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## **Policy as Practice**

Koen P.R. Bartels

### **Introduction**

Practice has been a longstanding concern in policy studies (Laws & Hajer, 2006). Or to be more precise, the policy process and our understanding of it are intimately tied up with practice. What, if anything else, are policy studies about other than practice? The policy sciences originally emerged out of efforts to theorize the practice of policy and were importantly shaped by studies that sought to bring our analytical understanding of the policy process in line with how it actually works in practice. As studies of practice revealed that policy processes are characterized by complex and contingent dynamics of sense making, persuasion, bargaining, value conflict, and networking (Goodin et al., 2006), awareness grew that practitioners produce many diverging accounts of policy as they negotiate what is going on and act upon problematic situations.

Therefore, the editors of this handbook propose “to recognize policy as a concept in practice” and understand “‘policy as process’ – that is, the patterning of activity as part of the accomplishment of governing” (p. X). In other words, understanding the policy process involves mapping and interpreting who is involved, what they do, how they interact, what knowledge and understandings they have, how they enact these, how they make sense together, how they address situations, and how institutions are dynamically sustained or modified. This is, in a nutshell, what studies of policy practice do and the so-called practice approach is about. They advance an understanding of policy in terms of *the ordinary, situated, and embodied activities which policy actors routinely enact in the course of participating in the policy process to make sense of and affect it*. In this conception, policy is both a process and outcome of the practical know-how, emotions, bodily movements, artefacts, sociality, and discourses that policy actors interactively evoke, negotiate, and sustain while practically engaging with concrete situations.

Taking a practice approach help us appreciate that policy actors do a lot of challenging and meaningful work to perform seemingly routine tasks. For instance, the police work involved with administering a case is a subtle and complex task of negotiating the meaning of its particulars, ways to process it in the system, and potential future courses of action (Wagenaar & Cook, 2011). But also something as big and abstract as international

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order and peace results from security community officials' practical efforts to sustain diplomacy as the customary background against which interstate disputes are to be resolved (Pouliot, 2008). In other words, a practice approach reveals how policy actors skilfully negotiate and dynamically reproduce apparently stable, coherent policy systems visible to external observers. And it shows that they contest and modify hierarchically imposed decisions outside the purview of formal institutions. Long-standing informal local practices can, for example, inconspicuously yet effectively subvert a new, externally imposed policy for managing community-based natural resources (Wilshusen, 2009).

Especially over the past decade, practice-based studies have made it increasingly less true that “we know surprisingly little about what the work of public administrators entails” (Wagenaar, 2004, 643). Nevertheless, much work remains to be done to develop the analysis of policy practice—especially when compared to the much further maturation of the practice approach in organization studies (see Nicolini et al., 2003; Gherardi, 2012; Nicolini, 2012). As a case in point, before the current text, there was only one policy handbook chapter devoted to practice (Laws & Hajer, 2006). Therefore, we lack answers to such key questions as: In what variety of ways has policy practice been studied? What are the similarities and differences of these approaches? How has practice been theorized and how can such practice theory be used? What does a practice approach have to offer compared to other ways of understanding the policy process? How can practice be observed, analyzed, and reported? And what is the value of the practice approach for the practice of policy?

The aim of this chapter is to (at least preliminarily) answer these questions. It first distinguishes between four types of approaches to analyzing policy practice and reviews how practice has historically been studied and theorized. The chapter then discusses practice theory and its analytical implications as well as three key contributions. The third section considers a variety of practice-based studies to explain what we have learned from their findings and approaches about ‘policy as process’. Finally, several challenges to studying policy as practice are identified as well as methods for dealing with these.

### **A history of practice**

The ways in which policy practice has historically been studied and theorized are rich and varied. Based on my review of the literature, I have therefore developed an, admitted preliminary, heuristic to distinguish between four types of approaches to analyzing policy practice and evaluate their differences (see table 1). In the first quadrant I have placed *early contributions* to the formation of policy studies which were explicitly concerned with

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generating empirically grounded accounts of how everyday practices shape or even determine policy rather than being merely about the practical application of authoritative decisions. Seminal work like Lindblom (1959), Pressman & Wildavsky (1973, 1984), Lipsky (1980) and Rein (1983) facilitated a re-focusing of policy studies on practice by stressing that hierarchical direction was just part of the reality of policy actors, while their main focus was on doing their job. These early contributions turned practice into a subject of its own and inspired a proliferation of *studies of practice*, which I classify as a second type of approach. Studies of practice usually do not self-identify as taking a practice approach or even define practice for that matter<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, these studies provide detailed empirical analyses of the what policy actors do to navigate the political, social, economic, cultural, emotional, and material circumstances they find themselves in.

The approaches in the other two quadrants explicitly take practice as their main unit of analysis and, to varying degrees, are inspired by the “practice turn” in social theory (Schatzki et al., 2001) and policy studies (Wagenaar & Cook, 2003; Brunner, 2006; Colebatch, 2006a). While some policy analysts have ended up as exponents of practice theory, others study policy practice without subscribing to any particular theoretical approach or philosophical principles. In this respect Nicolini (2012, 9-13) makes a distinction between the “weak program” of practice theory, which uses it as a theoretical lens on everyday practice, and the “strong program”, which entails an ontological commitment to study practices analytically and not just descriptively<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, I distinguish between studies using *practice as analytical lens* for making sense of the policy process and studies which are *practice theory driven* by explicitly drawing on its philosophical principles. Notwithstanding important differences in levels of theorization and critical analysis, both types of approaches further broaden and deepen our understanding of the many dimensions of practice as well as ways in which it can be improved.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

To be sure, each of the four types of approaches has great internal variation and it might be difficult to classify some studies as belonging to one of the four categories. However, the alternative, collapsing all practice-based studies into one, would risk missing

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Lipsky and Pressman & Wildavsky did not do so either; ‘practice’ is not even to be found in the index of their books.

<sup>2</sup> Not to be confused with the weak and strong program in sociology.

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what is distinctive about them and could end up in thinking of the practice approach as merely a generic term for the logical reconstruction of policy practices. Starting with a review of how several seminal early contributions to policy studies already started to advance a more sophisticated approach to practice, I will discuss more recent studies of practice and practice theory inspired studies in the subsequent sections (for a fuller overview see [chapters 9 and 18 on implementation and policy work](#)).

*Early contributions*

From the 1950s to the 1980s, many seminal studies of the policy process revolved around practice. Efforts to establish the policy sciences by Harold Lasswell (Lasswell, 1951, 1970) and others emerged out of a desire to conceptualise and improve the practice of policy. He observed how the policy analyst “as a purveyor of knowledge for immediate or potential use in policy moves toward the complex role of a full-scale policy scientist who is knowledgeable of the policy process” (Lasswell, 1970, 4-5). The policy sciences, then, were to be problem-oriented, i.e., providing both “knowledge *in* and *of* the policy process”. While this took the form of identifying a series of cognitive steps to better support decision makers, Lasswell also proposed a contextual orientation that would enable a better understanding of “self-in-context” and the value judgments involved. Ambivalently, his work thus advanced the rationalization and institutionalization of policy analysis as profession grounded in reason and interdisciplinary science, but also reflexivity and inquiry to advance freedom, democracy and human dignity (Torgerson, 1985).

As the policy analysis profession increasingly took hold of governments throughout the 70s and 80s (cf. DeLeon, 2006; Radin, 2006), Lasswell’s theorizing of policy practice was seen as the basis for the “stagist” or “policy cycle” model advanced by the widely adopted rational policy analysis<sup>3</sup> (see Goodin et al. 2006). This perspective on policy was about authoritative leaders choosing goals for government rather than practice. However, it did carry an implicit theorisation of practice; i.e., that practice involved supporting choice through analysis, making choices, executing choices, and verifying that the objectives of choices had been achieved. Almost immediately this view became subject to analytical and empirical criticism by a range of seminal studies which revealed “a ‘disconnect’ between the accounts of policy work found in the instructional texts and the accounts drawn from

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<sup>3</sup> Even though Lasswell’s work did not support a stagist or cyclical model (see Dunn, 2012, ch. 7).

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practice” (Colebatch, 2006a, 311). These early contributions fostered a contextual and normative orientation to practice and, albeit often implicitly, turned it into a unit of analysis of its own.

The earliest empirical study of policy practice is probably Herbert Kauffman’s (2006 [1956]) analysis of how US forest rangers translated federal policy into action. He explains the surprising high degree of consistency in the way policy was implemented for such a scattered organization by “approaching organizations from the point of view of the way in which decisions and behavior of ‘operative employees’ are influenced within and by the organizations” (239), including its management, culture and history, and institutional environment. The study demonstrates how “centrifugal forces ... [are] pushing and pulling them in different directions, yet they are held together” (5) by constantly accomplishing “integration” in the practice of managing the organization and enacting the work. But even though Kauffman pays attention to flexibility, informality, and local knowledge, he mainly advances a rationalistic approach to managing administrative and policy processes.

More outright criticism of the way practice was being theorized came from Charles Lindblom’s (1959) argument that policy making does not follow a neat, linear progression of stages but is an incremental process of muddling through. Political pressures, time pressures, vested interests, and policy history and experiences foster a policy process of partisan mutual adjustment. Similarly, Pressman & Wildavsky (1984) brought to light how the complexity of joint action significantly changes the designs of policy makers. Later editions of their celebrated book include an extensive analytical critique of the “divorce of implementation from policy” (142). Alternatively, they advocate an evolutionary perspective in which design, implementation, and evaluation are integrated to foster mutual adaptation and continuous learning from experience with “perfectly ordinary circumstances” (ibidem, xx).

Another famous critique came from Michael Lipsky’s (1980) observation that the practices of street level bureaucrats effectively become the policies of public agencies. Street level bureaucrats enact “patterns of practice” (81) to cope with ambiguous and vague policies, non-voluntary clients, difficult to measure activities, high caseloads, increasing demand, scarce resources and limited personal capacities. Policy makers’ intentions do not explain or determine what happens; it is street level bureaucrats’ discretionary engagement with the actual physical, social, and emotional conditions in which they do their jobs. Policy making should therefore be grounded in a contextual orientation to everyday working conditions, the structural dilemmas and pressures inherent to those, and the “work practices

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and orientations” (xiii) developed in response to these in order to “develop proposals for supporting practice ... helpful in solving specific challenges experienced by workers.” (200).

The first explicit theorization of practice came from Martin Rein (1983), who argues that “implementation and practice are not just extensions of programmatic designs but subjects on their own terms” (xiii). Based on empirical studies of social work and benefits, he developed a value critical approach to policy analysis that, amongst others, challenges dominant understanding of rational knowledge by teasing out the contextual and value-driven ways in which practitioners engage with the world. He defines practice as “a special system of actions unique to, and institutionally vested in, a professional role” (176). It combines a certain set of skills, purposes, power relationships, and myths to manage the “worries” and “tension between meaning and action, faith and doubt” (190) inherent to a practice. Donald Schön ([1983] 1991) articulated a similar “epistemology of practice” (20) focused on “knowing-in-action”: the “spontaneous, intuitive performance of the actions of everyday life” (49). He diagnoses that public professionals’ technical, specialized and authoritative knowledge is inadequate for resolving modern problems characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and value pluralism. Therefore, his analysis both revealed and recommended a “reflective practice” of responding to the “back talk” of problematic situations.

A final seminal contribution came from anthropologist James Scott (1998), who framed the difference between rational and practical knowledge in terms of the power of states over local populations. He argued that the “high modernism” of taking “exceptionally complex, illegible, and local social practices (...) and [creating] a standard grid whereby it could be centrally recorded and monitored” (2) is bound to fail as it neglects local conditions and “practical knowledge, informal processes, and improvisation in the face of unpredictability” (6). Thus, large scale state interventions need to be replaced with a practical and contextual approach that appreciates and accommodates “a large repertoire of moves, visual judgments, a sense of touch, or a discriminating gestalt for assessing the work as well as a range of accurate institutions born of experience that defy being communicated apart from practice” (329).

As such, a practice approach emerged that countered the initial rational focus on cognitive steps and providing advice to decision makers with attention to a variety of tasks, multiple actors and the relationships between them, diverse types of knowledge, and value conflict (see Chapter 12 on linkage). As the literature on governing increasingly came to refer to it as ‘governance,’ analyses of the policy process paid more attention to the contextual,

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value-laden and interactive ability to acquire practical knowledge and coordinate divergent accounts of what is going on and what should be done (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003; Goodin et al., 2006; Colebatch et al., 2010; Feldman, 2010). Policy analysis was no longer about producing a single or authoritative account of the policy process, but about the contextual everyday practices through which policy actors are framing, puzzling, contesting, developing, resisting, coordinating, and powering policy problems.

This analytical job was especially picked up by post-positivist, critical, and interpretive approaches to policy analysis (Hoppe, 1999; Yanow, 2000; Fischer, 2003; Wagenaar, 2011). Carrying forward Lasswell's problem-oriented, contextual, and normative ambitions, they cultivated the use of methods that enable making sense of multiple meanings, values, contingency, emotions, and practical knowledge (I will return to methods in the penultimate section). It is in this context that practice theory emerged and further shaped our understanding of the policy process. The next section explains the main principles of its analytical program and discusses three key contributions.

### **The turn to practice**

The practice turn in social theory provides a philosophical programme that in many ways confirms and extends the practice approach that developed from the early contributions to policy analysis. In brief, practice theory proposes the following premises (Schatzki et al., 2001; Wagenaar & Cook, 2003; Nicolini, 2012, ch. 1-2; Shove et al., 2012, Jonas and Littig 2017):

1. Practice is the main unit of analysis. Not practitioners, not policy, but the ongoing routinized and improvised practical activities of actors engaged in concrete tasks and situated in a wider social and historical context. The traditional dualism of individual agency and structural determinism is overcome as the context provides a shared horizon of intelligibility that indicates what is appropriate action, yet is dynamically enacted, negotiated, and adjusted through the interactions between actors and the situation at hand.
2. Practice is not primarily a cognitive but a linguistic and embodied activity. What we know is generated in the course of practice as our grasp of the world emerges from embodied, often unacknowledged intuitions, feelings, know-how, and dispositions as well as the way we express our innate intentions and communicate their meanings. Going beyond the Cartesian primacy of mind and rationality, knowledge and action



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are triggered by active engagement with situations (by experiencing, making sense of, and communicating about them) of that somehow resist our efforts to change it.

3. Practice is fundamentally sociomaterial. Human activity is always materially mediated and cannot be understood separately from their interactions with artefacts, technology, nature, bodily sensations, and physical spaces. Human beings are not fully in control of the world or the sole source of action; nonhumans also have agency that accommodates and resists human activity.

These philosophical premises provide an enhanced analytical lens on practice for explaining its complexity, differentiation, and ongoing change. But practice theory also offers a set of deeper ontological, epistemological, and ethical principles.

Ontologically, it operates on a relational worldview in which actors exist in an ongoing, dialectical relationship with one another and the materials, discourses, rules, moral order, emotions, and community that constitute the situation. All these elements are not fixed, identifiable things with separate ontological status but only exist as emergent properties of our interactions (Wagenaar & Cook, 2011; Cook & Wagenaar, 2012; Bartels, 2015, ch. 2). Indeed, Pressman & Wildavsky (1984) already emphasized the importance of understanding implementation in terms of “complex chains of reciprocal interaction” (xxv).

Epistemologically, practice theory asserts that we come to know the world by actively engaging with the particulars of the challenges we face in the course of getting things done. We may be conscious of what we do and capture it in formal knowledge, but usually it is tacit, sensuous, unreflective knowledge that helps us to routinely move around in the background we are immersed in. Formal knowledge is not a precursor to but an aspect of practice: we do not necessarily need to think about and represent the world to intervene in it (Hacking, 1983; Cook & Brown, 1999; Cook & Wagenaar, 2012; Nicolini, 2012, ch. 2). This view bolsters the “epistemology of practice” proposed by Schön (1991, 20).

Ethically, practice theory proposes a concrete, reflexive and deliberative stance. Policy actors should engage in inclusive conversations about the problematic situation that implicates them rather than imposing authoritative decisions. This should empower all those involved to become aware of their shared and divergent activities, understandings, and challenges and enact meaningful changes that everyone can agree to and move the situation forward (Wagenaar & Cook, 2003; Colebatch, 2006a). Policy analysts can stimulate such practices by, for example, facilitating what Rein (1983) called frame reflection on value conflicts, problem setting, and practice worries.

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Altogether, practice theory has great potential for developing the philosophical foundations of policy studies. For instance, the philosophically sophisticated and empirically grounded approach of decentred governance developed by Bevir & Rhodes (2003, 2006, 2010) aims “to unpack a practice as the disparate and contingent beliefs and actions of individuals” (Bevir & Rhodes, 2010, 73) embedded within “traditions”. Based on the premises of anti-foundationalism, meaning holism, and anti-representationalism, they seek to reconstruct policy processes in terms of the practices through which actors reproduce and modify their historical and cultural context. Another example is Turnbull’s (2013) “integrated analytical framework” for explaining how policy actors use a “practical logic to distinguish what is problematic from what is not” (122) and engage in “a continual struggle between the repression and explication of problems” (124). This approach recasts the problem orientation by explaining policy processes in terms of the contextually nested activities of interpreting, puzzling, negotiating, and powering of problems.

At this point it should be emphasized that there is no such thing as “the practice approach”. Practice theory is not a single, unified body of thought but rather a collection of approaches and insights. Practice approaches are, for example, variously built on the work of Dewey (Forester, 1999), Peirce (Kangas, 2011), Bourdieu (Turnbull, 2013), Wittgenstein (Pouliot, 2008), Giddens (Healey, 2007), Durkheim (Perri 6, 2015), Foucault (Østergaard Møller & Stone, 2013), and Schatzki (Arts et al., 2014), sometimes also combining several of these (e.g., Kangas, 2011). The rich history of practice theory stretches back to Aristotle and comprises different philosophical origins in American pragmatism and Continental European social theory (for overviews see Wagenaar & Cook, 2003; Pouliot, 2008; Freeman et al., 2011; Cook & Wagenaar, 2012; Nicolini, 2012; Shove et al., 2012, Jonas and Littig 2017).

A crucial philosophical difference is whether studies take a representative or performative approach to practice. The former focus on the social construction and linguistic practice of the policy process to explain how practitioners make sense of it and coordinate or negotiate their accounts to make things happen or dynamically enact institutions and power relationships (e.g., Colebatch, 2006a; Bevir & Rhodes, 2010; Turnbull, 2013; Perri 6, 2015). While these studies all but neglect the actual experiences and activities of practitioners, they tend to approach these from a linguistic or conceptual scheme informed by social theory which prefigures particular understandings of and relationships between structure and agency, language and action, mind and body, social and material, stability and change. Practice, in a representative approach, refers to the unconscious, routine enactment of tasks

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based on engrained beliefs, habits, and institutions that is only brought to the level of reflection in case of a conflict or dilemma. In performative approaches, instead, practice is understood in the pragmatist tradition as a dynamic, holistic, and temporally unfolding process of interacting with the resistances and affordances that the world throws up when actors try to intervene in it. Although all the elements and dualisms mentioned before are part of practice, this is only in the ways in which they become manifest through actors' experience of and practical engagement with the world. Experience, and not representations crafted of this, is the starting point (Shields, 2004; Wagenaar, 2012, 2014b).

*Practice as analytical lens and practice theory-driven studies*

The degree to which practice theory guides the analysis of the policy process depends on whether studies use it as an *analytical lens* or are *driven by practice theory*. I now illustrate some of their differences by appraising the work of three contemporary scholars who have probably contributed most to developing the practice approach in policy studies.

Hal Colebatch (Colebatch, 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2009; 2015; Colebatch et al., 2010) does not so much apply practice theory as just asking why practitioners do what they do and what this tells us about the policy process. In other words, practice forms an *analytical lens* on what policy workers (rather than top level decision makers) actually do in their daily jobs. At the basis of his approach is the observation that “the activity of theorizing is not separable from what people do in the activity of organizing.” (Colebatch & Degeling, 1986, 339). In other words, giving accounts of policy practice is itself part of that practice. This means that the rational view of the policy process is only one of the ways in which practitioners make sense of what is going on. Colebatch follows Lasswell in monitoring the nature of the profession of policy analysis and narrating changes in the policy process and governance by identifying what policy workers (say they) do while dealing with different forms of knowledge and accounts of policy. He thus advances an understanding of the policy process in terms of the work involved with making sense of the diversity of ways in which policy is used as a sense making construct.

As such, Colebatch has created a solid basis for policy work as a subject area and practice as an analytical focus in policy studies. Detailed studies of different policy areas, national contexts, and time periods (by him and contributors to his edited volumes and special issues) has generated insight into how issues are framed as policy problems and solutions; when, where, and by whom is policy work done; what types of knowledge are enacted; how are different accounts of policy constructed and mobilized; and how are all

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these issues are negotiated and coordinated. A limitation to the empirical grounding and explanatory capacity of his work is that Colebatch makes little use of practice theory and engages in little theorization to deepen understanding of practice in terms of artefacts, bodily dispositions, sociomaterial relations, emotions, rules, sociality, and so on.

Hendrik Wagenaar takes a *practice theory-driven approach* that explains practice as dialogical experience. His studies of prostitution policy, citizen participation, collaborative governance, planning, and several forms of administrative work (Wagenaar & Cook, 2003; Wagenaar, 2004, 2006; Wagenaar & Specht, 2010; Wagenaar & Cook, 2011; Cook & Wagenaar, 2012; Wagenaar, 2012; Vos & Wagenaar, 2014; Wagenaar, 2014a, 2014b; Wagenaar & Wilkinson, 2015) build on and extend the performative approach to practice. In brief, Wagenaar's conception of practice is that policy actors do not monologically apply pre-held, formal knowledge to concrete situations but produce emergent understandings and activities by jointly engaging with the 'ongoing business' and enacting their 'actionable understanding' in an 'eternally unfolding present'. Practice takes shape as they experience the affordances and resistances emerging in response to their interventions. In other words, it is a process in which actor, environment, and others bring each other into being through dialogical experience.

Wagenaar's work has advanced the practice approach in policy studies in a philosophically rounded and empirically grounded manner, always carefully interweaving fine-grained mundane activities with sophisticated abstract insights. His epistemology and ontology of practice are consistent with his ethical program of stimulating more dialogical, reflexive, and collaborative practices. Moreover, he argues that policy analysis should reflect the performative, dialogical and experiential nature of practice in its methodology and teaching (Wagenaar, 2007b, 2011, 2012; Bartels & Wagenaar, 2017). Yet, while astutely aware and deeply critical of the high modernist, power-ridden, adversarial nature of the policy process (Wagenaar, 2007a, 2014a), his studies tend to emphasize practically judicious and democratically vigorous competences of ordinary administrators who manage to navigate political, bureaucratic, and moral swamps. It remains somewhat elusive what to do—both practically and analytically—in cases of malicious practices; i.e., what does dialogical practice have to offer in the face of policy actors who competently navigate policy processes into a swamp of technical procedures, administrative categories and political struggles (Heidelberg, 2015; Bartels, 2017a)?

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Finally, John Forester (1989, 1993a, 1993b, 1999, 2006, 2009, 2013, 2014) sits somewhat in the middle between using practice as analytical lens and taking a practice-driven approach. Yet, he adds a critical-transformative perspective by combining deep concerns with the everyday practices of planners, mediators and policy workers; the real world settings of pluralism, conflict and inequality in which they operate; and the transformative potential of critical communicative practice. His ‘critical pragmatism’ extends Schön’s view of the reflective practitioner in “the fragmented, pluralistic, adversarial world that has eroded the steering capacity of central governments and that transferred policymaking power to a fragmented field of social and political actors” (Wagenaar, 2001, 234; Forester, 1999, 2013; Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003). Carefully unpacking detailed practitioner narratives, he demonstrates how subtle communicative practices can help overcome seemingly hopeless situations through carefully listening, reaching pragmatic agreement, and enacting productive relationships. Forester thus understands the policy process in terms of the communicative (dis)organizing of attention in practically feasible and politically sensitive ways.

The major attraction of Forester’s work is its down-to-earth reporting and theorizing of (always fascinating) real world experiences. He presents a disenchanting view of what it means to make policy in situations fraught with conflict, injustice and struggle as well as an inspiring approach to what it takes to move such situations forward. Policy processes in his view entail practically engaging with actual issues as to transform mutual relationships and produce concrete outcomes in the process. Forester puts to work a subtle moral philosophy, critically interpretive method (Fischer & Forester, 1993; Forester, 1993a), and sobering practical judgment. However, we are left somewhat empty-handed in evaluating and improving the quality of relational practices (Bartels, 2017a) beyond the role of exemplary practitioners and pragmatic successes in accommodating problematic situations; i.e., what does it mean to systemically transform a practice?

Each of these key contributions has in its own way sparked great interest in the practice approach and inspired many practice-based studies of the policy process. The next section further delves into the variety of ways in which practice is analyzed in policy studies. It starts with a review of key areas of policy studies (expertise, street level bureaucracy, implementation, governance, participatory democracy, evidence-based policy making) and then turns to analyses of the practice of policy in several adjacent areas (health care, public planning, environmental governance, and international relations). I discuss practice theory-

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driven studies as well as studies using practice as an analytical lens and studies of practice and, insofar possible in such a general overview, highlight their differences.

**An overview of practice-based studies**

Practice-based studies have greatly informed our understanding of the role of expertise, knowledge, and learning in the policy process (Yanow, 2004; Freeman, 2007; Weber & Khademian, 2008; Freeman & Sturdy, 2014; Davoudi, 2015). The practical, local knowledge of practitioners is found to constitute a vital, unacknowledged, and in some cases even suppressed, form of expertise for policy making. Learning what is needed to implement a policy well or how to do a good job is a process of *bricolage*: piecing together different bits and types of knowledge (rational, institutional, interactive, moral) and reflecting on their respective value and mutual tensions. Especially practitioners operating at the (physical and social) borders of their organization gain a form of experiential-contextual expertise that is crucial to making policies work and doing a competent job in local situations, yet is discounted by centralized decision makers who see knowledge as universal, rational, and controllable. A practice approach demonstrates how practitioners with local knowledge should be supported and fosters an understanding of how knowledge is dynamically enacted and contested in policy processes as it is practically embodied in people, inscribed in documents and instruments (see chapters 3 and 9)<sup>4</sup> and situated in time and space (cf. Canary, 2010 for an alternative approach based on structuring activity theory).

The expertise of practitioners is also a key theme in studies of street level bureaucracy (Ellis et al., 1999; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Dubois, 2009; Brodtkin, 2012; Van Hulst, 2013; Bruhn & Ekström, 2015). Carrying forward Lipsky's work, these studies have refined our understanding of what police officers, welfare officials, neighborhood managers, and health care workers do across national contexts. Most studies build on the *early contributions* by taking 'discretion' rather than practice as their main unit of analysis to examine how street level bureaucrats enact policies, (neoliberal) political discourses, New Public Management reforms, and public values. However, numerous studies make use of the practice theories of Giddens, Bevir and Rhodes, Foucault, and others (Sandfort, 2000; Wagenaar, 2004; Durose, 2009, 2011; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; Østergaard Møller & Stone, 2013; Wagenaar, 2014b; Durose et al., 2015; Laws & Forester, 2015) to demonstrate how street level practices of improvising, reconciling beliefs, managing tensions, and making a difference are constitutive of well-functioning and democratic governance.

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed (practice-based) discussion of this topic, see chapter 3 on policy as ordering through documents.

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Studies of implementation have also paid much attention to the practical skills and knowledge bottom-level policy actors evoke while implementing policy (e.g., Hill, 2003; O'Toole, 2004; Schofield, 2004; Romzek et al., 2014; [see chapter 10 for a full overview](#)) but without drawing on practice theory. An exception is Heidelberg's (2015) study of how the implementation of a broadband program failed as officials opposed to the project managed to frustrate it through subtle, hidden practices of resistance and manipulation. In contrast to the usual praise for administrators' practical skills and know-how for making policy work, this critical analysis demonstrates that "knowing the rules" (Wagenaar, 2004) can also imply malevolent practices that enable the invisible use of power.

Analyzing practice as a site of power is a key theme in studies of (local) governance (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003; Feldman, 2010; Griggs & Howarth, 2011; Griggs & Roberts, 2012; Griggs & Sullivan, 2014; Lindsey, 2014). Against the background of shifting governance narratives and political discourses, local practices of partnership working, decentralization, and neighborhood governance provide a lens on historically embedded political relations and contingent power dynamics between central and local government, public agencies, and public officials and citizens. Whereas theories and policies promoting a shift to networked governance suggest greater interdependence, collaboration and empowerment, these critical analyses reveal how local contestations, interpretations and struggles transform policy ambitions and expectations in a diversity of political meanings and outcomes. Taking a practice approach—either informed by Bevir and Rhodes' decentred governance or Foucauldian governmentality—reveals that discursive contexts are brought into being through situated practices and that understanding what happens in practice should favor grounded empirical analysis over pre-conceived theoretical constructs.

A similar analytical concern underlies the practice approach in participatory and deliberative democracy (Hajer, 2005; Wagenaar & Specht, 2010; Van der Arend & Behagel, 2011; Wagenaar, 2014a; Bartels, 2015; Escobar, 2015). Practice-based studies criticize the dominant theory-driven approach in this field for frontloading analyses with substantive theoretical principles and overly concentrating on formal institutions, policy frameworks and officials' perspectives and activities. Rather than assessing the contingent ways in which institutional designs, deliberative experiments, and participatory project management realize democratic ideals in practice, a practice approach opens the analysis up to what participants do and how they interact, i.e. the concrete ways in which they talk about and address the issues they face together. Accordingly, practice-based studies reveal how new meanings and

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relational patterns are produced while practically engaging with concrete situations, including fine-grained understandings of emotional involvement, conflict and power, pragmatic skills, and communicative capacities.

Also in studies of evidence based policy-making (EBP) the practice approach generates an alternative perspective to the dominant approach in the field (Pearce et al., 2014; Wesselink et al., 2014). In contrast to the (neoliberal) discourse that upholds EBP by prescribing that policy should be based on sound evidence of what works, where, and how, practice-based analyses deconstruct the underlying reductionist, rational, and apolitical conception of knowledge. By exploring how rhetorical acceptance of EBP impacts on practices and outcomes of decision making, they uncover how every case involves multiple sources of evidence; practical judgment for interpreting their various meanings in specific circumstances; contestation and political games over what counts as evidence; and implicit value differences and preferences for certain outcomes. In the process official ‘experts’ and power holders are often empowered over and above ‘lay’ citizens, while deliberation can easily run astray due to fundamentally conflicting forms of evidence and emotional or political attachments. Besides showing that there is no such thing as neutral, context-free, or unambiguous evidence, these studies also suggest that a practice approach might have some sway in enhancing awareness of the political realities of EBP as well as appreciation for the value of practical, local knowledge.

The practice approach is used as well in the area where EBP originated: health care (Degeling et al., 2006; Colebatch & Degeling, 2007; Lea, 2008; Maybin, 2015). Besides countering rationalist inclinations to make policy based on ‘evidence’ with appreciation of the actual work done to negotiate clinical work settings and make policy happen, practice-based studies also provide insight into a variety of organizational and governing cultures and the power relations reproduced throughout the policy process. Claims to evidence and expertise are shown to be sense-making, legitimation, and authority devices shaping practice. This generates a nuanced and critical perspective on the role of management vis-à-vis practitioners as well as the scope of government vis-à-vis patients and citizens.

In the field of international relations too, the practice approach has been welcomed for its advantages over dominant approaches—in this case neo-institutionalism and rational choice (Pouliot, 2008; Bueger, 2011; Kangas, 2011). *En passant* proving that a practice approach is not just relevant to geographically local practices, these studies demonstrate how global institutions, international disputes, and diplomacy are actively reproduced through the



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routinized, intuitive, material, and discursive activities of officials and their positioning in dynamic fields of power and geopolitical discourses. Mostly based on the work of Schatzki and Bourdieu, international organizations are analyzed in terms of the performance of unarticulated, experiential background knowledge, the contingent interpretation of artefacts and discursive events, and the mutual constitution of dispositions and resources. Peace, international order, and diplomatic relationships are found not to be fundamentally governed by strategic and instrumental concerns or global institutional norms but to exist in and through officials' practical relations to the world and their relational sense making of interstate tensions and disputes.

Similarly, practice-based studies in public planning (Forester, 1999; Innes & Booher, 2003; Wagenaar & Wilkinson, 2015) and dispute resolution (Laws & Rein, 2003; Laws & Forester, 2007; Forester, 2009) challenge the assumption that policy actors are aware of or driven by theoretical concepts and categories by exploring how they go about in skilfully harnessing complex problems and collaboratively addressing deep value differences and disputes. These analyses show that truly effective and democratic planning, collaboration, and dispute resolution are intersubjective and emergent practices rather than actively pursued strategies or thoroughly designed processes. Particular attention is paid to communicative processes of reframing contested issues, negotiating disputes, and facilitating dialogue and joint inquiry. Moreover, the sociomaterial nature of planning and disputes also means that artefacts, physical spaces, and nature often feature in these studies.

Sociomaterial interactions are more at the forefront of another area, though, that has generated many practice-based studies: environmental governance (Wilshusen, 2009; Behagel, 2012; Arts et al., 2014; Mukhtarov & Gerlak, 2014; Coffey, 2015; Behagel et al., 2017). Studies of common pool resources, water management, and forest governance highlight that humans and nature are fundamentally interwoven and that their interdependencies are negotiated in encounters between governments, NGOs, international corporations, scientists and local (often indigenous) communities. Echoing Scott (1998), policy makers are often found to adhere to highly abstract, prescriptive discourses of sustainability, participation and collaboration that produce formalistic systems and technocratic solutions which do little justice to the practical, experiential, and contingent complexities on the ground or the informal practices, native values and subtle resistances of local communities. Furthermore, often working in an anthropological tradition, studies in environmental governance are mostly set in the Global South, thereby offering a refreshing

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change of context. As such, the practice approach offers a situated, anti-foundationalist, performative alternative to dominant concerns with institutional design principles and strategic behavior.

A related, final area is science and technology studies, in particular practice-based studies of socio-technical transitions, innovations, and science-policy relations (Shove, 2010; Shove & Walker, 2010; Loeber & Vermeulen, 2012; Hoffman, 2013; Hoffman & Loeber, 2016). A key concern of these studies is to foster more grounded and nuanced understandings of the everyday practices that inhibit and promote transitions towards sustainability. Current environmental policy and research are criticized for being driven by narrow-minded and instrumental conceptions of social change. The practice theories of Bourdieu, Schatzki, Reckwitz and others are used to unpack how social practices (e.g., showering), agricultural practices (e.g., animal husbandry), innovation practices (e.g., wind energy) and so on are both reproduced and changed through emergent dynamics of meanings, conventions, know-how, emotions, materials, power relations, and historical trajectories. Moreover, clear and often critical implications are outlined for how policy makers, researchers, and practitioners can engage in the micro-politics and coevolutionary processes involved with facilitating sustainable innovations and transitions.

**Researching practice**

Having reviewed a variety of practice approaches, we might now have a better understanding of *what* it can mean to analyze policy as practice but still not so much of *how* to do so. Indeed, although awareness of practice as an analytical question shapes the way we research and talk about policy, its methodological implications are not often systematically reflected upon. Therefore, this section identifies the distinct analytical challenges involved with researching practice and discusses methods for dealing with these in the practice of practice research.

In essence, the practice approach aims to understand what policy actors actually do, say and feel. The goal is to capture their practical knowledge and lived experiences from their perspective and in action rather than what their superiors want them to do, formal policy statements say they do, or what analysts based on pre-conceived theories and assumptions think they do. This can only be rendered visible and meaningful through careful observation, being present, in-depth interviewing, collecting documents and other artefacts, and a flexible, iterative and open-ended analytical process. Therefore, practice-based studies nearly always

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employ qualitative methods and follow an interpretive methodology (Yanow, 2006; Colebatch et al., 2010; Gherardi, 2012; Nicolini, 2012; Arts et al., 2014; Bueger, 2014).

Although quantitative methods can certainly be used (see Durose et al., 2015)<sup>5</sup>, it is simply not possible to interpret practical knowledge, discourse, emotions, artefacts, sociality, bodily dispositions and normativity without making use of ethnographic methods, in-depth case studies, and linguistic analysis. The nature and meaning of a practice cannot be readily observed from its external manifestations, assumed to follow from its institutional context, or taken for granted from actors' self-generated accounts. Instead, a practice needs to be interpreted as it is interactively performed in contingent, multifaceted and temporally unfolding situations. This can only be done in meaningful and intelligible ways if the analyst has an intimate familiarity with the actual practice by interacting with its members, handling its artefacts and having been in its physical spaces. Moreover, the empirical analysis and theorizing of practices need to be grounded in the actual practicing by using some form of grounded theory analysis to gradually abstract the data into more analytical insights that nevertheless stay close to what practitioners experienced and said (Yanow, 2006; Wagenaar, 2011; Arts et al., 2014).

Analyzing practice carries some inherent challenges (Noordegraaf, 2010; Nicolini, 2012, ch. 3, 6, 7; Wagenaar, 2012). As practice is partly routinized, tacit, and unintentional as well as embodied, situated, and relational, it might actually not be possible to articulate it. Attempting to do so will produce not just distorted accounts but poor and alien representations of what policy actors actually do, because the practice is raised to the level of awareness and taken out of the course of practical engagement with the world that renders it meaningful. Analysts might try to get around this issue by observing and analyzing practices according to a conceptual framework of practice. However, this essentially means importing pre-conceived constructs to reveal a hidden structure that sustains a practice, an analytical move which does not sit well with the anti-foundational and non-representational philosophical premises of practice theory. This analytical conundrum is worsened, finally, because most approaches specify an analytical focus on (certain features of) practice but provide little clarity on the methods that could be used to capture and interpret practices. Ironically enough, theories of practice are often highly abstract and not easy to analyze in

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<sup>5</sup> And should arguably be incorporated in practice-based studies more systematically to reflect their importance in policy practice.

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practice, a general challenge voiced by ethnomethodologists and a specific criticism articulated against the approaches of Giddens, Bourdieu, Schatzki, and Bevir and Rhodes.

Nevertheless, it is possible to strike a balance between practice as experienced by policy actors and our analytical assumptions and constructs (Noordegraaf, 2010). As we can infer from the work of Wittgenstein, “to know how to follow a rule is something that cannot be fully articulated, although it can be communicated” (Nicolini, 2012, 85). Therefore, policy analysts should devote more attention to how various methods can be used to fruitfully analyze practice—what Brueger (2014) calls “the practice of practice research”. Indeed, research is a practice itself, a performative, dialogical process of coming to an understanding of the world as it talks back when we intervene in it (Wagenaar, 2007b; Bartels, 2012; Wagenaar, 2012; Bartels, 2017b; Bartels & Wagenaar, 2017). Policy analysts studying practice should thus be aware that their approach always comes as a “theory-practice package” (Nicolini, 2012, 14) in which philosophical assumptions and methodological choices have to work together and reflexivity is needed to skilfully and meaningfully use methods.

Besides the qualitative methods just discussed, there are a number of specific analytical tools and research methods for studying practice. A popular approach is to conduct semi- or unstructured interviews aimed at story-telling about everyday experiences and mundane situations (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Durose, 2009; Østergaard Møller & Stone, 2013; Wagenaar, 2014b; Bartels, 2015). Another method is the “interview-to-the double” (Nicolini, 2009a), in which practitioners are asked to explain what they would do at their next day of work as if explaining it to someone who would take over. Alternatively, policy analysts can follow the ethnomethodological “unique adequacy principle” of acquiring the actual competences used in a local practice and grasping when their accounts are intelligible and meaningful to its members<sup>6</sup> (Nicolini, 2012, ch. 6). Action research can also be used to help practitioners in better understanding and changing their practice (Bartels, 2017b). This means that the analyst actively and meaningfully participates in a practice by producing immediately usable insights, experiences, and artefacts and critically reflecting on the difficulties, risks, and failures involved with understanding and changing policy practice.

Besides the common approach of analyzing the narratives practitioners tell during interviews, Bueger (2014) suggests that analysis of practice could (1) explore sites where a

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<sup>6</sup> This almost sacred analytic mentality avoids theories, concepts or categories unless practitioners demonstrably enact and recognize these.

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practice is, or a multiplicity of practices are enacted, sustained, and transformed; (2) follow the construction, use and modification of (material and discursive) artefacts (see also Kangas 2011); and (3) study crises or controversies as moments where routines fail, unarticulated knowledge is explicated, and new, joint practices are brought into being (see also Laws & Rein 2003). Finally, Nicolini (2009b) proposes a strategy of zooming in and zooming out to render fine-grained practices visible and link them to historical and systemic configurations and networks of practices in which they are dynamically embedded and enacted.

Despite their great potential for generating usable knowledge, practice-based studies do not necessarily render research-practice relationships less problematic. Besides all the usual barriers to knowledge transfer, learning and collaboration (see Laws, 2007; Hoppe, 2010), taking a practice approach faces the additional challenge of overcoming instrumental approaches to practice. Particularly policy makers invested in rationalistic accounts of the policy process might continue to desire objective knowledge instrumental to enhancing the effectiveness of their interventions and the legitimacy of their authority.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Analyzing policy as practice is a powerful approach of growing significance. Our understanding of the policy process has greatly benefited from studying *the ordinary, situated, and embodied activities which policy actors routinely enact in the course of participating in the policy process to make sense of and affect it*. This chapter has distinguished between four types of approaches to clarify the variety of ways in which policy practice has been studied. Several *early contributions* to policy studies have greatly improved our understanding of policy by more closely aligning conceptualizations of the policy process with its actual practice. Their seminal insights triggered a wealth of *studies of practice* that have since been mapping and explaining the knowledge, experiences, accounts, emotions, and relationships of practitioners. These type of studies do not explicitly reflect on the notion of ‘practice’, in contrast to those inspired by the practice turn in social theory. These studies either use *practice as analytical lens* on what policy actors actually do or take a *practice theory-driven* approach to explain how policy processes and outcomes result from the practical, situated, embodied and socio-materially mediated activities and accounts of actors engaged in concrete tasks.

Compared to other approaches, taking a practice approach has great potential for improving our understanding of “policy as a concept in practice”. Practice-based studies challenge conventional understandings of the policy process by not relying on pre-conceived

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theoretical constructs but engaging in detailed grounded empirical analysis of what policy actors—including citizens and other societal stakeholders—actually do, how they talk and interact, and in which ways they address the issues they face. Unpacking these daily practices reveals how policy ambitions and expectations are transformed or backfire through the evolving, situated interpretations, resistances, and struggles of practitioners ‘making’ policy and interacting with or projecting their interventions on society and environment. Moreover, it emphasizes how the nature and effects of policy fundamentally depends on the practical skills, local knowledge, improvisations, judgments and relational networks that policy actors enact as part of their jobs and everyday lives. Practice-based studies drive us away from focusing on strategic-instrumental behavior or institutional norms towards making sense of a multiplicity in accounts of what is going on and the practical relationships policy actors have with each other and the situation at hand. Hence, a practice approach to policy making means letting go of abstract, prescriptive discourses, formalistic systems, and technocratic solutions and, rather, appreciating the situated, emergent, and relational interplay of know-how, intuitions, emotions, bodily sensations, artefacts, nature, technology, and physical spaces that makes up policy practice.

A key issue is how practice can be observed, analysed and reported. Researching practice requires awareness of the nature, limitations, and value of our own practices as policy analysts. It invites sensitivity to how we go about in capturing, interpreting, representing and criticizing what policy actors say, do, and feel. It also asks for more attention to what it means and takes to generate critical and usable knowledge for improving policy processes. Therefore, we would benefit from more reflection on experiences with different methods for engaging in the practice of practice research.

To be sure, the overview of practice-based studies in this chapter is far from exhaustive and, admitted, somewhat cursory. We are only on the brink of grasping the differences and similarities of various approaches to studying policy as practice. Nevertheless, future practice-based studies can draw on a rich offering of analytical frameworks and insights. Doing so more explicitly and systematically could further improve awareness of the trade-offs of various approaches and thereby lead to more nuanced and sophisticated understandings of the policy process. Attempts at combining different approaches would be welcome too<sup>7</sup>. More attention should also be paid to the impact of

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<sup>7</sup> See for example the integration of Bevir and Rhodes’ decentring governance and Forester’s critical pragmatism in the analysis of “practices of freedom” (Griggs et al., 2014), the fusion of Wagenaar’s practice as

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taking a practice approach on policy practice; i.e. how does it influence the ability of practitioners to do their work, manage policy processes, resolve problems, and enhance public welfare, democracy, environmental sustainability, and social justice? Finally, we should reflect on what it means to teach practice and report on experiences with different pedagogical approaches to facilitating students and practitioners in learning to understand policy as practice (Bartels & Wagenaar, 2017; Leigh & Freeman, 2017). All of this will help to further recognize policy as a concept in practice and improve the analysis and practice of policy as a process.

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dialogical experience with the relational process ontology of American pragmatist Mary Follett to study communicative capacities (Bartels, 2015), or the combination of Colebatch's policy work and Bourdieu's social theory for grasping how issues are turned into policy problems and solutions (Turnbull, 2013).

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**Tables**

early contributions to policy studies	practice theory-driven studies
studies of practice	practice as analytical lens on policy process

**Table 1. Approaches to analyzing policy as practice**