P153 / The Same Words, Different Policies: Contested Meanings in Public Policy

Topic : Discourses, Ideas, and Narratives

Chair : Apoorva Bhatnagar (Dream a Dream)

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Public policy frequently mobilises terms that attract broad agreement: inclusion, wellbeing, resilience, participation, equity and empowerment. Yet agreement on vocabulary can conceal substantial disagreement over policy purposes, responsibilities and instruments. Inclusion may entail expanding access to existing institutions or transforming the arrangements that produce exclusion. Resilience may justify strengthening collective provision or placing greater responsibility on individuals. Participation may involve consultation, shared decision-making or the legitimation of decisions already taken. These differences make the interpretation of shared language a consequential political process.

This panel asks: How do actors use shared policy terms to advance competing agendas, and under what conditions do particular interpretations acquire authority and shape policy decisions?

The panel brings interpretive policy analysis, discursive institutionalism, framing research and the study of policy narratives into conversation. These approaches illuminate how language constitutes public problems, establishes legitimate knowledge and organises political action. The panel focuses specifically on situations in which actors appear to agree because they use the same terms, while attaching different meanings, causal assumptions and expectations to them.

Three connected research questions guide the discussion. First, how do actors construct and contest the meanings of widely endorsed policy concepts? Second, through what processes do interpretations become embedded in policy instruments, funding criteria, indicators and administrative routines? Third, when does ambiguity enable cooperation across different interests, and when does it obscure conflict, weaken accountability or marginalise alternative visions?

The panel examines both strategic uses of language and differences arising from institutional position, professional practice, lived experience and cultural context. Actors may deliberately preserve ambiguity to sustain coalitions. They may also discover competing interpretations only when broad commitments are translated into operational decisions. Meaning is therefore negotiated throughout the policy process, including within frontline practice and encounters between public institutions and affected communities. Attention is given to power: who can define an authoritative interpretation, whose understanding becomes measurable and actionable, and whose meanings remain peripheral. The panel also considers how policy concepts travel across jurisdictions, languages and sectors, and how translation changes their political significance.

The panel distinguishes agreement on terminology from agreement on problem definitions, policy goals, instruments and the distribution of responsibilities. It invites contributions that trace connections between discourse and concrete decisions without assuming that language alone determines outcomes.
Its scientific contribution lies in explaining how apparent discursive consensus can coexist with divergent policy trajectories. By comparing concepts, sectors and institutional settings, the panel seeks to identify when shared language enables collective action, when it sustains symbolic agreement, and how struggles over meaning shape policy legitimacy, equity and accountability.

CALL FOR PAPERS

What happens when policy actors agree on the words but disagree on what those words require? How can commitments to inclusion, wellbeing, resilience or participation support substantially different policy

agendas? When does shared language create possibilities for cooperation, and when does it conceal unresolved political conflict?

This panel invites theoretical, empirical and methodological contributions examining contested meanings in public policy. We welcome papers exploring how governments, international organisations, civil society, researchers, professionals and affected communities interpret and mobilise widely endorsed policy concepts. Contributions may examine any sector, jurisdiction or level of government.

We are particularly interested in studies that connect struggles over meaning with policy choices: which problems receive attention, which interventions attract resources, who bears responsibility, what counts as success, and whose claims are recognised.
Contributions may address one or more of the following questions:
1. How do actors use shared terms to advance competing problem definitions, causal explanations or visions of public responsibility?
2. Under what conditions does ambiguity enable coalition-building, negotiation or policy adoption?
3. When does apparent consensus defer conflict until decisions about budgets, instruments or implementation must be made?
4. How do particular interpretations become authoritative through legislation, expertise, indicators, funding requirements or organisational routines?
5. How do policy narratives assign agency, responsibility and deservingness within a shared conceptual vocabulary?
6. How do concepts change as they travel across countries, languages, sectors or levels of government?
7. How do frontline professionals and affected communities reinterpret, resist or reshape official policy meanings?
8. How can researchers distinguish consequential disagreement from linguistic variation, symbolic commitments or strategic relabelling?

We welcome interpretive, ethnographic, historical, comparative and mixed-method approaches, alongside discourse analysis, narrative analysis and computational text analysis. Conceptual and methodological papers examining how to investigate contested meanings are also welcome.

Submissions should identify the concept or vocabulary under examination, the actors involved, the institutional setting and the stakes of the disagreement. Empirical papers should explain how competing meanings are identified and provide evidence of their relationship to policy processes or decisions. Conceptual papers should clarify how their argument advances understanding of discourse, ideas or narratives in public policy.

The panel aims to develop a comparative account of how shared policy language accommodates divergent agendas, how particular meanings gain authority, and what these processes imply for democratic debate and public accountability.