P132 / Discursive Agency in (Environmental) Politics - Concepts, Applications and Perspectives

Topic : Discourses, Ideas, and Narratives

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Policy change hinges on the ability of alternative discourses to challenge long established policy paradigms. Yet, alternative perspectives often struggle to gain traction, while established narratives continue to shape policy priorities and limit the scope of what is considered legitimate. Studying discursive agency is crucial if we want to better understand actors' role in language and narrative use, their relationship to strategic practices, as well as their ability to construct problems, legitimize particular solutions, and gain political influence (Schmidt 2008; Leipold and Winkel 2017).

Despite its growing analytical relevance in times of regression and policy stalemate, research on discursive agency remains fragmented across theoretical approaches, empirical cases, and policy fields. As a result, opportunities to compare how discursive agency is conceptualized and operationalized remain limited. Furthermore, important questions remain unanswered regarding the conditions under which actors exercise discursive agency and the ways in which this agency can contribute to political change or reinforce existing power relations. This raises questions about how discursive agency operates across institutional levels, how material conditions enable or constrain discursive interventions, and how methodological approaches can capture these dynamics across different policy contexts.

Addressing these issues is particularly important in environmental policy, where established political paradigms, such as ecological modernization, face ever-growing challenges, while transformative alternatives continue to be pushed to the sideline amid shifting global power dynamics.

Bringing together scholars working on discursive agency, this panel seeks to advance a more systematic understanding of discursive agency and it's methodological foundations, empirical applications, and explanatory potential. By identifying commonalities and tensions across approaches, the panel aims to investigate how discursive agency can help explain the ways in which actors shape, contest, and transform policy processes. Ultimately, we seek to foster dialogue across contributions and explore how discursive agency can contribute to a broader understanding of policy change.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The panel welcomes theoretical and empirical papers examining discursive agency across different policy contexts, with a particular interest in environmental policymaking. We invite contributions that explore how diverse stakeholders employ discursive practices to shape policy debates, challenge dominant narratives, reproduce existing discursive dominance, or advance alternative policy ideas. We are particularly interested in contribution engaging with approaches from interpretative policy analysis such as Discursive Agency Approach (Leipold and Winkel 2017), Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2003), and Argumentative Discourse Analysis (Hajer 1997). Conceptual papers may address the theoretical foundations of discursive agency, its operationalization, and its methodological implications, while empirical contributions may examine how discursive agency unfolds in specific policy processes, institutional settings, or political contexts.

The panel will examine how discursive agency emerges and translates or fails to translate into policy making. Among the questions to be addressed are: How do actors use knowledge, expertise, values, narratives, and emotions to propose solutions or challenge existing problem definitions? How do differences in resources, institutional access, and political authority influence actors' ability to participate and gain agency in political debates? Contributions examining the relationships between discourse and material conditions are also welcome, including how discursive practices interact with technologies, infrastructures,

ecological processes, and socioeconomic inequalities. Particular attention may be given to the role of discursive agency in environmental policy processes of change.

By bringing diverse theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and empirical cases into conversation, the panel aims to advance understanding of discursive agency as a concept and an analytical perspective for studying policymaking and policy change. Contributions may address, but are not limited to, the following questions:

· How is discursive agency conceptualized and empirically analyzed in environmental policymaking and other policy contexts?

· How does discursive agency relate to power, knowledge, institutions, and political practices?

· How do actors' identities, resources, and institutional positions shape their discursive agency?

· How does discursive agency interact with social and material phenomena, and how can these interactions generate or constrain change?

· How do discursive strategies, coalitions, and competing narratives influence policy agendas, problem definitions, and policy instruments?

· Under what conditions does discursive agency contribute to environmental policy change?

· What methodological challenges and opportunities arise when operationalizing and studying discursive agency across different policy settings?