P138 / Seeing Policy from Below: Everyday Life, Burdens, Emotions and Policy Feedback

Topic : Citizens, Participation and Social Movements

Chair : Vincent DUBOIS (Sciences Po Strasbourg)

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Public policy research has traditionally examined policies through an institutional lens—focusing on their design, organizational implementation, and performance relative to stated goals. This panel explores what is gained, both analytically and practically, by shifting the analytical entry point to people's everyday lived experiences with policies.

Several bodies of literature provide foundational building blocks for this approach. Research on policy feedback demonstrates that policies actively shape citizens' resources, interpretations, and political participation (Mettler and Soss 2004). Analyses of "policy targets" clarify how clients internalize the "subtle messages" embedded in policy design (Ingram and Schneider 1993), while the concept of "policy reception" captures how target publics navigate and ascribe meaning to the programs that govern them (Revillard 2024). Meanwhile, scholarship on administrative burdens documents the learning, compliance, and psychological costs of interacting with the state (Herd and Moynihan 2018), complemented by street-level bureaucracy research on frontline discretion (Lipsky 1980) and sociological studies on how these bureaucratic encounters affect individuals both materially and symbolically (Hasenfeld 1980; Dubois 1999).

Yet, these approaches typically remain anchored in institutional frameworks: they tend to track a single program, organization, or professional group, often treating citizens' experiences merely as a reactive response to policy design. Conversely, an alternative tradition begins with the everyday world of those subject to policies, tracing how institutions organize and structure that reality. Feminist and activist ethnographies have long argued that grounding analysis in everyday experience reveals how institutional relations operate in practice. This lens illuminates how individuals—particularly women and other marginalized groups—cope with, rework, and contest these overarching structures (Naples 1998). Critical policy ethnography and comparative research focusing on how lower-class individuals interact with state institutions have integrated this perspective into the analysis of welfare systems and public services (Dubois 2010, 2015; LOCI Research Network). However, these everyday-life approaches have remained largely disconnected from mainstream policy analysis and its core conceptual frameworks.

Consequently, the central question of this panel is: what does an everyday-life perspective allow us to observe, explain, and improve in public policy that institution-centered approaches overlook? We explore three core propositions. First, adopting an everyday-life lens exposes the cumulative and cross-sectoral nature of policy effects; individuals navigate a complex patchwork of programs across their life courses rather than isolated policies, meaning that administrative burdens, social impacts, and emotional tolls accumulate across successive encounters. Second, emotions and political learning serve as primary channels through which these lived experiences translate into policy feedback, deeply shaping citizens' trust, sense of entitlement, and political engagement. Third, everyday experiences consistently bring to light mediating actors and processes—ranging from community organizations, unions, and legal advocates to relatives, informal brokers, and digital helpers—that remain invisible from institutional vantage points and are currently being reshaped by digitalization.

Ultimately, this panel bridges the gap between well-established policy concepts and the lived reality of governance. By doing so, it expands the empirical evidence base for equitable policy design and evaluation, while fostering a vital methodological dialogue across diverse contexts and policy sectors.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite empirical, conceptual and methodological papers that analyze public policy starting from people's everyday life experiences, and that show what this shift of perspective adds to policy analysis. Papers may address any policy sector (e.g. social protection, health, housing, migration, justice, taxation). Cross-sectorial approaches are post welcome. They may consider any national, transnational or subnational context. Comparative work and contributions from the Global South are particularly welcome.

We are especially interested in papers that:

1. Adopt everyday life as their primary analytical point of departure to demonstrate what this lens reveals beyond institution-centered accounts, particularly regarding cumulative experiences across diverse programs, organizations, and life trajectories.

2. Examine how policies reshape individuals' lives through administrative, compliance, and psychological burdens, as well as material and social impacts, with a keen focus on how these dynamics intersect with class, race, gender, age, disability, migration status, and geographic territory.

3. Analyze the affective dimensions of public policy—such as anxiety, shame, anger, trust, gratitude, and hope—both as intrinsic components of how policies are lived and as critical mechanisms driving political learning.

4. Connect these everyday lived experiences directly to policy feedback loops, exploring how they inform citizens' perceptions of institutional legitimacy, sense of entitlement, and subsequent civic or political engagement.

5. Identify the intermediaries and processes of intermediation that emerge from people's interactions with the state (e.g., community organizations, unions, legal advocates, relatives, informal brokers, and digital assistants), paying specific attention to how digitalization and algorithmic platforms reshape these dynamics compared to traditional forms of mediation.

6. Discuss methodological and ethical choices involved in researching public policy "from below," including the application of organizational, institutional, and critical policy ethnographies, life-course approaches, participatory action research, or innovative mixed-methods designs that pair qualitative inquiries with survey and administrative data.

Proposals should state their empirical material, their conceptual contribution to policy analysis, and, where possible, what an everyday-life perspective changes for policy design or evaluation. Early-career scholars are warmly encouraged to apply.