P26 / Interdisciplinarity in Public Policy Analysis : Tacit Practices, Explicit Foundations

Topic : Methods & Research Design

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

This panel takes seriously an intriguing contrast in how public policy analysis relates to its neighbouring disciplines. Mainstream Anglophone policy scholarship increasingly draws on American pragmatist philosophy and classical sociology — the pragmatist turn, the uses of Dewey, the sociologies of action and problem definition (Dewey, 1927; Ansell, 2011; Zittoun, 2014) — yet this borrowing is rarely thematised as a practice of interdisciplinarity: concepts travel, are naturalised and settle into policy frameworks without the work of translation between disciplines being made visible. In Africa, by contrast, interdisciplinarity has been the field's explicit foundation since its emergence: as Laakso (2022) shows, it developed at the crossroads of anthropology, political economy, development studies and political science, and this plural genealogy is openly claimed as constitutive of the discipline. A similar explicitness is found in much policy scholarship elsewhere in the Global South.

The panel invites reflection on this asymmetry. Why is interdisciplinarity an assumed and theorised foundation in some scholarly traditions, and a tacit, uncommented practice in others? What does it reveal about the geography of knowledge in the discipline, about its hierarchies, and about what counts as “theory” and what counts as “context”? The panel’s central research question is therefore: how is interdisciplinarity practised, claimed, or left implicit in public policy analysis — in the construction of research objects, fieldwork, the making of data and the writing of results — and what does this (in)visibility do to the discipline’s theoretical frameworks and to the relations between scholarly traditions?

The panel works from three propositions. **P1:** the invisibility of disciplinary borrowings in mainstream policy scholarship is not an absence of interdisciplinarity but a mode of its naturalisation: concepts enter the field as “theory” once their disciplinary origin is forgotten — a forgetting all the more striking as the policy sciences were founded as an explicitly multidisciplinary project (Lasswell, 1951). **P2:** where interdisciplinarity is openly claimed, as in African policy scholarship, it tends to be read as “context” rather than as theoretical contribution; the asymmetry is one of recognition, not of practice. **P3:** some policy objects — customary policy capacity (Manga Edimo, forthcoming), natural resource governance — impose explicit interdisciplinarity whatever the tradition; the difference lies less in what analysts do than in what the discipline says about itself.

The panel’s relevance is twofold. **First,** while interdisciplinarity has become an injunction of funding agencies and international programmes, it remains under-studied as a research practice (Frodeman, Klein & Pacheco, 2017); the panel treats it as an object of inquiry attentive to the genealogy and career of the concepts that travel across disciplines. **Second,** objects such as customary policy capacity — the ability of customary institutions to advise, design and carry public action — or natural resource governance in the Congo Basin cannot be grasped without crossing political science, anthropology, law and environmental sciences. By examining how such crossings are performed, the panel contributes to debates on the globalisation and decolonisation of policy analysis and on South-South circulations of governmental knowledge.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We welcome theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions from all regions and disciplinary backgrounds, and particularly encourage papers grounded in sustained fieldwork. Contributions may address, among others, four sets of themes.

(1) Disciplinary borrowings, explicit or tacit: concept biographies. How do policy scholars in Anglophone, Francophone and Southern traditions actually borrow from philosophy, sociology, anthropology, economics, law or the environmental sciences? We particularly invite “concept biographies”: papers that trace the career of a specific concept from its discipline of origin to its naturalisation in policy analysis, reconstructing its

translations, appropriations and silences along the way. Papers may also compare how the same borrowing is acknowledged in one tradition and naturalised in another, or examine what is gained and lost when interdisciplinary work goes unnamed.

(2) Research objects that demand interdisciplinarity. We invite papers on objects that resist mono-disciplinary treatment: customary capacities and the place of traditional authorities in policy advice and design; the governance of natural resources, land and forests; digital government and data-driven administration; migration and diaspora policies. Contributions may show how the object itself forces analysts to assemble concepts, methods and literatures from several disciplines, and with what analytical consequences.

(3) Interdisciplinarity as an institutional and collaborative condition. Papers may examine how funded research programmes, South-South and North-South cooperation schemes, laboratories and consortia organise — or constrain — the encounter between disciplines: division of labour between political scientists and biophysical or economic expertise, negotiation of research questions, co-authorship practices, and the effects of these arrangements on the frameworks mobilised.

(4) Reflexive and decolonial stakes. We finally welcome contributions that interrogate the politics of (in)visible interdisciplinarity: what does it mean that plural disciplinary foundations are openly claimed in African and Southern policy scholarship while remaining tacit in the mainstream? Papers may discuss the implications for teaching, for publishing, for the recognition of Southern scholarship, and for current debates on the decolonisation of policy analysis.

Papers may be single-authored or collective, and presented by scholars at all career stages, including doctoral researchers. Comparative designs, single case studies and historical or genealogical approaches are equally welcome. Papers in English and in French are welcome; the panel will be conducted in a bilingual and inclusive format. Selected papers will be considered for an edited volume or a special issue, for which preliminary discussions are underway; authors will be asked to engage explicitly with the panel's three propositions.

References

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Laakso, L. (2022). The social science foundations of public policy in Africa. In G. Onyango (Ed.), Routledge handbook of public policy in Africa. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003143840

Lasswell, H. D. (1951). The policy orientation. In D. Lerner & H. D. Lasswell (Eds.), The policy sciences: Recent developments in scope and method (pp. 3–15). Stanford University Press.

Manga Edimo, M. (forthcoming). Chiefs as policy advisors: Customary capacity and epistemic pluralism in African hybrid governance. Policy Design and Practice (revised manuscript under review).

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