government officials (Page and Jenkins 2005), But the members of this cast deny that they are ‘making policy’ – ‘Only the Secretary if State [the political leader] does that’ (Maybin 2016). The normative force of this rhetorical sleight-of-hand makes it ‘a good account’ beyond its empirical accuracy. As Foucault puts it, ‘In our political and social thought, we have not yet cut off the king’s head (1986: 88-9).

Similarly the perception of policy as being problem-focused fits well into a modernist discourse of governmental ‘intervention’ in society when needed, and it would be difficult to get support for any program without a problem to justify it, but if the intervention has been and appropriate response to the original concern, does it not become part of normal practice ? If the original goal is achieved, is the program terminated, or is the problem redefined ? In other words, is the goal discourse itself a part of the action ?

This interplay between the talk and the action can also be seen in the last of our ‘markers’, policy as characterised by a body of accrued expertise. Of course, there are such bodies of expert knowledge, in health care, education, highway engineering, wildlife ecology and many others, and they mobilise this expert knowledge to support of claims made. This simply creates a problem for those who have to generate an outcome from these competing claims, and there tends to be a yearning for an overriding, ‘objective’ discourse. Policy analysis was claimed to be such, but while the analysis was done and cited in support, it did not dissolve the need for negotiation, and while it has now been reborn as ‘evidence-based policy’, it appears that like policy analysis, it will become a part of the negotiation, rather than a way of avoiding it.

Similarly, the concept of ‘process’ in relation to policy rests on a body of shared experience and sense-making. While it is common for policy activity to be described as ‘messy’ or ‘confusing’, policy participants recognise a world of known practice: the elements may not be perfectly predictable, but they are not unknown. Feldman and March (1981) noted that in organisational practice, information may be called for, but not used in making the decision: calling for information demonstrates that the decision was made in the appropriate way. In the performance of policy, it is important to show that the right people have been involved in the development of the policy, the appropriate information has been used, the problem being addressed and the priority it has been given are in accord with community expectations, and the projected outcomes are credible. If these requirements are not satisfied, then it may be questioned whether 'due process' has been followed.

This, of course, assumes that appropriate practice is known, and shows the importance of knowing the discourse and having the skills – 'knowing how' as Maybin (2016) puts it. Even when non-official involvement in policy development is solicited, effective participation depends on knowing the right moves, and the outsiders may find that they have to learn the moves, or move the action to another location, like a politician's office – or the streets (Arend and Behagel 2011). And this raises questions about policy as part of a reform agenda – e.g. by such bodies as the OECD, the EU and th World Bank.

'Process', then is an exercise in collective sense-making, with multiple dimensions, arising out of continuing interaction and a commitment to its maintenance. *The 'policy process', then, can be seen as the way that the shared concept of public authority is mobilized in the governing of the problematic aspects of our collective life.* (authors, forthcoming, ch.1). This makes for a very broad span of attention, and the research literature is focused much more narrowly, onto distinct segments of policy activity, or particular research approaches. We have singled out twenty of these foci of research attention; there are others that could have been included, and still others that have yet to win a place in the updates of research approaches that appear from time to time in the *Policy Studies journal*, but we believe that this selection gives a good coverage of the field.

But in what way does this wide array of specialised research fields contribute to our understanding of policy as a process that is mobilised in the pursuit of governing ? We suggest that it is helpful to think of the concept of policy as being underpinned by three core values – *order - there is a consistent response to a given situation -*, *authority– this response originates from some authoritative figure -* and *problem– the action is an appropriate response to a recognised problem*. We can think of these as norms which underpin a 'good account' of policy, but they may not all be part of every account, and certainly not in the same proportions. But by recognising that ‘policy’ is seen as conveying several distinct values, we can see these specialised fields as being focused on one or other of these core values, whether testing for it, looking at ways to advance it, or seeing it as in some way problematic. As we shall show, this is the way we brought these fields into focus in the handbook. But there were also some research approaches which in different ways challenged the basic assumption that policy is, in some way, the reflection of ‘the authoritative allocation of values’ in a polity, and we felt it was worth highlighting this point of different by grouping the chapters on these approaches in a section of their own (Part V). We shall now show how these diverse approach can contribute to an integrated approach to policy as a process in governing.

The contribution of the diverse fields of policy research

Perhaps the highest-profile of the three underlying values which we identified is *authority (Part II)*: policy is understood as a process of authoritative choice. The dominant theorisation of policy sees it as a process originating with governments recognising a need, moving through options to choice, execution and evaluation of outcomes – the ‘life cycle’ of policy (Parsons 1994: 77) (Chapter 7). This can be seen in the organising of textbooks and university courses, and in the discourses of practitioners and the public, which present it in terms of concerns, choices and outcomes, but it is omitted from Weible’s *Theories of the Policy Process* on the basis of its alleged ‘empirical inaccuracy’ (a curious criterion for a theory) and its ‘ineffectiveness as a causal theory’ (Weible 2014: 8-9). Whatever the merits of the academic critiques cited by Weible, it is undeniable that theorising policy as a process of authoritative choice is an important component of policy practice, and accounting for the differences between the experience of policy and the terms of the theorising is part of the analysis, not a reason for ignoring the theorising.

But while ‘authority’ is concentrated in a few hands, policy activity (as we noted earlier) seems to involve ‘a cast of thousands’, and much of the research on policy focuses of their activity. In fact, Lasswell’s demand for a ‘policy science’ (1951) was a call to social scientists to put their expertise to work in the selection and pursuit of authoritatively-endorsed goals. This was followed by the development, as an academic construct and a field of practice, of ‘policy analysis’, which was largely seen as a methodology for the identification and comparison of options in terms of their costs and likely outcomes. The results of this calculation would then form the basis of ‘advice’ to the authoritative figures who were seen as ‘making policy’ by their decisions, and these non-authoritative participants were often described as ‘policy advisers’, a term which was also applied to the representatives of organised interests who were seeking an outcome favourable to their organisation. Recently, this ‘expert’ function has come to be termed ‘policy design’ (Howlett 2014), which raises the question of who can be considered the ‘policy makers’: the experts who crafter a course of action, or the authorities who approved its introduction ? (Chapter 8) Within the design literature, there has been argument about whether the focus should be on designing solutions to policy problems, or on measuring the efficacy of particular tools available to governments (‘policy instruments’) (Chapter 9) – e.g. regulation v. transferable permits v. self-regulation – but the assumption that the question is about the instrumental efficacy of policy action remains the same.

The significance of authority was even more central in the literature on ‘policy implementation’ (Chapter 10), which was sparked by Pressman and Wildavsky in 1973, asking to what extent the policy goals announced at the outset were actually achieved – i.e., was the policy that had been chosen ‘implemented’. This generated a significant literature in the 1970s and 1980s, but interest waned, the Pressman and Wildavsky thesis was substantially modified (1979, 1983), and by the 1990s it was being asked whether implementation had become ‘yesterday’s issue’ (Hill 1997). But the decline in academic interest did not signal any decline in the propensity of authority figures to assert their interest in the implementation of the policies they had approved.

Perhaps the interest in instrumental efficacy had been swallowed by the growing field of ‘evaluation’ (Chapter 11), which had its own journals, conferences and professional associations, and was not limited to policy evaluation, but took in projects, programs, and any form of organised innovation. It focused on methodology: how to assess the impact of the innovation. This raised questions about how well the goals had been specified originally, whether participants all had the same goals, whether efficacy should be measured in terms of program, process or politics (McConnell 2010), and whether what was to be evaluated was the outcome of the innovation or the continuing process. These questions interacted with questions about the relationship between the evaluation and the practice being evaluated – questions of timing (before, during or after the innovation), relationships (were the evaluators outside inspectors, an instrument of control, or part of the team ?), and response (how did being evaluated affect practice, whether benignly (the 'Hawthorne effect') or deceitfully ('gaming' – Hood 2006). This moves the focus from a 'technical' question of measurement to a broader consideration of the place of assessment in the organisation of practice.

So while authority is a very high-profile value, it is also problematic in many ways. It seems to assume an actor called 'government' that has knowledge and preferences, and acts to maximise these preferences. But policy practitioners find that 'the government' is composed of a wide range of specialised bodies with diverse and often competing fields of concern and agendas of ambition, a long history of involvement in governing, marked by linkage and antagonism, and a concern to maintain their position in the continuing interaction; 'government' is not so much an actor as an arena in which distinct bodies pursue specialised agendas.. And even in long-established and stable liberal democracies, there are a number of participants who are only marginally or not at all 'government, so the arena of governing spreads well beyond the reassuring organisation charts showing jurisdiction and accountability. And in polities with significant ethnic, tribal, religious, regional or cultural divisions, the authority of government may be quite problematic, with governments relying on their ability to recruit these other sources of authority in support of their agendas.

For this reason, the accounts that participants give of the policy process tend to be less about authority than about order (Chapter 12(: since policy implies a uniform and predictable response to known situations, producing this predictability is an important part of the policy task. Accounts of policy as authoritative choice tend to assume that hierarchy produces order: once the authoritative choice has been made, the game is over, and the choice will be put into action. Practitioners find that this is not their experience, because as Lindblom (1959) pointed out, policy innovations are likely to encounter a range of existing practices, which will be defended by their officials and institutions, and because of the costs and uncertainty of appealing to hierarchical direction, the innovators will need to negotiate a settlement with existing practice, and exercise in 'partisan mutual adjustment'.

So policy activity is likely to involve interaction between different participants – some in government, some now, some more organised, some less so – and this is likely to lead to a degree of shared understanding about how issues should be addressed and who should be involved in their management: that is, it becomes a pattern of structured interaction. Much of the focus of policy study has been on how this structured interaction may be best be understood, and how it can be related to constitutional formulations based on authoritative choice. One widely-used approach has been the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Chapter 13), which argues that policy structures are coalitions formed by participants who share deep-seated values, to achieve policy goals which reflect these values (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Kingdon's different (but equally widely-used) 'multiple streams' approach (1984) (Chapter 14) sees structuring in, and between, parallel streams of action, related to the investigation of the problem ('what do we know about this ?), possible responses ('what could we do about this ?),and the appropriateness of a response ('what should we do about this – if anything ?), with policy outcomes reflecting the action both within and between the streams. A third, less clearly-demarcated approach, focuses on the increasing professionalization of policy activity ('policy work') (Chapter 15), both within government and in non-government spheres, which has moved beyond the early formulations of 'policy analysts' advising a 'policy-maker' to a recognition of the institutionalisation of different sorts of expertise, of both subject-matter and of process.

All of these formulations are grappling with an underlying dynamic in policy activity: there are multiple participants, with diverse understanding of the situation and agendas of concern, and hence offering continuing stimuli for both conflict and cooperation, 'networking' and 'boundary maintenance'. Participants are likely to find it easier to reach agreement with people that they know and trust, and that developing mutual recognition and trust among stakeholders makes it easier to manage areas of concern. But where this trust and mutual recognition is weak – as in the former communist states of central and eastern Europe, or in much of the Middle East – creating a shared acceptance of collective action becomes very difficult. But even when there is a readiness to work together, whether this leads to regular meetings, whether the meetings have a name, and whether they become a 'normal' part of policy practice is an empirical question. Whether this sort of practice creates institutions, and what these should be called – e.g. does this 'networking' create a 'network', and is the 'network' itself an actor – is an analytic question, and one which is not well addressed in the literature.

The third of our underlying values of policy is problem (Part IV). "Problem' seems to be integral to policy: policy is either addressing a problem, or stabilising practice because uncertainty might itself be a problem. The fact that different participants may have different understandings of the nature of the policy concern points to the extent that policy research comes to focus on the identification of policy problems. Medical research pointed to the impact of smoking on mortality and morbidity: was this a policy problem ? If so, was it because of its significance for individual health, or population health, or hospital budgets, or the welfare of tobacco farmers, shopkeepers, advertising outlets, or occupational health and safety ? And how did these concerns rank against liberal policy settings on individual choice ? This shows the importance of how the issue is framed (Chapter 16) – or as Bacchi (2009) puts it 'what's the problem represented to be ?'. One response to this question has been the concept of policy agenda (Chapter 17): a metaphor drawn from organisational practice to label the phenomenon that some things are recognised a problems and are talked about, while other matters (with apparently an equally good or better claim) are not. Another has been mobilising the concepts of narrative or discourse (Chapter 18) : how is this concern talked about, and how does this way of taking contribute to the policy outcome. ? Thinking of policy in this way also underlies a research interest in policy learning (Chapter 19), which sees the adoption of similar policies as a result of participants coming to as a shared understanding of a problem.

The main source of such a shared understanding has traditionally been seen as the mass media, which generated (through newspapers and TV channels covering most of the population) a shared narrative (or a number of competing ones) in which the discourse of governing could be conducted. But this has been changed by technological, commercial and social change: the sales of newspapers are falling, the audience of the major TV channels is shrinking, and rather than the mass media articulating a narrative which their viewers share, the viewers/readers choose media which articulate views which they already hold. And these are likely to be social media rather than mass media (Chapters 20 and 21). So while the social media do make it possible for citizens to expand their policy horizons and engage in a wider policy world, they also make it easier to retreat into a smaller world of 'people like me'.

This all confirms Heclo's observation (1974) that policy activity is not only about deciding, but is also a process of 'collective puzzling' – about what is of concern, and why, what is known about it, who can speak with authority, what should be done, and who might be looked to to do it – in other words, it is a continuing process of problematisation (Chapter 22).

This brings much of the writing on policy into focus by reference to the key values of authority, order and problem; throughout the mainstream policy writing, there is a tacit framing of policy as (at least ideally) governments making choices, but some of the writing on policy implicitly challenges this, exploring the extent to which incremental adaptation reduces the significance of authoritative choice (Chapter 23), or that policy reflects the socio-economic characteristics of the jurisdiction (Chapter 25), or long-running logics of adaptation to social and technological change (Chapter 24), rather than the activity of participants. Not to mention that policy creates its own feedback which, in turn influences the conditions for new policymaking (Chapter 26). These do not so much detract from the 'social action' perspective of the mainstream literature as remind us of its limits. To paraphrase Marx, policy is made by people, but not as free agents, in circumstances of their own choosing.

What does this tell us about policy, process and governing?
(Chapter 27)

By focusing on policy as a concept in use, we have tried to clarify the meaning of policy as it is used by both practitioners and observers without resort to narrow constitutional formulas or lists that amount to a repackaging of the political process in Western liberal democratic states as conventionally described. We have seen that it is a concept embodying authority, order and problem which is mobilised to indicate, explain and validate action. We can see the way in which different sorts of activity contribute to policy-making: that enactment by official announcement has probably been preceded by discussion among significant interests, and is likely to be accompanied by an account presenting the action as an appropriate response to a recognised problem. There may be tension between these accounts, particularly between authority and order, and policy participants learn to use one account (formal/front-stage/sacred) in presenting the policy outcome and another (informal/back-stage/profane) in discussing the ordering of practice.

So policy is an exercise in social construction – as are the underlying values – authority, order and problem - that we have identified. How people understand situations, participants, possible actions and likely outcomes is always 'under construction'. For instance, the term 'stakeholder', which is now rather significant in both policy practice and theorising, was unknown in the policy writing of the 1950s and 60s; many of the people to whom the term is now applied would have been termed 'vested interests': the new label (which had been imported from business management; see Mitroff 1983) reflecting a changing normative framework. And while it is a continuing, and changing, activity, it is stabilised by the shared language in use, and new terms are adopted because they are needed to describe and validate changes in practice in acceptable terms, and in this way, to show the compliance with 'due process'.

We can also see that it is not necessary to posit a shift from 'government' to 'governance', as Rhodes (1997) has done, to explain this broad participation in the policy process. We see that interested parties have long been active participants in the policy process, for a range of overlapping reasons – because they share a concern with the matter to be governed, have relevant knowledge, have the capacity to cooperate with or oppose any policy outcome, value being recognised, and can see the utility in taking part in the collective managing of the activity. For all of the participants, then, including as many as possible of the affected parties in the construction of the policy outcome 'makes sense'.

This has long been recognised by political scientists, but because it seemed so inappropriate in the terms of the dominant constitutional model, has been marginalised in quirky metaphors - Bentley's 'social pressures' (1908), Griffith's 'whirlpools' (1939), Truman's 'web of relationships' (1951), and Davies' 'gatekeepers … camped permanently around each source of problems' (1964) – and did not achieve respectability until the late 1970s (e.g. Heclo's 'issue networks' (1978) and Richardson and Jordan's 'policy communities' (1979). Rhodes was probably right in detecting greater public recognition of this sort of collaboration in the UK in the 1980s and 90s, and it was certainly a significant element in the institutional development of the EU (van Schendelen 2002, Greenwood 2017), but essentially, Rhodes was comparing a profane (back-stage) account of governing in the 1990s with a sacred ('front-stage) account of governing in some unspecified prior time. There may have been significant changes in the way in which participation in policy development was recognised, but it was not that it was introduced for the first time.

Our focus has been on policy as part of the pursuit and accomplishment of governing, which implies a shared sense of the appropriate management of collective concerns in the face of a diversity of participants, understandings and agendas. This is very much a Western liberal democratic perception of government, and very different to the countries - notably, but not solely, in Asia and Africa, that have been described as 'broken-backed' or 'failed' states (Tinker 1964, Nelson 2006) or 'incomplete states' (Crawford and Lijphart, 1997) but even in the established liberal democracies, it is argued that governing is about aspiration more than achievement.

> We do not live in a governed world so much as a world traversed by the 'will to govern', fuelled by the constant registration of 'failure', the discrepancy between ambition and outcome, and the constant injunction to do better next time. (Rose and Miller 1992:191

Governing, then, is characterized less by its achievement than by its pursuit: the plans, the commitments, the evaluation, and the reiteration of the aspiration. The diverse participants can share the ambition for their joint managing of this problematic aspect of our collective life, and value their participation in the attempt to achieve it, even if they have different ideas of how best it might be achieved. And they are content to see the imperfect outcomes of their collective interaction represented (re-presented) as a deliberate and authoritative choice: 'the government has decided …'.

We have been analyzing policy as a concept in use, a way of making sense of the diverse activities that make for governing, and the sense-making runs both ways: policy is pursued by following a recognized pattern ('process') which enables the situation to be seen as 'governed'; conversely, the need for the situation to be seen as governed calls for the recognition of the appropriate process, which includes the articulation of policy. By approaching it in this way, we have been able to see how the diverse studies of policy relate to this flow of thinking and practice which makes for policy as a process in the pursuit of governing. But this raises one more question: since these studies are aimed at making sense of policy practice, what is their relationship to sense-making in policy practice ? How does the 'observer's map' relate to the 'practitioner's map' – and vice versa ? (see also Hoppe and Coelbatch, 2016)

Here, the relationship between the maps runs both ways – the observer's map tries to capture the practitioner's experience, and the practitioners use the observer's map to make sense of that experience – but the observers tend to be in the lead. In particular, it is the academic observers who look for coherence and for appropriate labels, searching for the logic which explains a particular pattern of action, and for the characteristics which differentiate it from other patterns, enabling the construction of a systematic categorisation of systems of governing.

Policy practitioners tend to be more concerned with the flow of practice, and less concerned with how it may be categorised. They encounter policy practice less as a work bench on which to construct projects, and more a continuing flow of activity in which they interact with a range of other actors who may have quite different perspectives and agendas. They therefore are very attentive to routines, discourses and relationships: ‘the system, the stakeholders, the data, and how things are measured’, as one put it (Adams *et al.* 2015: 104). They are concerned with process, and the sustained capacity for effective action, as much as with the achievement of discrete outcomes.

This is an involved, ‘internal’ view of governing, rather different to the academic observer’s view of governing as systematic external ‘intervention’ to achieve socially-beneficial goals. But they recognized its utility in particular contexts. The observer’s model focused on decisions and their execution, and having distinguished a number of discrete components of decision, saw these as the basis for a cycle of successive ‘stages’ which made up ‘the policy process’. Reformers urge public organisations to organize their activity in terms of these ‘stages’ (e.g. Cabinet Office 1999), and policy practitioners might feel that this presentation of their activity makes sense in some, public contexts, even though in private, they might be skeptical about using it as a guide to practice.

> But this model would not be of great use. …if that's where you left it, you might as well be sacked tomorrow. These words are so neutral. It's not about consultation. It's really about stakeholder engagement. (Howard 2005: 10)

So the language is itself part of the creation of policy. Meeting with interested parties (‘stakeholders’) to ascertain their views (‘consultation’) has a symbolic value in the ‘enactment’ of policy. The policy workers may already know the views of the stakeholder, and in any case have already decided what they want to do, but having ‘consultation’ affirms the significance of the stakeholders, and demonstrates that ‘due process’ has been followed. So practitioners learn the importance of matching the discourse to the context, and distinguish between a public (‘front-stage/formal/sacred) discourse and a private (‘back-stage’/ informal/profane).

This presents a problem for social science-based analysis, which seeks to establish the most credible explanation of policy practice. How can one explanation be credible in some contexts, and another be a better explanation in others ? For instance, it seems obvious that public bodies are established to pursue clear public purposes: this is clearly stated in their foundation documents, reiterated in public occasions, and reflected in the projects carried out under the policy settings. Why should an academic researcher contest this assumption – particularly when there is so much pressure on researchers to show that their research is 'useful' and used by policy staff ? Research which seeks to find better ways of achieving desired outcomes will be seen as 'useful', at least by funding bodies.

What we have tried to do in this handbook is to show how both research which operates from within the dominant 'authoritative instrumental' framework, and research from other perspectives, can contribute to our growing understanding of policy as a process, contributing to the pursuit of governing. By focusing on the way that attention is directed to problems, responses are organised, and practice becomes institutionalised, it shows how the concept of policy becomes part of the collective managing of the problematic – which is to say, 'governing'.

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Appendix: *Handbook on Policy, Process and Governing*, H.K. Colebatch and Robert Hoppe, editors

to be published by Edward Elgar, late 2018

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