

Policy networks: what are they and what are they good for?

Kathryn Oliver, Michele Acuto

Paper for ICPP, Milan 2015.

Abstract

This paper presents a recent review of the policy networks literature, both empirical and theoretical, and describes an ongoing project to map existing policy network data. Much of the literature on policy networks sees them variously as a mode of governance, and a metaphor for the reality of governance, or configurations of individuals/organisational engaged in a policy sector (Rhodes 1992b). Dowding asserted that the field of policy networks is divided into those who believe that the network gives rise to a policy through convergence (ties forming through mutual beliefs and values within an epistemic community – the advocacy coalition framework (Haas 1992, Sabatier- & Jenkins-Smith) or those who perceive policy networks as a way of linking state-level structures with interpersonal ‘micro’ interactions; i.e. a description of how entities are linked through the enacting of power and bargaining (Harsanyi, Rhodes & Marsh). Therefore, to be analytically useful, the concept of a policy network must be able to explain in network terms (structure, position, characteristics) policy outcomes or processes. These explanations must work in a range of domains and contexts. Understanding policy network formation, change and process can inform us not only about how policy processes work, but also how ideas and evidence are found and passed between actors. The *theory* of policy networks should be able to explain the common features of policy networks (as opposed to networks of other kinds), which this project is aiming to identify. Using an interdisciplinary, multi-theoretical and methodological approach, our project will add to the conceptual and empirical literature on policy networks. We end with some proposals for the development of the field, and invitations to participate in the ongoing project.

Introduction: How has ‘network’ been used?

As previous research has documented, policymakers use personal contacts to find evidence and advice (Haynes), and the strategies employed by policy actors to influence evidence-use can be informative about the policy process. Interpersonal interaction in policy processes suggests that the policy network may be a useful analytical concept. However, as we all know, the concept of the ‘policy network’ means very different things to different people. Between 1980-1990s, ‘policy network’ was more or less analytically interchangeable with ‘policy community’ or ‘interest group’. The network element indicated some aspect of informal connectivity, but the network idea performed little conceptual beyond a metaphorical suggestion of a community. Since then, there have been applications of the network idea ranging from the metaphorical, through the esoteric, to the empirical. Fawcett and Daugbjerg (2012) state that the school of policy networks arises from the premise that policy actors need to exchange resources to enable policy goals – thus enabling the development of hypotheses linking network structure to policy outcomes; for example, examining membership of cores or peripheries of networks with regard to agenda-setting. However, in reality, only lately have empirical structural approaches been applied to policy process (e.g. Ingold 2011) and as yet no systematic overview of the contributions of networks as conceptual or analytical artefacts has been taken. Largely, scholars have attempted to define typologies of policy networks (e.g. the continuum of policy community to issue network, defined by Rhodes 1981).

Clarity is needed. It is missing because much of the language used by policy scholars is inherently structural, or at least has a structural flavor (networks; brokers) and the primary concepts which are agreed to determine policy processes (power dependency; information exchange) are relational. Martin Smith (1993, 126-7, quoted in Fawcett and Daugbjerg 2012, "Power is structural. Policy outputs ... are the result of actors within structural locations making choices from a range of structurally determined options."

Fawcett and Daugbjerg also claim that Dowding argues that policy outcomes are determined by the characteristics of individual policy actors, rather than by the structural properties of the networks themselves. This is a mis-reading of Dowding, who actually said that a network-based explanation needs to move beyond description of networks into providing an explanation of policy outcomes – such as the variables proposed by Sorensen and Torfing, 2009) - using network structure as an explanatory factor – a critique which has been frankly ignored by some policy network scholars who insist that networks are dynamic, and policy processes are mediated by the network structure (Marsh and Rhodes 2000) without providing any empirical substance to support these claims.

'Network' does different work in these contexts, and it is not yet clear is whether policy networks anything in common; or whether policy networks are more or less heterogeneous than other network families. This literature review was conducted to explore how the concept has been used, to map different conceptual uses across the literature and to explore the implications of these different uses for a unified theory of networks in policy. We are aiming to develop a library of empirical cases, in order to explore our second question; whether policy networks have special characteristics in common, beyond being 'of policy' in some way. We searched for literature containing the term 'policy network' in title and abstract, published since 2000. 136 relevant studies were identified during this preliminary search, and were coded against policy domain, type of network concept, and application of concept. Below, we briefly describe these sets of literature.

1. Ontological networks

Much of the literature on policy networks sees them variously as a mode of governance, and a metaphor for the reality of governance, or configurations of individuals/organisational engaged in a policy sector (Rhodes 1992b). Here, policy networks are 'about' government, 'about' issues, and essentially draw attention to the - apparently opaque – relationships which exist between institutions and individuals aiming to influence government on different issues. For this set of literature, 'policy network' is a concept which describes a dispersed form of public management, reifying power relations (Marsh & Smith 2000, p.6)

Historically, this is probably a reaction to the traditional view of government as a top-down, controlling entity, indicated by the apparent failure of public policy to deal with challenges presented by modern societies (Kickert 1997), and by the failure of the rational models to explain multi-actor participation in policy-making. Aspirationally, Le Grand argues that the 'network model' of governance, as described above is seen as a positive thing; an emphasis on informal networks, relationships and collaborative working (Le Grand 2007). This model which is an optimistic and prescriptive attempt to describe an open and democratic mode of decision-making (Blanco 2011), which is inherently neo-liberal, and can replace markets and hierarchies (Marsh 1998b).

Given the essentially metaphorical nature of the network in this set of literature, some astoundingly bold analytical claims are made about them. Here is Rhodes, R. A. (2006): "Policy networks are sets of formal institutional and informal linkages between governmental and other actors structured around shared if endlessly negotiated beliefs and interests in public policymaking and implementation. These actors are interdependent and policy emerges from the interactions between them." Similarly, Stephen Ball (2012): "Network is a method, an analytic techniques... [that] works to capture and describe *some aspects* of these relationships, that is some of the more visible aspects of these relationships." Interestingly, most studies we identified which used 'network' in this theoretical sense were from the governance and politics literature (e.g. Bevir 2009, Fawcett 2012, Blanco 2011, Stone 2008, Smith 2008, Berry 2004, Osborne 2006, Lyall 2007).

The network-as-metaphor has also been applied to education (Exley 2011, Fataa 2006, Holloway 2009, Williamson 2012), environmental and agricultural policy (Greer 2002, Goldman 2007, Hudons 2007, Joas 2007, Lemos 2008), health (Rhodes 2002, ALdred 2007) and public policy more generally (Ponzini 2009, Peck 2010, De Bruijn 2002). Here, the analytical claims tend to be weaker, as the concept is not applied as a means of explaining power relations.

2. Esoteric networks

In this second set of literature, the 'network' concept performs more analytical work. For this set of literature (51 of our identified studies), networks are defined again as relations between actors in a community, but with more attempt to describe the constituents of these networks, the role of the network in producing policy outcomes, or offer empirical case descriptions of how ties between actors influenced policy processes – without going as far as specifying ties or analyzing structural components of networks.

This set of literature also offers critiques focusing on the inability of 'networks' to exhaustively map policy interactions, although of course this is not a limitation of the method, just of it's application: ". A key advantage of the [network] model is that it increases understanding of network transformation, explanation of which has been an alleged weakness of the policy network approach. However, this case study does throw up some weaknesses with the model, including the tendency of the model to emphasize the role of 'insider' agents and downplay the role of 'outsiders' in the policy process" Toke and Marsh 2003

3. Empirical networks

Empirically, the concept of the policy network has been applied variously to smoke-free legislation in Europe (Weishaar 2012), to town planning (Henry 2011), agricultural policy (Cristosomo 2012), human rights (Drew 2011), climate change (Ingold 2011; Bomberg 2012). These studies have explicitly defined the nature of a relationship (tie) between a set of actors (nodes) and collected information on the structure of this network within a certain context. For Ingolf, for example, "when it comes to understanding actors' and brokers' influence on policy output, access to power and opportunity structures are particularly crucial (Ingold 2009a, ingold and varone 201, nohrstedt 2010, ingold 2011.) Similarly:"...actions and beliefs cannot tell the whole story. Policy certainly arises from interactions between actors in networks, but the structure of these networks matters a great deal since they shape who interacts with whom." Lewis, 2011, pp. 1127)

The range of ties, actors and methods used to analyse the resultant networks within this set of literature (n = 36) is vast, from communications about cross-border disputes and regulation (Sissenich 2008), the influence of multi-national corporations in business policy (Schnieder 2006) to classic reputational studies in water policy (Luzy 2008), healthcare (Wang 2012, 2013, Lewis 2006), planning and urban studies (Eraydin 2008, Henry 2012) amongst others. The disparate nature of this set of studies, however, hinders comparative analysis; it is still not possible to distinguish a communications network in crime, for example, from policy.

For some within this set of literature, 'network' has become aggregated with 'complex', so the methodological and theoretical questions have tended towards solving problems to do with complex networks and systems (i.e. questions about network analysis, rather than policy networks).

Networks or network analysis?

Certainly, it is true that empirical applications of network analysis to policy fields have been largely, though not wholly descriptive. Many argue that network analysis is not an appropriate tool by which to study policy processes because it does not answer questions about "... how and why networks change, what the relative importance of interpersonal and interorganizational relationships is, or which interests dominate" (Borzel, Public Administration, 2011). Many argue that network analysis is not an appropriate tool by which to study policy processes because it does not answer questions about "... how and why networks change, what the relative importance of interpersonal and interorganizational relationships is, or which interests dominate" (Borzel, Public Administration, 2011).

This statement may be a description of the field as it stands, but is not an accurate reflection of the potential for network analysis to contribute to the policy sciences. We do not yet understand to what extent theories developed about social networks such as transitivity apply to non-comparable policy networks (which may include the interpersonal, interorganisational, inter-state, and be derived from survey data, documentary analysis). For any of the three types of causal relationships posited above, there are multiple variables which could be used to explore them.

Because of the number and complexity of these variables, a large number of cases of policy networks of all kinds would need to be compared in order to generate any testable findings – but then the same could be said of most social sciences. Secondly, in most of the policy networks literature, the nature of the tie is unspecified, undermining any analytical conclusions (e.g. Evidence-provision, advice, influence). In addition, the role of agency in creating ties, maintaining them and acting through them is not understood. As Knoke warns that "network analyses of elite structures are ultimately valuable only if they improve our understanding of how elites interact to read policy decisions. Thus analysts must determine if the global structures and actor positions within influence and domination networks are related to those actors' mobilization for participation in policy events" Knoke 1993, pp34-35.

A common theory of policy networks: comparing policy networks

Most studies using the network concept are mainly descriptive, or even metaphorical (e.g. Rhodes and Marsh) or prescriptive (Daumberg 2013). However, a true theory must go beyond description and provide assumptions and rationales which link key concepts and outcomes (Shlager and Weible). Dowding claims that the policy network concept lacks the

explanatory power necessary to elevate it to the status of theory; that where the network concept has been applied, metaphorically or empirically, it is superfluous to any causal explanation of events; and that a theory of policy networks must be able to explain outcomes in terms of network properties; must be able to “produce empirical implications under different conditions”. In other words, to be analytically useful, the concept of a policy network must be able to explain in network terms (structure, position, characteristics) policy outcomes or processes. These explanations must work in a range of domains and contexts: as Hay states “...The empirical is simple amenable to a multitude of different interpretations informed by a multitude of competing ontologies. Different ontologies may – and do – draw sustenance from the same empirical evidence...”(Hay 2009, p 263. Quoted in Lewis 2011 1227)

Understanding policy network formation, change and process can inform us not only about how policy processes work, but also how ideas and evidence are found and passed between actors. The network is “both a descriptor of social relations and a descriptor of itself – it is both a model and an object and is stands both for itself and for something beyond itself..... The network and relations exist as the same thing, ‘seen twice’”. (Riles 2001, quoted in Lewis 2011, 1229.)

A properly networked explanation of the policy process does not yet exist. This would look like an explanation which explained variation in policy outcomes in terms of network characteristics, and/or described how individual actors formed ties, broke ties or influenced ties between alters, across different types of ties (advising, persuading, influencing) become activated. The central question here is: to what extent are policy networks shaped by contextual factors and their constituents, and to what extent do different networks give rise to different policy outcomes. To put these questions in network terminology:

Dependent	Independent
Whole network properties (size, density, clustering)	Policy formulation / change of policy
Ego-level network properties (centrality, brokerage)	Policy formulation / change of policy
Type of policy (health, education) Type of policy process (reactive/creative/statutory)	Whole and individual network properties

Since ‘policy’ itself may be defined by an actor attribute (i.e. as “decisions taken by those with responsibility for a given policy area”(Buse et al., 2005), an actor-base approach is clearly an appropriate methods for policy analysis. A lack of conceptual clarity around the term “policy networks” has led to differences in how it is interpreted and implemented as a research topic. In turn, this means that the empirical data which does exist is not easily compared, and it is therefore difficult to draw conclusions about the conceptual claims briefly outlined above. These claims are often plausible, but somewhat ideologically constructed with questionable assumptions around the ability of individual actors to enact agency.

Building on on-going work by the applicants (Oliver et al. 2013;Oliver 2012), and by using an interdisciplinary, multi-theoretical and methodological approach, this project will add to the conceptual and empirical literature on policy networks (Damgaard 2006;Jung and Nutley 2008;Klijn 2000;Lee and Goodman 2002;Lewis 2006;Marsh 1998a;Rhodes 1992a;Richards 2010). This literature, which has direct policy relevance for understanding how to mobilise knowledge and evidence for public policy, how policies are implemented, and the role of

vested interests in democratic processes, tends to claim that networks are more accurate depictions of political process than other models, and more equitable and desirable forms of governance which governments should aspire to. These claims remain largely rooted in theoretical descriptions of the policy process, and largely untested on empirical data. The challenge is to develop theories which provide causal explanations linking structure with outcome. One way of doing this is to use QCA with network analysis (Fischer 2011). This study therefore aims to clarify the conceptual differences in how policy networks are used, to gather empirical policy network data, to analyse approaches taken and to develop methodological tools to analysed policy networks.

Objectives

This project aims to:

1. Understand the nature, formation and dynamics of policy networks
2. Advance theoretical and empirical knowledge about policy networks by generating international and cross-field comparative data on the structure and content of policy networks
3. Explore how to mobilise knowledge within these – comparing knowledge and influence networks.
4. Understand the role of institutions, organisations and individuals in creating and manipulating these networks

Specific aims include:

1. Clarify the conceptual uses of the term “policy networks” through a systematic and exhaustive theoretical review of the literature
2. Compile an archive of relevant network data for researching and analysing policy networks
3. Collect new and comparable policy network data through collaborative partnerships across a range of contexts
4. Test existing theoretical claims on this data, and develop a theory-led typology of policy networks
5. Review the utility of existing approaches to analyse policy networks and where appropriate develop new measures.

Methods : A systematic study of the available theories and data will be undertaken. Data available to us include local policy making networks (Oliver 2013) at interpersonal and organisational level. In addition, a systematic search for theoretical and empirical papers on policy networks would be undertaken, including archival and secondary data. We will also comb existing network archives for suitable policy network data. Each data set will be described, the approaches taken to analyse it be indexed, and the key theoretical statements made about it summarised. These data will form the basis for some methodological and theoretical reflections.

References

- Burt, R. 1992. The social structure of competition in networks and organizations.
- Buse, K., Mays, N., & Walt, G. 2005. Making Health Policy Open University Press; illustrated edition edition.

Damgaard, B. 2006. Do policy networks lead to network governing? *Public Administration*, 84, (3) 673 available from: <http://openurl.man.ac.uk/sfxlcl3?sid=google&aunit=B&aualast=Damgaard&atitle=Do%20policy%20networks%20lead%20to%20network%20governing%3F&id=doi%3A10.1111%2Fj.1467-9299.2006.00607.x&title=Public%20administration&volume=84&issue=3&date=2006&spage=673&issn=0033-3298>

Jung, T. & Nutley, S. 2008. Evidence and policy networks: the UK debate about sex offender community notification. *Evidence and Policy: A Journal of Research, Debate and Practice*, 4, (2) 187-207

Kickert, W.J.M. 1997. *Managing Complex Networks : Strategies for the Public Sector*.

Klijn, E.H. 2000. Public management and policy networks. *Public management review*, 2, (2) 135

Le Grand, J. 2007. *Delivering Public Services through Choices and Competition: The other invisible Hand* Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Lee, K. & Goodman, H. 2002, "Global Policy Networks: The Propagation of Health Care reform since the 1980s," In *Health Policy in a Globalising World*, K. Lee, K. Buse, & S. Fustakian, eds., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lewis, J.M. 2006. Being around and knowing the players: Networks of influence in health policy. *Social Science & Medicine*, 62, (9) 2125-2136 available from: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/B6VBF-4HJS5GP-2/2/dd85d3f489116b10a3e13e7cf4ea2e1c>

Marsh, D. 1998a. Comparing policy networks.

Marsh, D. 1998b. Comparing policy networks.

Oliver, K., de Vocht, F., Money, A., & Everett, M.G. 2013. Who runs public health? A mixed-methods study combining network and qualitative analyses. *Journal of Public Health*, In press,

Oliver, K. 2012. The human factor: Re-organisations in public health policy. *Health Policy*, 106, (1) 97

Rhodes, R.A.W. 1992a. Policy networks in British politics.

Richards, D. 2010, "Pressure Groups and Policy Networks," In *British Politics*, 5th ed. D. Kavanagh et al., eds..

Thompson, G. 2003. *Between Hierarchies and Markets*.

Crisostomo, Catarina, et al. "Organic farming policy in Portugal: analysis of the policy network." *New mediterranean journal of economics, agriculture and environment= Revue méditerranéenne d'économie, agriculture et environnement* 11.4 (2012): 27-30.

Henry, Adam Douglas, Mark Lubell, and Michael McCoy. "Belief systems and social capital as drivers of policy network structure: The case of California regional planning." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 21.3 (2011): 419-444.

Lee, Jeongyoon, R. Karl Rethemeyer, and Hyun Hee Park. "Network Context and Advocacy Organization: A Comparison of Two Social Service Policy Networks." *Academy of Management Proceedings*. Vol. 2013. No. 1. Academy of Management, 2013.

Drew, Roger, et al. "Using social network analysis to evaluate a complex policy network." *Evaluation* 17.4 (2011): 383-394.

Ingold, Karin. "Network structures within policy processes: Coalitions, power, and brokerage in Swiss climate policy." *Policy Studies Journal* 39.3 (2011): 435-459.

Bomberg, Elizabeth. "Mind the (mobilization) gap: comparing climate activism in the United States and European Union." *Review of Policy Research* 29.3 (2012): 408-430.

Dowding, Keith. "Model or metaphor? A critical review of the policy network approach." *Political studies* 43.1 (1995): 136-158.

Fischer, Manuel. "Social Network Analysis and Qualitative Comparative Analysis: Their mutual benefit for the explanation of policy network structures." *Methodological Innovations Online* 6.2 (2011): 27-51.

Haynes, Abby S., et al. "Galvanizers, guides, champions, and shields: the many ways that policymakers use public health researchers." *Milbank Quarterly* 89.4 (2011): 564-598.

Ingold, Karin. "Network structures within policy processes: Coalitions, power, and brokerage in Swiss climate policy." *Policy Studies Journal* 39.3 (2011): 435-459.

Knoke, David. "Networks of elite structure and decision making." *Sociological methods & research* 22.1 (1993): 23-45.

Kok, Maarten O., and Albertine J. Schuit. "Contribution mapping: a method for mapping the contribution of research to enhance its impact." *Health Res Policy Syst* 10 (2012): 21.

Marsh, David, and Roderick Arthur William Rhodes. *Policy networks in British government*. Clarendon Press, 1992.

Oliver, Kathryn, Theo Lorenc, and Simon Innvær. "New directions in evidence-based policy research: a critical analysis of the literature." *Health Research Policy and Systems* 12.1 (2014): 34.

Oliver, Kathryn, et al. "Who runs public health? A mixed-methods study combining qualitative and network analyses." *Journal of Public Health* (2013): fdt039.

Oliver, Kathryn Ann. "Evaluating power, influence and evidence-use in public health policy-making: a social network analysis." (2012).

Ragin, Charles C. "Introduction to qualitative comparative analysis." *The comparative political economy of the welfare state* 299 (1994): 300-9.

Smith, Katherine E. "A Risky Business? The Politics of Knowledge Transfer in Public Health". ESRC Future Leaders fellowship, 2011-12.

Smith, Katherine. "Institutional filters: the translation and re-circulation of ideas about health inequalities within policy." *Policy & Politics* 41.1 (2013): 81-100.