P49 / Talking across lenses: Comparing, combining, and synthesizing perspectives, concepts, and theories of the policy process

Topic : Policy Process Theories

Chair : Nihit Goyal (Delft University of Technology)

Second Chair : Nils Bandelow (Technische Universität Carolo-Wilhelmina Braunschweig)

Third Chair : Daniel Béland (McGill University)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

The study of public policy processes is characterized by conceptual pluralism. The field includes established concepts and theories, but also ‘lenses’ developed in public administration, comparative public policy, critical and interpretive policy studies, political sociology and social psychology. Various perspectives (such as argumentative policy analysis or social identities), concepts (such as policy capacity, policy feedback, and policy learning), and frameworks (such as the multiple streams framework and the programmatic action framework) have been used to illuminate different dimensions of policymaking.

These lenses are typically treated as distinct, since they rest on different assumptions, for example, about actors, institutions, meaning, power and the role of knowledge. Consequently, most work in the field proceeds within existing concepts and theories rather than at their intersection. While this diversity is a source of analytical strength, it can also hinder dialogue and the exchange of knowledge among different theoretical traditions: insights generated within one perspective seldom inform another, and scholars working on the same policy problem may talk past each other.

The panel aims to foster dialogue at the intersection of lenses. It does so by focusing on substantive engagement with two or more lenses, i.e., perspectives, concepts, frameworks, theories, or models. Such engagement may take the form of parallel application to test them against one another or to study different stages, levels, or aspects of policymaking; use of one to illuminate the underlying mechanisms of another; or a synthesis of the core elements of two or more lenses to create a new one. Where the perspectives are difficult to reconcile, even identifying the limits to their substantive engagement would constitute a meaningful dialogue.

The central research question is: what can be gained from a substantive debate between two or more lenses of the policy process, and under what conditions can such a debate enhance analytical insight and/or practical relevance?

1. Insightful engagement requires clarity about the research objectives, the underlying assumptions of the selected lenses, and the form the engagement could take. The added value may be conceptual, interpretive, explanatory, or normative.
2. Dialogue across disciplinary or national traditions can reveal blind spots created by treating a limited canon of theories as universally representative.
3. Engagement may be especially productive when lenses illuminate different aspects of policymaking, such as actors (and their networks), institutional trajectories, meanings and narratives, power dynamics, or policy outputs and outcomes.
4. The dialogue is more likely to be meaningful when methodological choices follow ontological and epistemological commitments. Comparative methods, computational techniques, discourse analysis, ethnographic studies, longitudinal analysis, process tracing, mixed methods analysis can all contribute when used appropriately.

The panel therefore welcomes conceptual, methodological and empirical work across descriptive, explanatory, interpretive, and normative traditions. Its broader aim is to move beyond theoretical silos while preserving conceptual and epistemological richness in order to identify whether, when, and how parallel application, translation, combination, or synthesis of lenses of policymaking can enhance their analytical power and/or practical relevance.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite manuscripts that engage substantively with two or more perspectives, concepts, frameworks, theories, or models relevant to the study of policy processes. Contributions may apply multiple lenses in parallel, connect perspectives across stages or levels of policymaking, import concepts from one to develop another, or synthesize theories to develop a new lens. The panel does not privilege positivist explanatory research over interpretive, constructivist or critical approaches and is not restricted to frameworks typically included in Theories of the Policy Process.

We prioritize manuscripts that make the logic of the engagement explicit. What does each perspective make visible, and what does it leave unexplained or unquestioned when used alone? Are the perspectives complementary, sequential, nested, or competing? Under which conditions, and to what extent, do the lenses travel productively across traditions? Which inconsistencies, tensions, or contradictions arise from different understandings of power, interpretation, causality, or normativity? Manuscripts that substantively engage with two or more lenses to argue that integration is inappropriate are also welcome.

We also encourage contributions that connect traditions across disciplinary or national contexts, including works beyond the North American policy process canon. Possible starting points include, but are not limited to, the multiple streams framework, the programmatic action framework, policy capacity, policy feedback, policy learning, policy design, policy success and justice, social identities in the policy process as well as critical and interpretive perspectives, such as argumentative policy analysis, discursive approaches, and feminist policy studies.

Conceptual, methodological, and empirical studies are all welcome. Manuscripts should demonstrate how they engage substantively with two or more lenses and articulate whether the engagement adds analytical power and/or practical relevance over a single lens. Empirical analysis may use computational, qualitative, or quantitative techniques (or their combination), provided the research design follows from the ontological and epistemological commitments.

Selected papers will be considered for a special issue in a suitable public policy journal. The panel is planned as an in-person panel in Rennes, and authors should expect to participate on site.