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Theory and Practice of Deliberative Policy Analysis

**Three Frameworks for Integrating Interpretive Inquiry with
Deliberative Policy Analysis**

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Three Frameworks for Integrating Interpretive Inquiry with Deliberative Policy Analysis

Abstract: Recent 20 years have seen the growth of DPA and IPA as two streams of the post-positivist wave in policy analysis. But due to its limit, neither DPA nor IPA can be considered as a competitive alternative to mainstream positivist approach in the policy process. In this paper, we examine the problems that impede the application of two approaches and argue for the endeavor to integrate IPA with DPA in the procedural sense. Specifically, we propose IPA-informed deliberative analysis, IPA-supported deliberative analysis, and expert-executing deliberative analysis as three potential frameworks for such integration and discuss the pros and cons of each of them.

Key Words: Post-positivist Policy Analysis, Deliberative Policy Analysis, Interpretive Inquiry, Integrative Framework

1. Introduction

Deliberative policy analysis (DPA, see Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003), broadly speaking, refers to the use of deliberative and interpretative methods in policy analysis so as to deal with the challenges in the emerging network society. This agenda was proposed ten years after the argumentative turn in policy analysis and planning (Fisher & Forester, 1993), the landmark when post-positivist scholars argue for a paradigmatic shift from “analysis as science” to “analysis as arguments” (Dryzek, 1993). As a further development of this wave, DPA puts more emphasis on carving out its niche in public policy making and governance than making theoretical justification against mainstream positivism. With a variety of case studies, participatory trails, and meaning-focused inquiries, post-positivists are dedicated to making policy analysis interpretative, practical-oriented, and deliberative.

Far from being an unambiguous, consensual model, DPA is specified differently by different scholars: some emphasize more on deliberative engagement in various forms, while others focus on concrete methods to interpret meaning and action and understand discursive struggle in public policy (e.g. Hajer, 2004; Fischer, 2006; Stevenson, 2014). Such divergence reflects two important streams of post-positivist policy analysis from the beginning.

The first is the enterprise of involving ordinary citizens or direct stakeholders in collective inquiry so as to remedy democratic deficit and solve wicked problems (e.g. Fischer, 1993; Forester, 1999; Wagle, 2000; Innes & Booher, 2010; Li, 2015). Through interactive process guided by deliberative principles, including egalitarian, sincerity, and mutual respect, such practice encourages participants to tell their own stories, generate new identities, discuss problems reasonedly, and eventually build consensus, resolve conflicts, or at least use communication as a collective heuristic to detect potential solutions. The studies along this line are often more interested in normative issues and institutional design, seeking to promote deliberative democracy and governance from bottom up. To avoid confusion we limit the

scope of DPA to this approach in the following discussion, as it is more relevant to the original concept of “deliberative” in political theory.

The second stream can be loosely summarized as interpretive policy analysis (IPA, see Yanow, 1999; 2007; van Bommel et al., 2014), which encompasses all sorts of meaning-focused inquiries based on the concepts such as discourse, frame, rhetoric, and narrative (e.g. Hajer, 1993; Schmidt, 2008; Rein & Schön, 1996; Throgmorton, 1993; Roe, 1994). Sharing a similar ontology and epistemology, the IPA family explores interaction and conflict among different meanings and uncovers direct links between language and action. Particularly, interpretive scholars are good at bringing out local perspectives and ordinary experience and suggesting deep structures fundamental to policy paradox. Studies along this line are more interested in specific context, often entailing identifying key actors, engaging with their positions, beliefs, and stories, and spelling them out. Meanwhile, IPA requires analysts to be critical of all policy arguments and trying to think of alternatives.

Despite a few studies (e.g. Hampton, 2009; Wagenaar, 2011), DPA and IPA seldom work jointly in analyzing one particular policy issue. More often, scholars tend to specialize in either of them. Such division seems reasonable since two approaches take different forms—DPA is embodied by dialogues among ordinary citizens, while IPA is primarily undertaken by the interpretive analysts who interact and investigate the target individuals, groups, or institutions at discretion. Moreover, compared to DPA, IPA tends to take greater effort to acquire a subtle understanding of the *status quo* than search for ways to change it.

The problem, however, is that the division between DPA and IPA potentially weakens the momentum of post-positivist policy analysis to shape public policy domain. Due to its limit, neither DPA nor IPA can be considered as a competitive alternative to mainstream positivist approach in the policy process. In particular, post-positivist studies may remain marginal for lack of a unified, generally applicable procedure to generate reliable knowledge

for policy making. As such, we argue for the endeavor to integrate two approaches in policy analysis and propose three potential frameworks to achieve this goal.

The rest of paper proceeds as follows. We discuss the constraint of DPA in practice in Section 2 and the weakness of IPA in problem-solving in Section 3. Next, three potential frameworks to integrate IPA with DPA is proposed in Section 4. Finally, we discuss the pros and cons of each framework in Section 5 and conclude with an outlook for further investigation.

2. Constraint of DPA in Practice

As its name suggests, DPA takes the form of direct engagement and collective problem-solving. Consequently, the quality of analysis is conditional on the deliberative interaction among participants, who usually need to be trained how to do it first. Deliberation, in strict terms, asks for competent participants: they are expected to be strongly committed to problem-solving, aware of value pluralism, tolerant to oppositions, and open to collaboration. Even if participants are deeply divided at the beginning, theorists argue that deliberation has the power to transform participants by letting them exchange information and perspectives. Such a process evokes public reason that helps participants overcome the narrow self-interested predisposition and leads them towards a general set of consensus that best fit their interests (Niemeyer & Dryzek, 2007). According to the theory, DPA seems widely applicable to policy issues in various circumstances.

However, deliberation is not the panacea. Given the debate in the field of political psychology and deliberative experiment, we argue for a more realistic stand that DPA may not equally work in all circumstances. Indeed, sincere communication and collective inquiry is shown to benefit participants and promote consensus-building (e.g. Gastil & Dillard, 1999; Luskin, Fishkin, & Hahn, 2007; Niemeyer, 2011). But deliberation is not a magic that always

transforms participants from “I” to “we” (Mansbridge et al., 2006). Besides facilitation and organization, how well deliberation works out depends on context and participants.

There are some situations that tend to make deliberation less productive, according to existing research. Wojcieszak (2011), for instance, finds that participants could become more extreme if deliberation threatens their cherished beliefs or valued identities. Similarly, Smets and Isernia (2014) find participants tend to refuse dissonant information and only defend their preexisting belief when given highly politicized and controversial topics. Gastil, Black & Moscovitz (2008) suggests that participants’ personalities may play a role in such collective inquiry. It is possible that the move towards consensus is largely attributed to the effort of the participants who are particularly open, expressive, careful, and practical in interaction with others.

These empirical works represent the reservation on deliberative approach widely existing outside the post-positivist community. Given the pervasive cleavages in the real world, it is questionable whether DPA can still produce satisfactory outcome under unfavorable circumstances. To be sure, disagreement or deadlock is not necessarily seen as “dissatisfactory”. Many theorists appreciate the value of “positive dissensus” and emotion in deliberation (e.g. Mansbridge et al., 2010; Fischer, 2003, 2009; Landemore and Page, 2014). But as an analytic approach that promises to generate policy insights, DPA is supposed to produce something more than “thick” description of complex reality. In particular, policymakers expect unambiguous policy implications, which DPA may fail to provide once deliberative process does not end with any consensus.

Alternatively, post-positivists can choose to live with the local issues that citizens are more likely and able to participate, avoiding those nationwide salient and highly polarized issues. This is basically how DPA was experimented over the recent decade. But if DPA can only apply to the problems that do not matter much nationally, as Robert Dahl (1994) believes

participatory democracy does, how can DPA make a significant impact on public policy and governance as post-positivists pursue?

3. Weakness of IPA in Problem-solving

While DPA is conditioned on contexts and participants, the application of IPA is limited by its scope on local knowledge. As the tradeoff of delving deeply into the world of lived experiences and sense-making process, IPA is neither very interested in nor fully capable of assessing multiple alternatives regarding feasibility and effectiveness. However, policymakers are more concerned about such assessment at the “global” level than interpretation at the local level.

This scope difference can explain why positivist approach wins popularity and why it is so hard for interpretive research to challenge its dominant position. With the rise of modern science, positivism has succeeded in establishing the doctrine that validity of knowledge relies on empirical scrutiny and falsification. The mainstream policy analysis thereby legitimizes itself by subjecting policy arguments to the framework of hypotheses test, which is assumed as “value-free”.

Surely, such positivist doctrine is not as well-grounded as it appears to be. Post-positivists seriously challenge the epistemological basis that positivism relies on (Fischer, 1993, 2003), as they point out that all the variables measured and tested in the positivist framework are inherently social constructs. The policy analysis based on the “facts” turns out to be a discursive struggle over different definitions, frames, stories, and ideologies. Moreover, the question of objectivity and value-neutrality in policy argumentation seriously undermines the role of experts, who are presumed to “speak the truth to power” in the positivist doctrine. But the problem leaves to post-positivists: if policy analyses of various

kinds should all be seen as argumentation or advocacy, the assessment of analyses becomes theoretically difficult and vague (Jennings, 1993; Saretzki, 2013).

DPA can overcome this problem by appealing to communicative rationality—through the process of argumentation and collective inquiry among different parties, the “best argument” would emerge and survive. IPA, by comparison, is particularly vulnerable to this problem, for lack of such assessment that involves dialogue and crosscheck among different perspectives. To be sure, interpret analysts do have their criteria to compare multiple narratives and discourses, such as narrative probability, fidelity, and coherence (Ficher, 1989; McCloskey, 1990). Those criteria, however, are often aesthetic-oriented not practical-oriented. Most importantly, the quality of IPA relies upon analysts’ self-reflectivity, an ideal goal that only can be tried to approach in practice. Put differently, while being good at discovering meaningful stories, IPA is weak in distinguishing those stories that are more practically valuable from the rest ones.

Additionally, IPA, with a locally focused scope, often fails to go beyond the detail of ethnographic data to explore a broader social and political landscape (Newman, 2012). Post-positivists appreciate local knowledge and ordinary narratives and tend to underestimate expertise and its role of analyzing more general patterns, which is referred as “structures” in positivist analysis. Even though such understanding of “structures” is somewhat naïve from the post-positivist perspective, the impact of such macro-level forces is often fundamental and may not be readily understandable to people other than domain experts. In this sense, IPA could fall into the pitfall that analysts are satisfied with finding meaningful stories, which turn out to be nonproductive or fantastic under the existing conditions. After all, policy analysis serves to provide reliable knowledge for problem-solving and governance. Therefore, it is imperative to search for the appropriate description of the problem and the effective solution, under the constraint of time, energy, and other resources. IPA, if self-identified as an

alternative to the mainstream policy analysis, should be capable of making realistic and productive suggestions.

4. Integrating IPA with DPA

Despite the diagnosis of the poverty of positivism, neither DPA nor IPA is fully able to play a similar role that the mainstream approach does for public policy making. This is not all because of institutional path dependence, but also the weaknesses of two approaches. As we show early in the paper, DPA is conditional on the actual conditions for deliberation. In particular, people's willingness and competence to deliberate are requisite of productive collective inquiry. To be sure, chances are still high that post-positivist analysts can find good opportunities to employ DPA to solve problems in the appropriate timing. But it is unlikely that DPA can provide sufficient intellectual supply for all the policy problems in the society, especially when public engagement is extremely costly, if not impossible. By comparison, IPA is easier to be carried out and less constrained by the social conditions. However, it is questionable, from the practical perspective, whether IPA can move beyond the local scope to make an assessment of different stories and generate productive knowledge for problem-solving.

To strengthen the problem-solving capacity of post-positivist policy analysis, we argue for the endeavor to integrate IPA with DPA, not in the conceptual sense but procedural sense. To be specific, we are considering the potentials of embedding IPA in a participatory and dialogic context so as to make post-positivist policy analysis more capable of providing effective solutions rather than criticisms in a wide range of circumstances. Depending on the extent to which interpretive analysts are involved in the deliberative process, we identify three frameworks to achieve such integration: IPA-informed deliberative analysis, IPA-supported deliberative analysis, and expert-executing deliberative analysis.

Framework 1: IPA-informed Deliberative Analysis

This first integrative framework is IPA-informed deliberative analysis. As its name suggests, this is a deliberative inquiry based on the knowledge and clarification provided by interpretive analysts. Such analysis begins with an independent interpretive inquiry conducted by a group of experts. These experts are demanded to provide critical, systematic interpretation of a particular policy issue, with general context, key actors, relevant issues, and existing discourses or narratives. Such insights are then brought to the participants to deepen their understanding of the issue. Experts are also expected to answer the questions raised by the participants and demonstrate how values and discourses matter in policy debates. Finally, grounded on the insights from IPA, the participants are facilitated to explore consensus and solutions through deliberation.

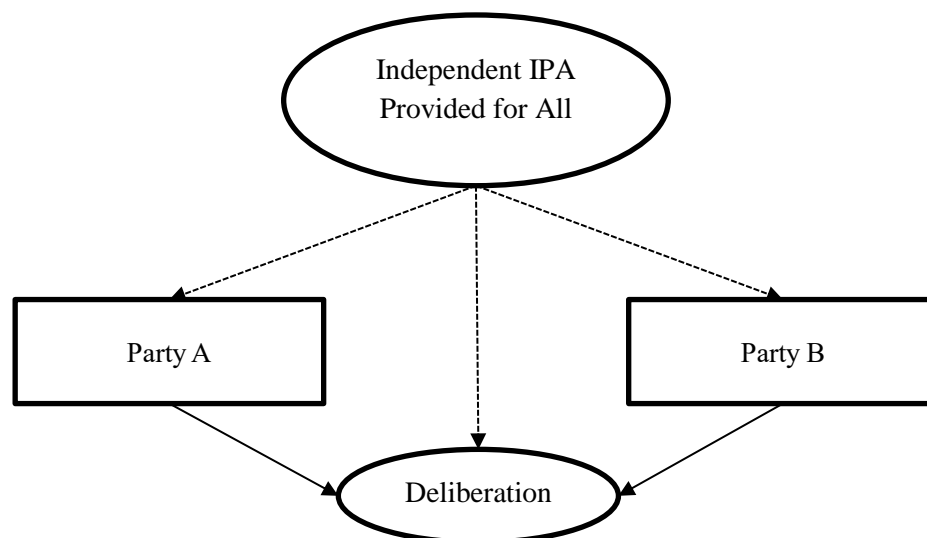


Figure 1. IPA-informed deliberative analysis: a two-party case

Similar to DPA in the ordinary sense, this framework is conditional on participants' commitment to the deliberative goal. But it improves DPA by educating participants to beware of mixed evidence, competing stories, different definitions, and plural values in the

first place. Confirmed by psychologists and conflict resolution experts (Winslade & Monk, 2000), the early access to competing narratives and the effort to accommodate and reconstruct narratives are an effective procedure to resolve disparities and rebuild rapport among different parties. Likewise, using IPA as the preliminary step of deliberative analysis sets up the favorable condition under which collective inquiry can be better carried out.

The limitation of this approach, however, is that it does not apply to the situation that IPA cannot be presumed as neutral and comprehensive, because of either analysts' strong self-identification or lack of full understanding of certain actors or arguments. It is also constrained by public engagement. Evidently, to use this method, there should be a sufficient number of ordinary citizens who are willing to participate and fully committed to it in the first place.

Framework 2: IPA-supported Deliberative Analysis

The second framework is IPA-supported deliberative analysis. Compared to the first framework, it does not require the neutrality of IPA. Instead, interpretive analysts are supposed to serve different parties of the participants, with corresponding identification, in the adversarial dialogue.

To be specific, this framework also begins with IPA. The difference is that interpretive analysts do not work completely independent to the participants. Rather, they are assigned to different parties of the participants as their deliberation supporters, if the participants are indeed divided into different parties in their identifications and discourses. After IPA for each party is completed, interpretive analysts then are invited to sit around the participants that they serve. But they do not engage in the discussion directly. What they do, in Fischer's (1993) terms, is helping participants "pose questions and examine technical analysis in their own ordinary languages and decide which issues are important to them". With the help of

interpretive experts, the participants are guided to articulate their own stories, examine all the arguments on the table, and work collectively to search for potential consensus and solutions.

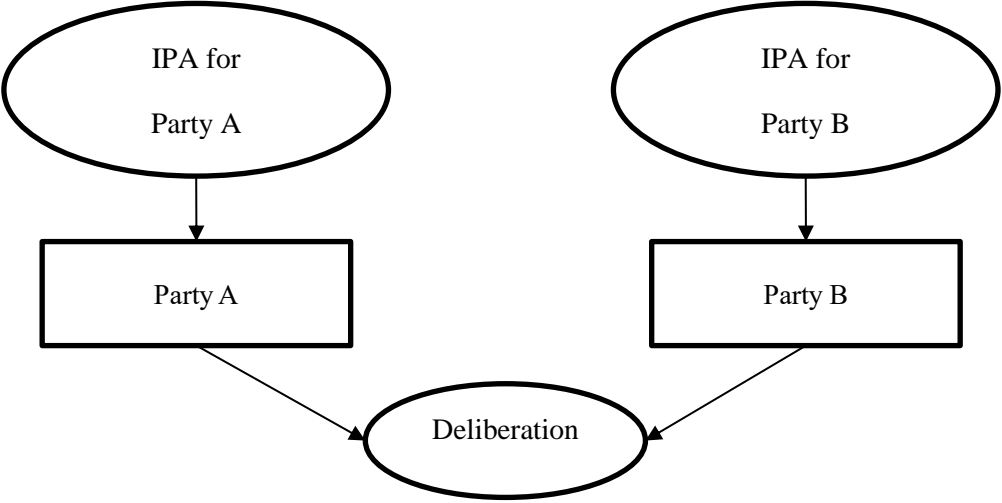


Figure 2. IPA-supported deliberative analysis: a two-party case

While many interpretive policy researchers seem to prefer doing independent analysis alone, we appreciate the value of organizing IPA in a dialogic manner so as to link local knowledge to communicative rationality with expertise. Such dialogue is particularly vital if participants are highly polarized and deeply entrenched in their own discourses. In such cases, there need to be interpretive experts that they trust to support them in the process of collective learning and inquiry. And this is the operational structure that we rely on in the plan to develop DPA in China (Li, 2011, 2015; Li & He, 2016).

Framework 3: Expert-executing deliberative analysis

The final framework is called expert-executing deliberative analysis, which does not entail public engagement. Instead, it is interpretive analysts that engage in argumentation and deliberation on behalf of different parties in the public, similar to what counsels do for their clients in court. Specifically, interpretive analysts first work separately, under a clear division of labor in target discourses or parties of the public. As long as each of them completes the

independent study, they engage in one or multiple rounds of deliberative discussion. Such process is adversarial in the sense that interpretive analysts stand on the position that they are assigned to interpret and try to clarify related stories and persuade others, as what ordinary people would pursue. Through crosscheck and collective assessment by those experts, better-grounded stories and more valuable solutions will eventually emerge as the outcome.

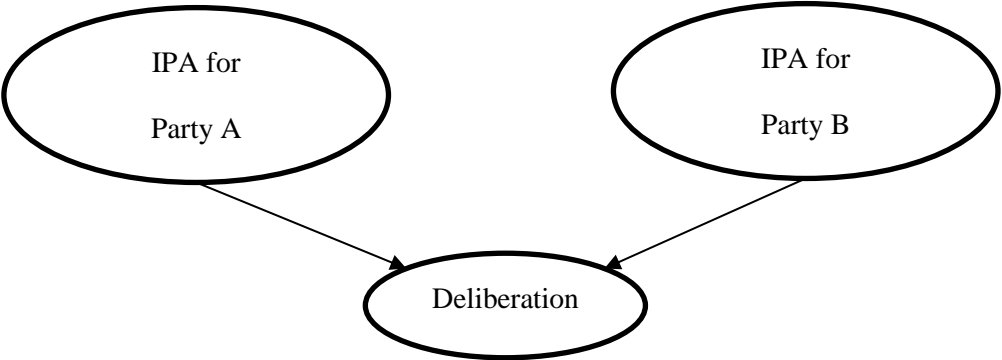


Figure 3. Expert-executing deliberative analysis: a two-party case

This framework fits the situation that public engagement is not feasible at the very moment, regardless of what reasons, while a group of interpretive analysts is still interested in exploring the complexity of meaning and politics of discourses. Also, it can apply to the salient issues that involve a wide range of interests and hegemonic discourse, such as environmental policy (e.g. Hajer, 1995; Dryzek, 2013) and genetic technology policy (e.g. Gottweis, 1998). Too often, policy analysts in different discourses do not speak to each other. In the absence of crosscheck and collective inquiry, the validity of such unilateral analysis would always be questionable. By comparison, the multi-discursive conversation among different advocates is highly critical to making essential progress in achieving cognitive consensus. In practice, conflict resolution experts are using a similar framework to resolve disparities on “fact” (McCreary et al., 2007).

5. Comparison and Discussion

Three frameworks demonstrate three different models in which DPA and IPA can work jointly to produce reliable knowledge for policymaking. More importantly, these three frameworks outline a spectrum between reliance on expertise and ordinary citizens: IPA-informed deliberative analysis prioritizes the role of ordinary citizens by excluding experts' intervention from deliberation. On the other side, expert-executing deliberative analysis relies on experts' deliberation rather than citizens'. IPA-supported deliberative analysis, to some extent, is the compromise between the two, as ordinary citizens still play a major role while experts serve as the supporters in behind. In practice, policy analysts can cherry pick different frameworks, depending on the demand for public engagement.

Table 1. Comparison of three frameworks

	Demand for Public Engagement	Demand for Neutral Interpretive Experts	Professional Wisdom	Democratic Legitimacy
IPA-informed Deliberative Analysis	Yes	Yes	Medium	High
IPA-supported Deliberative Analysis	Yes	No	Medium	High
Expert- executing deliberative analysis	No	No	High	Low

The second important dimension to distinguish three frameworks is whether or not neutrality of experts is assumed. In the framework of IPA-informed deliberative analysis, IPA is expected to be systematic, critical, and neutral so as to provide a reliable basis for further deliberation. In sharp contrast, the other two frameworks assume a client-counselor relation. To be specific, in the framework of IPA-informed deliberative analysis, the group interpretive analysts are expected to take account of every aspect of the issue, employ multiple methods to triangulate information, and try hard to be self-reflective. Such investigation can be seen as approximately “neutral,” for it provides the most procedurally transparent and methodologically unbiased knowledge and its goal is to serve all the participants, regardless of their identifications and positions. In the other two frameworks, IPA is partisan, because the analysts are assigned to one particular party of participants and are preoccupied with helping them perform better in deliberation.

The third dimension that matters is to what extent analysis is supported by professional wisdom. The more deeply experts take charge of analysis, the better this goal can be fulfilled. This is not underestimating the value of local knowledge, marginal narratives, and ordinary wisdom. Those inputs are highly valuable. But experts are after all better trained in making analysis, aware of domain knowledge, and equipped with advanced methods. In this sense, they may take better advantage of existing information and capture some insights or potential problems that ordinary people often fail to beware. Among the three frameworks, expert-executing deliberative analysis benefits from professional wisdom the most because of its expert-dominant feature. IPA-informed deliberative analysis and IPA-supported deliberative analysis are relatively inferior by this criterion.

Professional wisdom comes with the cost of democratic legitimacy. Evidently, public engagement brings such legitimacy to DPA, especially when the “mini-public” represents the public opinions in the society well. As such, both IPA-informed deliberative analysis and

IPA-supported deliberative analysis are strong by this criterion, whereas expert-executing deliberative analysis has a danger of being criticized as technocracy. However, this does not necessarily mean that expert-executing deliberative analysis is inferior. This approach still aims to acquire an in-depth understanding of the viewpoint of every policy-relevant group and map it onto deliberative inquiry. Moreover, policy analysts are always seeking a balance between democracy and professionalism in the concrete context. That said, when democratic legitimacy is overwhelmingly important, greater effort should be made to scale up deliberative democracy. If democratic consensus is too costly while solving a well-identified problem becomes so urgent, we may lean lightly towards the pole of professionalism.

In sum, these three frameworks have pros and cons in various dimensions. Instead of asking for the single best one, practitioners in policy analysis should be nimble enough to exercise different frameworks under different circumstances. But in general, the flexible integration of DPA and IPA would make post-positivists more capable of conducting policy analysis in a wide variety of situations and generating more reliable and productive knowledge.

6. Concluding Remark

Policy analysis is committed to tackling emerging challenges and solving problems. As such, one policy analysis approach is considered good, only if it is capable of achieving this goal under most circumstances and in a regular manner. Having observed over 20 years' development of argumentative turn, we are concerned about the potential tendency that post-positivists might diverge from this goal, with a much stronger interest in theoretical criticism and methodological advocacy. We thereby argue for the collaboration and dialogue between not only IPA and DPA but also post-positivists and positivists to strengthen policy analysis in real life.

From our perspective, DPA provides the ideal approach to make policy analysis both scientifically and democratically. But as we discuss early, democratic deliberation is in fact limited in application. IPA can go beyond the limitation of deliberation, but at the same time falls short of assessing different arguments in terms of feasibility and producing productive suggestions. Integrating IPA with DPA seems one way to overcome the problems and make post-positivist policy analysis gain further momentum in practice. Accordingly, we propose three potential frameworks for such integration and illustrate how to choose different frameworks under different circumstances.

To be sure, these three frameworks cannot exhaust all practical options. Good practice always emerges from trials and explorations in the concrete context rather than theorists' mind. But by writing this paper, we aim to highlight the disconnection between current IPA and DPA and that between post-positivist scholarship and the demand for policy analysis in reality. Moreover, we argue for the enterprise that pursues to transform post-positivist theory into clear-formulated, well-operationalized models and actively carve out their niches in the existing political institutions. By doing so, we can make greater headway in reshaping political landscape dominated by professionalism and scientism.

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