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The Policy Process

A reader

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First published 1993 by
Harvester Wheatsheaf
Campus 400, Maylands Avenue
Hemel Hempstead
Hertfordshire, HP2 7EZ
A division of
Simon & Schuster International Group



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Typeset in 10/12pt Times by
Keyset Composition, Colchester

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
BPC Wheatons Ltd, Exeter

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library

ISBN 0-7450-1272-8 (hbk)

ISBN 0-7450-1273-6 (pbk)

4 5 97 96 95



New York London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore

Perspectives on policy analysis

Ian Gordon, Janet Lewis and Ken Young

A typology of policy analysis

The most obvious distinction in varieties of policy analysis is in terms of explicit purpose and/or client, separating analysis *for* policy from analysis *of* policy. In terms of established lines of research this is probably the most important distinction, and it also reflects a division of disciplinary concerns. Yet within this dichotomy lies a continuum of activities from policy advocacy at one end to the analysis of policy content at the other.

Analysis for policy		Analysis of policy		
Policy advocacy	Information for policy	Policy monitoring and evaluation	Analysis of policy determination	Analysis of policy content

Policy advocacy

We use this term to denote any research that terminates in the direct advocacy of a single policy, or of a group of related policies, identified as serving some end taken as valued by the researchers. The connection of such research with the decision network may be rather less direct. It may be aimed at policy-makers, in which case it assumes a degree of value correspondence (which may or may not be a tenable assumption), or it may serve to challenge existing policies and appeal to rival groups or public opinion at large. In some cases policy advocates argue from their findings toward a particular conclusion, which is offered as a *recommendation*. In other cases, where a very strong commitment to a particular course of action predates the research, whatever analysis was conducted may have been designed, consciously or unconsciously, to

From I. Gordon, J. Lewis and K. Young, 'Perspectives on policy analysis', *Public Administration Bulletin*, 25, 1977, pp. 26-30.

support the case to be argued. Information is gathered and organised in order to sustain a point. This style of policy analysis [. . .] is often carried out by reformist pressure groups, although it is by no means entirely absent from some types of university research.

Information for policy

In this mode, the researcher's task is to provide policy-makers with information and perhaps advice. It assumes a case for action, in terms of either the introduction of a new policy, or the revision of an existing one. It may be carried out within the research branch of a government department; by outside researchers funded by that department; by independently funded researchers; or by unfunded individuals or associates who have simply chosen to address their scholarly activities to policy issues. The activity itself may be confined to the provision of useful data (e.g. on demographic change) for consideration in policy-making. It may, however, go beyond this to elucidate causal relationships, and thereby to suggest definite policy options. [. . .]

Policy monitoring and evaluation

Policy monitoring and evaluation frequently take the form of *post hoc* analysis of policies and programmes. In an obvious sense, all public agencies perform monitoring and evaluation functions in respect of their own activities, although some may be facile, uncritical or self-legitimising. Evaluation for policy review is, on the other hand a more self-conscious business, particularly where the policy or programme in question has an experimental aspect. [. . .]

Monitoring and evaluation can be aimed at providing direct results to policy-makers about the impact and effectiveness of specific policies. But it can do more than this. *Post hoc* review of policy impact may be used for feasibility analysis in future policy design, via the specification of a feasible *set* of actions. In this mode, the object of policy analysis is to inform policy-makers of the limits of possibility. 'Better' policies might then be those which are more closely tailored to the constraints of feasibility imposed by the intractable external world of the policy-makers.

Analysis of policy determination

The emphasis here is upon the inputs and transformational processes operating upon the *construction* of public policy. Attempts to analyse the policy process are inescapably based upon explicit or implicit models of the policy system. In some cases the model is seen as being 'driven' by environmental forces, in others by internal objectives and goals, in yet others by the internal perceptions of the external environment. In contrast with 'advocacy' or 'information' this mode can tend to

over-emphasise the constraints upon action to the point where patterns of activity are portrayed as the necessary outcomes of a confluence of forces.

Analysis of policy content

This category of activity includes many studies which have been carried out, within the social administration and social policy field, of the origin, intentions and operation of *specific* policies. Typical of this category are the numerous descriptive accounts which have been given by academics on such policy areas as housing, education, health and social services. While their results may help to inform policy-makers, this is not usually an explicit aim of such studies, for they are conducted for academic advancement rather than public impact. In their more sophisticated variants, content studies engage in 'value analysis' and show social policies as institutionalising social theories.

Assumptions about 'policy' and 'policy-making'

Before discussing the varieties of policy analysis further it is necessary to clarify certain assumptions about the nature of policy and policy-making, since a misunderstanding of these can lead to an unduly narrow view of appropriate research strategies.

Assumptions about the process

The common threads in 'policy' studies can be seen to include some interest in the *content* (as well as the institutions, ideology and procedures) of government activity, some concern for its *outcomes* and an assumption that this activity is in some degree instrumental or *purposive*. The basic orientation is compatible, however, with very different implicit models of the policy process, leading to different strategies for analysis and its application.

To take ideal cases, researchers may on the one hand adopt the assumption that policy-making is essentially a rational process based on the classic steps from problem formulation and evaluation of alternatives through to implementation. Conflicts over goals or perceptions of the situation may be admitted, but these are assumed to result in stable and determinate outcomes which do not interfere with the consistency of the system's operations. Typically the problem is seen as technical, the climate as consensual and the process as controlled. On the other hand, policy-making may be seen as an inescapably *political* activity into which the perceptions and interests of individual actors enter at all stages. In this case implementation becomes a problematic activity rather than something that can be taken for granted, as in the rational

process model; policy is seen as a bargained outcome, the environment as conflictful and the process itself is characterised by diversity and constraint.

The power and survival ability of the 'rational system' model is surprising, given that its assumptions have been undermined by empirical studies of the policy process, and that its predictive record is uneven. The main explanation for its continuing existence must lie in its status as a normative model and as a 'dignified' myth which is often shared by the policy-makers themselves. Acceptance of the rational model helps the researcher towards a comfortable life; it enables him or her to appear to engage in direct debate with the policy-makers on the basis that information provided by the researchers will be an aid to better policy-making. If, however, as we believe, policy-making systems approximate more closely to the 'political' model, these prospects can only be superficially attractive.

Assumptions about policy

The concept of 'policy' has a particular status in the 'rational' model as the relatively durable element against which other premises and actions are supposed to be tested for consistency. It is in this sense that we may speak of 'foreign policy' or 'social policy' or 'marketing policy' as if the terms denoted local variants of a universal theme. Yet each of these examples represents very different ways of manipulating, via purposive action, the external environment of particular organisations. Moreover, the term 'policy' is used even within ostensibly similar governmental agencies to describe a range of different activities including (i) defining objectives (ii) setting priorities (iii) describing a plan and (iv) specifying decision rules. These characterisations of 'policy' differ not only in their generality and the level at which it is supposed to occur but also in whether 'policy' is assumed to be entirely prior to action or (as we believe is often the case) at least partly a *post hoc* generalisation or rationalisation. We suggest here that there is a *recursive* relation between policy and action, with 'policy' itself representing an essentially dynamic set of constructions of the situation. In this case, we argue that it is a mistake to conceive of policy analysis as the study of identifiable things called policies which are produced, or crystallise, at a particular stage in the decision process.

Assumptions about 'boundaries'

A feature of the rational model of policy-making is that it conceives the policy system as tightly bounded, and its operations upon the external world as unproblematic. To depart from the assumptions of classical rationality is inevitably to widen the boundaries of the 'relevant' in the analysis of policy-making. 'Policy-makers' are seen as negotiating both

within their own organisations and externally, with a host of other organisations and actors whose concurrence may be necessary to policy implementation. The focus shifts from 'decision analysis' to encompass the range of activities from formulation to implementation and impact. Inter-organisational politics and the manipulation of networks (*réseaux*) enter the picture, and it becomes less plausible to speak of locating the 'real' policy-makers. Policy-making, like 'power', appears as a dynamic yet diffused element in the relations between public actors and the world on which they act. This, *the analysis of policy systems*, is perhaps the most neglected aspect of the field.

Assumptions about problem definition

In addition to the assumptions made about the policy-making process, assumptions about problem definition also affect almost all policy analysis. It has been suggested that in every government department there are 'deep structures' of policy – the implicit collection of beliefs about the aims and intentions of the departments and about the relevant actors who influence or benefit from the policy. These constitute what Laski called the 'inarticulate major premises' of the policy-makers. Policy analysts are in the position either of having to accept the 'deep structures' and the consequent assumptions made about problem definition and the range of possible solutions, or of trying to stand outside the organisational consensus and bring new perceptions to old problems. The former role may be more congenial to the policy-makers themselves, but the major potential contribution of the social scientist lies in challenging the deep structures of policy-making. In order that this potential be realised, policy studies must engage in the analysis of policy processes, systems and content – a narrowly utilitarian approach to funding policy research will in the long term be self-defeating.