EDITED BY

MICHAEL
MORAN

MARTIN
REIN

ROBERT E.
GOODIN

The Oxford Handbook *of*
PUBLIC POLICY

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THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

PUBLIC POLICY

Edited by

MICHAEL MORAN
MARTIN REIN
and
ROBERT E. GOODIN

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Graham Allison is Douglas Dillon Professor of Government, Director of Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, and Faculty Chair of the Caspian Studies Program at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

Eugene Bardach is Professor of Public Policy in the Richard and Rhoda Goldman School of Public Policy, University of California, Berkeley.

Johanna Birckmayer is a Senior Research Scientist at the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) in Calverton, Maryland.

Davis B. Bobrow is Professor of Public Policy and International Affairs and Political Science at the University of Pittsburgh.

Mark Bovens is Professor of Legal Philosophy and of Public Administration at Utrecht University and Research Director of the Utrecht School of Governance.

Bea Cantillon is Professor of Social Policy, and Director of the Centre for Social Policy, University of Antwerp.

Tom Christensen is Professor of Political Science, University of Oslo.

Neta C. Crawford is Associate Professor (Research) in the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University.

Peter deLeon is Professor of Public Policy at the University of Colorado, Denver.

John D. Donahue is Raymond Vernon Lecturer in Public Policy and Director of the Weil Program in Collaborative Governance at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

Yehezkel Dror is Professor of Political Science at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and Founding President, The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute. He received the 2005 Israel Prize in Administrative Sciences for his theoretic and applied work on strategic planning.

John S. Dryzek is Professor of Social and Political Theory and Political Science at the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University.

Amitai Etzioni is University Professor at George Washington University.

John Forester is Professor of City and Regional Planning, Cornell University.

Richard Freeman is Senior Lecturer in the School of Social and Political Studies, University of Edinburgh.

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ORDERING THROUGH DISCOURSE

MAARTEN HAJER

DAVID LAWS

1. DEALING WITH AMBIVALENCE

Practitioners face "wicked" problems, complex influences, shifting commitments, and moral complexity in their daily efforts to act on policy goals. In many situations, they will not even be able to agree on what the problem *really* is (Rittel and Webber 1973), and turning to the facts may amplify rather than resolve differences in the face of "contradictory certainties" (Schwarz and Thompson 1990).

Much policy analysis tries to reduce conflict and uncertainty and respond to the need for stability by deriving generalizable knowledge and universal principles that can be applied to achieve policy goals across domains and settings. In this chapter, we address a competing tradition that starts with the conflict, ambiguity, and lure of stability that policy actors experience, treats their action as intelligent, and tries to organize scholarship to understand and support the efforts of these policy practitioners. We focus on a central problem that public officials, policy analysts, researchers, and stakeholders face in these circumstances: "How can I make sense of this complex and politically charged world?" This question often takes the form, "How should I act, given this complexity and uncertainty?"

Scholarship on this problem has a long history that dates back at least to C. S. Peirce's call for reflection on the logic by which we fix beliefs (Peirce 1992), Kenneth Burke's effort to model the search for regularity on a grammar (Burke 1969), and Erving Goffman's enquiry into how individuals respond to the question "What is going on here?" in social behaviour (Goffman 1974). Ambivalence,

ambiguity, and doubt have inspired a rich body of scholarship ever since March and Olsen (1989).

While it is now sociological common sense that policy practitioners seek stability and act in a social world that is a kaleidoscope of potential realities, the approaches to understand their efforts to make sense of the world vary. We use the term "ordering device" here to connote the *conceptual tools that analysts use to capture how policy actors deal with ambiguity and allocate particular significance to specific social or physical events*. These ordering devices explain how policy makers structure reality to gain a handle on practical questions.

2. UNDERSTANDING AMBIVALENCE

Policy makers are supposed to analyse situations and determine how to act. Professionally preoccupied with the quest for order and control (Van Gunsteren 1976), they are likely to be concerned when they experience ambivalence. When a situation is ambiguous, the available tools may not be useful or lead to immediate advice. In *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Zygmunt Bauman (1991) describes the unease that people experience when they cannot "read" a situation and choose readily among alternatives. Bauman defines ambivalence as the "possibility of assigning an object or an event to more than one category" (Bauman 1991). Ambivalence confounds choice as the organizing metaphor for action. This becomes a policy problem when the sovereignty of the state is based on the "power to define and to make definitions stick" (1991, 1–2). Governing, in his account, is in a large part a matter of defining the situation and this, in turn, is a key feature of policy practice. His analysis only raises the salience of the question, however. How do policy makers manage ambivalence in this endeavour?

This question is complex because ambivalence (or ambiguity, we use the terms interchangeably) lends itself to suppression. This is particularly true in policy work. We all know the joke that a good policy adviser has only one hand (so that she cannot say "on the other hand ..."): politicians look to their policy advisers for clarity, to help them *overcome* ambivalence. This assumes that ambivalence is always a problem, a deficit, a thing to overcome. Yet we might also see ambivalence and doubt as part of a policy domain and engaging them as a key part of good policy work. The appreciation of ambivalence and the capacity to doubt are arguably essential components of a reflective way of acting in the world. Hence good policy work typically takes place between two poles: one pulling in the direction of clarity and the reduction of complexity, the other illuminating precisely that which we do not fully understand.

Robert McNamara's reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis in *The Fog of War* (Morris 2003) illustrate the kind of struggle that goes on between these poles in policy making. Information was imperfect; conditions were "foggy." The clock was ticking and policy had to be made on the spot (Kennedy 1971). In this fog, McNamara

suggests, the Kennedy administration could have read the Cuban situation in two ways, each implying a radically different course of action.

How did policy makers make sense of this ambiguous situation and choose how to act? We would expect them to employ classification and, as Mary Douglas has observed, that "institutions [would] do the classifying" (Douglas 1986). Classification is an *institutional* device for ordering in which perception is guided by routine. In the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Pentagon classified the situation in its established categories. The test of classification in such circumstances is the ability to define a situation persuasively and provide concrete suggestions for action (in this case including a pre-emptive strike against Cuba). In hindsight, the strength of the policy deliberation in this crisis was the ability of Kennedy's advisers to resist the rush to classification; they *acknowledged ambiguity*, kept doubt alive, and worked to "ferret out" the assumptions embedded in routine ways of classifying the situation. This enabled them to "frame" and "reframe," and thereby explore different ways of understanding the situation.

The ability of the Kennedy administration to engage doubt, in this account, prevented a military conflict and allowed them to find a way out of the conflict: in the end both parties (the USA and Soviet Union) could back down without losing face. This could not have been a simple task. Particularly not given the unease, as Deborah Stone and others have underscored, that policy makers experience when objects or situations do not fit in one particular category or understanding (Stone 1997). If a situation is unclear and imbued with ambivalence, the task is seen to be creating order. But if policy makers have the key task of choosing between alternative trajectories of action, then acknowledging and, subsequently, handling ambivalence is essential for prudent action. In this sense, the strength of institutionally embedded systems of classification may also be their weakness. The force of institutional classifications in the face of ambivalence can interfere with responsible judgement. McNamara shows how this extends to even the strongest of policy decisions. They are imbued with ambiguity, and the ability to manage this relationship is what distinguishes the Kennedy administration's efforts in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

In political science the Cuban Missile Crisis is almost automatically associated with Graham Allison's *The Essence of Decision* (Allison 1971; Allison and Zelikow 1999). Allison showed how analysis of the dynamics depends on the analyst's conceptual lens. In so doing, Allison in fact showed how the need to order, and the distinctiveness this imbues analysis with, is not just limited to analysis in the immediate crisis, but extends to the efforts of political scientists to theorize the experience.

3. INTERPRETIVE SCHEMATA

McNamara's account highlights the influence of different interpretative schemata in the crisis. He argues that the Pentagon's vigorous interpretation was countered by

Tommy Thompson, the former ambassador to Moscow. Thompson drew on personal knowledge of the Russian leader Khrushchev and argued for a different interpretation. Khrushchev "was not the kind of person" to fit in the story the Pentagon was telling. So what, in the name of policy analysis, was going on in this confrontation? Was it a confrontation between a five-star general with an extraordinary track record and a soft-spoken statesman with personal knowledge of his adversary? Should we understand this as a conflict between two institutionalized ways of making sense of an ambiguous situation? Or should we try to connect bits of both interpretations?

In this tension we can read the outlines of what sociologists have labelled the "actor–structure" problem (Giddens 1979). Should we focus on personality and individual power? Or should we emphasize the (institutional) structures within which individuals operate? It is now widely agreed that this dichotomy is false. Individuals and institutions are both important. The analytic task is to develop concepts that can mediate between actors and structure (March and Olsen 1989). This is what policy academics attempt to do with the three ordering devices we discuss here at some more length: beliefs, frames, and discourses.

We know that what people see is shaped by "interpretative schemata." Cognitive science has shown that people inevitably privilege some attributes over others and influence what is deemed important, exciting, scary, threatening, reassuring, promising, or challenging. Scholarship on interpretative schemata has a long history. An undisputed milestone is the early work of Ludwig Fleck in the 1930s (Fleck 1935). Fleck made the case for a social understanding of cognition suggesting that action is dependent on the way in which "thought collectives" conceive of the world. Each collective has a particular "thought style" that orders the process of cognition, explains new empirical findings ("the facts"), and informs sense making in complex situations. Recognition of Fleck's work grew, particularly when Thomas Kuhn acknowledged his debt to Fleck in his analysis of scientific "paradigms." Kuhn's seminal *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* combines an appreciation of the social embeddedness of interpretative schemata with the *Gestalt* psychology to make it understandable how, even when people look at the same object, they might see different things. This provides a way to relate individual cognition to social ordering devices (in his case "paradigms") that explains widely distributed patterns in conceiving realities (Kuhn 1970/1962).

The range of concepts that have been coined to understand this process of ordering is broad and includes "appreciative systems" (Vickers 1965), "cognitive maps" (Axelrod 1984), "heresthetics" (Riker 1986), and "frames" (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Snow and Benford 1992; Schön and Rein 1994). Recent work has investigated the role of "policy narratives," "storylines," or "discourses" in public policy practice (Litfin 1994; Roe 1994; Hajer 1995; Yanow 1996). Rather than spelling out each conceptual approach, we illuminate some key characteristics of this scholarship and where these approaches differ and overlap.

4. THREE CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES

For all the differences, the scholarship on these concepts shares a few important characteristics: ordering is related to cognitive commitments; all approaches include an account of how judgement takes place; ordering is seen as involving elements of exchange and coalition building; ordering is tied to action, and the concepts are supposed to help explain dominance, stability, and (limited) policy learning. Accounts of this process overlap in puzzling ways and the supposed variation among these approaches can seem, at times, more like wordplay. We believe, however, that there are important differences among the ordering devices that scholars employ to describe policy practice. We try and make these differences understandable by comparing the approaches in terms of their ontological and epistemological assumptions.

First, we position them on a continuum between an individualist ontology in which ordering is understood in terms of *individual* capacities (e.g. ordering in terms of individual "beliefs") and a *relational* pole that describes ordering in terms of the patterns of social interaction that characterize a particular situation (e.g. some work on frames and some scholarship on discourse). Second, we examine how proponents of different approaches generate and deliver knowledge about the world of public policy. What rules do they, explicitly or implicitly, follow when they try to make sense of the way in which policy makers deal with a complex and ambivalent world? Here we distinguish two empirical orientations: the first directed at creating generalizable knowledge by abstracting from contexts and a second focused on identifying detailed dynamics in policy practice.

5. BELIEFS

A prominent example of policy analysis that draws on the concept of belief is the "advocacy coalition framework" (ACF) developed by Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993). Advocacy coalitions consist of "actors from a variety of... institutions at all levels of government who share a set of basic beliefs ... and who seek to manipulate the rules, budgets, and personnel of governmental institutions in order to achieve these goals over time" (1993, 5). The coalition members who come together around the focal point of shared core beliefs coordinate their actions to a "non-trivial degree" (1993, 25).

The ACF approach has inspired and informed a substantial body of policy analysis. Yet precisely how the individual and the interpersonal interrelate and how shifts in belief occur remains opaque. A key feature of the ACF belief system approach is the effort to build a social explanation of policy from an ontology of individuals with

clearly defined and stable value preferences that inform their actions and provide a stable basis for association. The pursuit of core values through individual and collective action (via coalitions) produces the distinctive ordering in a policy field and lends stability to a domain. Yet the research focus on strategic behaviour and cognitive learning does not suggest a way of understanding how policy makers deal with ambiguities and how ambiguity might relate to policy change and learning.

Epistemologically, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith see the ACF as tuned to a Humean search for general laws. They (1993, 231) formulate nine hypotheses designed to test the robustness of the advocacy coalition framework in explaining policy learning and policy change and search for a causal theory, with clearly distinguishable forces of change, that is testable/falsifiable, fertile, and parsimonious (1993, 231). At the same time ACF proponents also speak a dialect of constructivism: they seek to analyse how problems get defined, emphasize the role of perceptions, and underline the inevitable influence of the conceptual lens on analysis (e.g. in the preface to the 1993 book). Yet the individualist ontology, search for general laws, and reliance on hypothesis testing clash with the interpretative elements of the advocacy coalition framework.

6. FRAMES

Over the last fifteen years the frame concept has built a remarkable career as an ordering device in public policy scholarship. This is more due to its usefulness in explaining practice patterns that resist other forms of analysis than to its internal consistency or its verifiability. Most frame analysis draws on the work of ethnomethodologists like Garfinkel and Goffman, but seeks to scale this approach up to deal with social and collective behaviour. All frame analysis takes, *to varying degrees*, language, or more specifically language use as the organizing framework for understanding society.

The popularity of frames is rooted in their intuitive appeal. The concept captures something about the dynamics of policy making that makes sense to practitioners and to those who analyse policy practice. In a similar manner, framing has been employed in economics and psychology (Kahneman and Tversky 2000) and social movement research (Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Snow and Benford 1992). Frame analysis highlights the communicative character of ordering devices that connects particular utterances (a speech, a policy text) to individual consciousness and social action (Entman 1993, 51).

What a frame is, is harder to say. Like the play of action they help to explain, frames are recognized, in part, by the way they resist specification. A frame is an account of ordering that makes sense in the domain of policy and that describes the

move from diffuse worries to actionable beliefs. In this way frames navigate the relationship between the "*struggle to attain a state of belief*" and the persistent "*irritation of doubt*" (Peirce 1992). Frames mediate this relationship by parsing the "field of experience" in a distinctive way, linking "facts derived from experience," observations, and accepted sources with values and other commitments in a way that guides action. Framing is the process of drawing these relationships and the frame is the internally coherent constellation of facts, values, and action implications.

Schön and Rein (1996) root their account of this process in the way "frame" is used in everyday speech and are tolerant of the play this leaves in the concept. They describe four ways of looking at frames that they treat as "mutually compatible images rather than competing conceptions" (1996, 88). A frame can be understood as "an underlying structure which is sufficiently strong and stable to support an edifice." Thus a house has a frame even if it is not visible from the outside. The idea of structure implies "a degree of regularity, and hence, a lack of adaptability to events as they unfold over time" (1996, 88). A frame can also be seen as a boundary, in the way a picture frame fixes our attention and tells us what to disregard. This boundary helps us freeze the continuous stream of events and demarcate what is inside, and deserving of our attention, from what is outside (1996, 89). Their third image portrays a frame as "a schemata of interpretation that enables individuals" to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and their world at large "rendering events meaningful and thereby guiding action" (1996, 89). Finally, harkening back to their original formulation, they describe frames as a particular kind of "normative-prescriptive" story that that provides a sense of what the problem is and what should be done about it. These "generic story lines" are important because they "give coherence to the analysis of issues in a policy domain" (1996, 89). In strict terms, a frame is the form of ordering that makes these four views compatible. As a group, they present a picture of framing as an essential act for making sense of a policy field, in which part of making sense is deciding how to act. They also express two representative tensions that distinguish framing as an account of this process. Frames are neither entirely intentional nor tacit and frames conceal as they reveal, in part by the way commitments insulate themselves from reflection.

Snow and Benford define a frame in more or less compatible terms as "an interpretive schemata that signifies and condenses the 'world out there' by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment" (Snow and Benford 1992, 137). Their account extends the play between intention and tacit action that is part of the concept of frame. Frames enable actors to "articulate and align" (ibid.) events and occurrences and order those in a meaningful fashion. Here there is no distance between belief and frame. Yet, actors also retain sufficient leverage over frames (and the distance this implies) to play an active and intentional role in shaping the process. "[W]hat gives a collective action frame its novelty is not so much its innovative ideational elements as the manner in which *activists articulate or tie*

them together" (1992, 138; emphasis added). Frames are powerful when they are empirically credible, consistent with experience, and ideationally central (1992, 140).

In these accounts, frames are recognized and active in the relationship among facts, values, and action. The relative strength and stability of the constellations drawn is what helps explain stability and change in a policy domain. In social movement research (see also Poletta, this volume) frame analysts distinguish their approach as an alternative to "resource mobilisation" and "political opportunity structures." They suggest that "non structural" factors account for both the particular arousal of groups and their ability to act collectively. They treat meanings as "social productions," analyse actors as being engaged in "meaning-work," and push to open the process of signification in order to explain action (Snow and Benford 1992). They conceptualize this "signifying work" as *framing* and allocate a central role to frames as the ordering device. This take on frames really is about "framing" as a deliberate act (undertaken by "signifying agents") aimed to make others follow particular patterns of signification (cf. also Steinberg 1998, 845). The balance gives priority to the framing as an intentional, even strategic activity and posits a certain distance between belief and frame.

The effort to describe framing in terms of actors' efforts to name and frame in an ongoing struggle between dominant frames and challengers also draws on this strategic orientation (Gamson and Modigliani 1989). This take emphasizes the importance of institutional sponsors and their strategic employment of frames in the struggle for dominance. It deepens the account of dominance, however, and in the process blurs the line between strategic and interpretative action. This move ties framing back to its roots by emphasizing the problematic character of ordering. The concern with dominance is rooted in an appreciation of the strong and persistent influence of the "irritation of doubt" and of the character of belief as "of the nature of habit" that, together, leave the "fixation of belief" open to "tenacity" and "authority" and make dominance both common and pernicious (Peirce 1992). It explains deference to authority and the willingness to turn aside conflicting evidence and sustain belief: better to accept the dominant framing than to open up a settled question to doubt. As Peirce (1992) put it:

Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief; while the latter is a calm and satisfactory state which we do not wish to avoid, or to change to a belief in anything else. On the contrary, we cling tenaciously, not merely to believing, but to believing just what we do believe. (Available at: www.peirce.org/writings/p107.html)

Gamson and others emphasize that these tendencies contribute to the occurrence and stability of dominant frames. The tendencies are exacerbated because framing takes place in a strategic field of action in which the "fixation of belief" is aligned with the distribution of influence and resources. This shapes a distinctive role for the analyst as an agent in this struggle whose critical perspective is needed to open

up dominant frames by challenging their appropriation of interpretation that presents a particular way of linking facts, values, and actions as natural or self-evident.

Schön and Rein's analysis of intractable controversies turned away from this strategic orientation to explore another facet of the play of belief and doubt. It also draws attention to the tenacity characteristic of belief and to the claim that there is no "view from nowhere." Frames are not "out there;" they *are* the sense we make by identifying some features as "symptomatic," relegating others to the background, and "bind[ing] together the salient features...into a pattern that is coherent and graspable" (Rein and Schön 1977, 239). To change, or even reflect on a frame then is to work against habit and further marginalize the already provisional stability beliefs provide. An intractable controversy is one in which frames conflict and in which the conflict further insulates the frames from reflection. Thus we are drawn again to the character of a frame as a way of fixing the play between belief and doubt and to the problematic charter of this process that limits our ability to reflect in action.

These broadly compatible accounts of framing embed a methodological pluralism. Snow and Benford's methods are closer to Sabatier than to Rein and Schön. They formulate highly abstract "propositions" to test relationships between (master) frames and cycles of protest. They treat frames as expressed by individuals, but also rooted in and sustained by social interaction. The confirmation that comes with sharing stabilizes and supports them. Testing can be understood as a distinctive form of sharing. Rein and Schön are not concerned with validating their analysis through hypothesis testing. For them frames are part of an *epistemology of practice* that takes the case as its unit of analysis and is redeemed by its usefulness in explaining reasoning in cases, the commitment to act in complex policy fields, and features like intractable controversy.

The internal unity of fact, value, and action distinguishes framing as an approach to ordering and ties it clearly and closely to ambivalence understood as the play between belief and doubt. This still finesses the question of *why* people deem something empirically credible, etc. and why *frames* are the way to grasp this process. The historical concern with dominance and intractability highlight the dynamic quality of the process by tying these forms of stability to persistent sources of concern (tenacity, authority) with the process of fixing belief itself. Reflection and reframing constitute distinct responses to these tendencies by engaging actors' "limited but not negligible" capacity for reflexivity in the former case and inventiveness in response to the natural instability of beliefs in the latter. It is worth noting that framing has been adopted readily and some of the most interesting expressions as policy analysis have come in practice fields like organizational learning (Argyris 1999) and mediation (Forester 1999). The effort to scale up ethnomethodology remains incomplete and frames' tolerance of methodological pluralism is another distinctive quality of the approach.

7. NARRATIVE AND DISCOURSE

In 1964 Clifford Geertz wrote that we had "no notion of how metaphor, analogy, irony, ambiguity, pun, paradox, hyperbole, rhythm, and all the other elements of what we lamely call 'style' operate in relation to how people order their personal preferences and become public or collective forces" (Geertz 1964). In the footsteps of Edelman (1964, 1988) a pack of scholars has picked up the challenge to understand the role of linguisitic and non-linguistic symbols in politics, discourse, and narrative in politics and policy (White 1992; Fischer and Forester 1993).

An important stream in the scholarship on policy and narrative has applied the insights of literary theory and sociolinguistics to the understanding of the dynamics of policy making (Kaplan 1986; Throgmorton 1993). Emery Roe, one of its protagonists, highlights the role of narratives in policy making and demonstrates how narrative analysis can help find ways out of complex policy controversies (Roe 1994). He distinguishes *stories* that "underwrite and stabilize the assumptions for policy-making in situations that persists with many unknowns, a high degree of interdependence, and little, if any, agreement" (Roe 1994, 34); *non-stories*, which are interventions that critique particular stories but do not have the full narrative structure of a beginning, middle, and end; and *meta-narratives*, which are constellation of stories and non-stories that together represent the policy debate. Such distinctions help illuminate what others have called the "discursive space" of controversies: seeing what gets discussed and what is disputed, and which elements go unnoticed.

Narrative analysts have shown that storytelling is a principle way of ordering, of constructing shared meaning and organizational realities (Boyce 1995). Stories can create a collective centering that informs policy actors' choices about what to do and, by providing a "plot" can help define operational solutions. Interestingly, much of this scholarship has taken place in the organizational studies literature (Czarniawska 1997). Here Gabriel (2000) employs the concept of "story-work," pointing out that while people's initial accounts of "facts-as-experience" include ambiguity, this changes over time as people try to discover the underlying meaning of events and negotiate a shared way of understanding. Analytically, narrative functions as the ordering device, suggesting that the telling of stories and the interactive development of plots is the way in which ambiguity is handled in organizational settings. People use "causal stories" (Stone 1989) to order complex realities.

In terms of the ontological premises, this take on policy work emphasizes how stories emerge in an interaction, thus operating with a relational ontology. Individual actors may strategically (seek to) insert a particular story, but whether this will organize a policy domain depends on how others respond to it, twist it, take it up. Narratives are like a ball that bounces backwards and forwards and constantly adapts to new challenges that are raised. Interestingly, narrative scholarship has amended the advocacy coalition framework discussed above. In an empirical study of the

highly sensitive debate on tax competition in the EU, Claudio Radaelli combines insights from narrative analysis with the advocacy coalition framework and shows that, contrary to the assumptions of the ACF, it is precisely seemingly superficial policy narratives that have the capacity to change "deep core beliefs" (Radaelli 1999). In a special issue following this initial finding, he and Vivian Schmidt found that in complex policy situations where people have to learn across belief systems, it is discursive "variables" that help explain how preferences change (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004). This confirmed a finding of Hajer who, in a study of environmental discourses in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, suggested that the complex policy domains were structured by "storylines" that actors from a widely differing background could relate to without necessarily understanding each other exactly (Hajer 1995). More generally, empirical research points out that narrative and discourse fulfill an essential role in structuring relations, in determining whether groups turn into opponents rather than collaborators, whether a confrontation leads to joint governance or to conflict (Healey and Hillier 1996).

Although the demarcation between narrative analysis and discourse analysis is not always clear-cut, the latter often takes a broader perspective suggesting ordering works through linguistic systems, through "vocabularies" or "repertoires" that shape the way in which people perceive and judge concrete situations (Potter and Wetherell 1987). These linguistic regularities even provide stability and organizational orientation as actors collaborate in "interpretative communities" that share a particular way of talking about policy situations or help understanding the social exclusion that is inherent in particular policy categories or vocabularies (Yanow 2003). Where discourse analysis draws on French post-structuralist theory, of which Foucault is the most prominent example, scholarship suggests that language allows us to look at a much more ingrained, well-embedded system of ordering. Here discourse is no longer synonymous with "discussion," but refers to something the analyst infers from a situation. Discourses are then seen as patterns in social life, which not only guide discussions, but are institutionalized in particular practices (Burchell et al. 1991). The idea of a strategic acting subject is corrected by the recognition that discourses come with "subject-positions" that guide actors in their perceptions. Because discourses are embedded in institutional practices, they cannot simply be manipulated. The recent work on discourse analysis combines enduring, even "unthought" or "epistemic," categorizations with the more dynamic narrative and metaphorical dimensions of language use (Hajer 2003; Howarth and Torfing 2004).

To the extent a policy analyst can adopt a reflexive position *outside* the cognitive domain of the policy makers, he or she can get analytic leverage on how a particular discourse (defined as an ensemble of concepts and categorizations through which meaning is given to phenomena) orders the way in which policy actors perceive reality, define problems, and choose to pursue solutions in a particular direction. By analyzing documents, sitting in on or video taping policy interactions, or by means of open-ended or focused interviews, the analyst aims to gain insights into the patterning and to relate these patterns back to the practices in which actors operate when doing their policy work. Elaborating Foucault's lectures on governmentality,

the discourse analytical methods have been employed to expose a particular power regime in policy domains (Rose and Miller 1992; Dean 1999). This work on "governmentality" fundamentally connects the way in which actors speak to the practices in which they function and the "mentality" that this work represents.

The discourse-analytical tradition addresses ambiguities head on. Pease Chock on immigration discourses is a case in point (1995), Radaelli (1999) explicitly addresses the issue of ambiguity, and Roe (1994) launches his narrative policy analysis in the context of controversies where actors really do not know where to go. In such situations storytelling becomes the central vehicle of consensus building and policy making (Kaplan 1986; Yanow 1996).

As with the work employing belief and frames, one has to look to how the analytical vocabularies of narrative and discourse are applied to understand how the policy analysis is conducted. Work in which discourses are seen as constraining, and are called upon to explain failure to influence the course of affairs, is markedly different in its analytical orientation from studies that try to illuminate how the very meaning of particular terms and categories is constantly contested and in need of social reproduction, and would even go so far as to illuminate how misunderstandings and ambiguity can facilitate diplomatic success (Radaelli and Schmidt 2004) or explain cross-disciplinary learning (cf. the notion of "communicative miracle" in Hajer 1995). The insistence on the social relationality of power and meanings is typical for the analysis of narrative and discourse. Discourse analysis is most consistently positioned at the relational pole of the analytic continuum. Its epistemology is heavily focused on illuminating mechanisms in policy practice, rather than on trying to generate general laws.

8. How Do Policy Makers Know What to Do?

In this chapter we thematized ambivalence in policy-making settings. We argued for a reappreciation of the character and role of ambivalence that treats the relationship with ambiguity as a significant feature of policy work. We examined how the public policy scholarship handles ambivalence by looking at scholarship on interpretative schemata. We distinguished and compared three "ordering devices" that analysts employ to make sense of what guides policy makers in their actions.

The empirical case studies in this literature highlight features whose salience is often less distinct in the dialects of analytic regimes we have discussed. In these cases, beliefs are not stable, discourses are not set in stone, and frames are perhaps best seen as constantly being renegotiated. In case studies that follow policy makers closely in their "work," stability is outside any single actor's reach (Healey 1992; Schön and Rein

1994). Actors are actively "naming" and "framing," but this is only part of what needs to be taken into account. All three approaches we looked into, for example, try to bridge actors and institutional structures to help us understand how ordering takes place in concrete policy contexts.

Epistemological principles and methodological rules should help clarify this process. Yet the work we reviewed seems to force a choice. We can either make sense of the activity of policy makers by spelling out general conditions and defining lawlike regularities, or we can undertake the case study work at a detailed level to show how actors deal with ambiguity *in situ* without worrying about how these findings can be generalized. This poses a nasty dilemma. It seems as if the type of question we raised leaves generalized statements open to critique on the grounds that they do not appreciate the particulars of the situation, but does not describe how case research that is detailed enough to grasp the particular can "scale up." Actually, the situation is more complex.

Policy analysts must also be ready to deal with the problem Steinberg raised in his critique of scholarship on frames that, in its strategic emphasis, treated values, beliefs, or belief systems as exogenous to interaction. This gives little attention to the social production of frames. Steinberg suggest that even ideology can be treated as an endogenous characteristic—"it is possible that ideology is an emergent and interactional product of framing and is essentially produced in framing" (1998, 847)—thereby avoiding the "reification" inherent in representing "a frame as a discrete text" distinct from "disparate and discontinuous discourse processes" (1998, 848). This led Steinberg to focus on the discursive production of frames and values, a move that resonates with work in the advocacy coalition framework that describes how policy "narratives" seem to guide actors towards compatible positions. These approaches echo the effort to understand how social actors deal with ambivalent situations triggered by Goffman's organizing question, "What is it that is going on here?" If the problem that policy makers have to face is, how do we "arrive at reasonable, acceptable and feasible judgement under conditions of high uncertainty" (Wagenaar 2004), then it makes sense to treat the seemingly effortless activity of policy makers as a struggle, as work (ibid.). The central questions become how to understand interaction in context, and how to trace the dynamics that occur in the effort to "fix belief," allocate meaning, and stabilize the situation enough to be able to act.

Such epistemological commitments have important consequences for the methodology of policy analysis. They call for a very precise, almost ethnographic approach. If beliefs-frames-discourses cannot be assumed to be stable, but are always incomplete and constantly shifting, then we need to be able to expose this process of "refracturing." Analytical work can illuminate the *mechanisms* that are used to manage ambivalence, help us see what makes certain frames appear "natural" at a particular moment in time, and make sense of what stabilizes them in a stream of experience that always includes conflicting facts and commitments and produces patterns like dominance and intractability. One might be able to start to understand how stable beliefs, frames, narratives, or discourses can become responsive and resilient in the in face of turbulent social events. Concepts like Law and Latour's

use of translation can help, as they start from an assumption of variability and precisely target understanding how knowledge and commitments are constantly renegotiated as they are passed on in time.

This step to treat policy practice as the site at which interpretative schemata are produced and reproduced is a significant one. It builds on the linguistic account of policy making that employs narratives—stories, metaphors, myths—to create an image of the world that is acted upon and that constitutes that world at the same time. If we accept that language interferes, that it is more than a medium of something "outside" it (Fischer and Forester 1993), then analysis of policy work as the way in which practitioners make sense of a world that, as such, entails a kaleidoscope of possible meanings, acquires a concrete focus on the *interaction* among actors and on the way in which they interactively frame a situation.

This does not require a turn away from treating actors as strategic operators, nor is it necessarily a denial of the usefulness of traditional research products, like surveys. It is, however, a claim that to understand how policy makers make sense of a complex world and design actions, we need to look more carefully at concrete interaction. Lester and Piore (2004) suggest what the general outlines of such a take might look like when they compare the competence they observed in engineers and other practitioners involved in technical innovation to language development. They draw on sociolinguistic research and argue that "language evolves from clarity to ambiguity—in precisely the opposite direction of evolution that one finds in analytical problem solving. Language development evolves, in other words, toward the creation of interpretative space" (Lester and Piore 2004, 70–1).

Language provides a model to understand competence in which a central feature of practice, and of the intelligence of action, is precisely the way in which these interpretative spaces are opened, sustained, and how the actors who participate engage ambiguity. As Kenneth Burke put it (in his case in the context of an effort to construct a "grammar of motives"): "what we want is *not terms that avoid ambiguity*, but *terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise*" (Burke 1969). Or, to tailor it more directly to our purposes, what we want are terms that reveal the particular ways in which coping with and finding the creative potential in these ambiguities is constitutive of good policy practice.

If policy work these days often takes place in settings in which people do not share a past and cannot draw on a shared vocabulary of experience, where they can assume misunderstanding as diverse participants draw on different interpretative schemata in the situation, then the need to understand and contribute to the ability to disentangle the complexities of these exchanges is all the more vital. What is more, analysis becomes part of an effort to provide the sort of interpretative spaces that Lester and Piore describe.

This does not imply, however, a policy science that is nothing more than an accumulation of case studies. It is an approach that generates knowledge on the mechanisms involved, precisely the basis on which many contributions to understanding of the sociopolitical dynamics of public policy have been made (Schön and Rein 1994; Argyris 1999; Yanow 2003). But one of the challenges for the time to come

is to show to a much broader community how this tradition can yield practical insights into key policy dilemmas and produce meaningful knowledge that can help us understand controversy, resolve conflicts, and innovate. Such an approach holds particular promise for understanding fields like the transnationalization of society that trigger interplay with established political institutions and for husbanding the development of new practices that respond to contemporary public policy challenges. It is in such a context that the relationship between highly decontextualized propositional knowledge (featured here in the work of Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, and Snow and Benford) and contributions of work in the practice tradition can begin to be explored. This is also the context in which we might begin a search for regularities modelled on the way one searches for regularities in language use, as a grammar of practice.

This brings us to the policy analyst. Rein and Schön have argued that the prevailing traditions in policy analysis fail to take seriously the way in which cultural variables often hinder the resolution of policy controversies. To mainstream traditions that conceive of cultural values as constant and static, cross-cultural controversies appear intractable. Rein and Schön's interpretative approach illuminated how problems, problem holders, and analysts mutually construct one another. Much like the way symbolical interactionism revolutionized thinking about the relationship between the power of the individual and social institutions in sociological theory, Rein and Schön suggest policy makers' competence can be enhanced through procedural innovations.

This perspective still holds. The very epistemological approach that is assumed in the "policy analysis of practice" we investigated here already calls for direct and often extended engagement with policy makers in their actual work. Being aware of the role of ordering, employing the analytical tools we have discussed, allows for a policy analysis that can provide insights into mechanisms operating in contemporary policy making and also facilitate concrete problem solving. Based on that knowledge new, well-researched books in the Lasswellian tradition of policy sciences (Lasswell 1951) can be written that help us understand *and* respond to the controversies of our time.

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