Public Policy Studies: Academic Roots and Practical Significance[1]

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The study focuses on public policy studies as an essential pillar of public policy education in academic universities on the one hand, and as an important player in determining the role of the state and government in the field of policymaking on the other. It suggests eight commonalities in the study of public policies, arguing that although public policy making has been influenced by the cultural and social features of the political system, these participants can be presented as a new theoretical contribution to public policy education. It recommends that focus should be on preparing public policy analysis models based on an analysis of the regional context and an understanding of the diversity and impacts of different theoretical contributions in the areas of policy analysis and policy studies.

Public Policy   Policy Analysis   Comparative Policy Studies   Public-private partnerships

Public policy studies exist in many different forms. Most visibly, it is an academic pursuit, with departments and schools of public policy in many universities around the world. Public policy also has an important role in the world of practice, with governments needing to understand the policies they are implementing and to design new and, one hopes, better policies. Finally, although less obviously perhaps, policy studies also exist at the level of the citizen who is the consumer of those policies. But citizens need to be more than passive consumers of policy and should have the capacity to assess the goods and services being produced by governments and advocate for improvements.[3]

If we accept the importance of public policy and policy studies then the next question to be asked is what exactly do we mean by the term "public policy"? There is a widely diffused common-sense understanding of the term, but is there a more precise definition? One standard definition of public policy is "...the sum of government activities, whether pursued directly or by agents, as they affect the lives of citizens". This definition privileges the role of the State in policy and governance more than some scholars might like, but does note that agents are involved, and frequently involved, in service delivery. The most fundamental point, however, is that what really matters is what happens to citizens as a result of the interventions of the public sector (and its agents) into the economy and society.

The development of several lines of inquiry into public policy – policy studies, policy sciences, policy analysis – has contributed to a rich array of studies in a group of related domains surrounding policy. Some, such as policy analysis, focus on the dynamics of the individual policy and attempts to enable the policy maker to make the best choices among a set of available alternative policies. Some such as policy studies are concerned with the success and failure of policies, but also are interested in the reasons that certain policies are selected when governments and their allies are faced with a particular problem. The policy sciences tend to integrate the other two, but also focus on decision-making as choices are made

2   Maurice Falk Professor of Government, University of Pittsburgh.

3   The late Duncan MacRae argued that the ultimate purpose of policy education was to create more informed, more active citizens.

about which policies to implement.[4] The distinctions between these different strands of policy research are far from watertight, and may be contested by some scholars, but clearer distinctions between these various disciplines and sub-disciplines need to be made if good policy is to be made clear.

As a contribution to this special issue on public policy in the Arab countries, it is important also to argue that policy studies is at once universal and culture-bound. Many of the models of policy, whether about the assessment of policy or the process by which policies are made are universal: The actors involved may differ, but the underlying dimensions of analysis are the same. On the other hand, however, the way in which policies are assessed, and the interpretations that may be applied to the policies and their outcomes, tend to be embedded in the society and culture. Thus, the policy analyst needs to be very careful when s/he attempts to offer advice about what is a "good" policy or attempts to understand why particular policy choices have been made. Without an understanding of the society, it is very easy to make the wrong decisions, even with policies that appear reasonable in other settings.[5]

The remainder of this essay will develop eight points about the study of public policy. I will be using the term "policy studies" throughout, but all of the strands of thinking about policy mentioned previously will be considered. I will be discussing these eight propositions independently, but it will rapidly become apparent that they are intertwined. Attempting to disentangle the relationships within policy studies, or within any area of inquiry for that matter, is useful for purposes of exposition, but may also attempt to tear apart a complex whole too readily.

These eight propositions about the study of public policy are applicable in almost any setting, although they may be influenced by culture and the social and political characteristics of the political system that is making and implementing the policy. Some aspects of policy are culturally embedded, while other aspects of policy may be more or less universal. The question for the analyst is which aspects are which? The focus of this special issue on public policies in the Arab countries may provide an opportunity to consider to what extent history, culture, social variables and politics influence policy choices and policy success. And the impacts of those social and cultural variables may be even on the way in which policy is conceptualized.

Policy Studies is Academic and it is Practical

The first point about policy studies is that its status as an academic enterprise does not diminish its important practical implications. Indeed, good academic work in public policy will usually have implications for the real work of government. Thus, public policy studies can be conceptualized as a discipline like architecture or engineering, with a strong academic foundation but also with a substantial potential to contribute to solving practical problems. It must be seen as being at once intellectually demanding and substantively useful.

One of the tasks for schools of public policy is training the analysts who will do the policy analysis within government and within think tanks. That training is in academic and theoretical approaches to policy, along with methods that can be used to supply policy analysis to policymakers working in the "real world".

The good student emerging from an education in public policy will know the relevant theory, but will also know when to abandon theoretical speculation and begin to apply the knowledge. This may be true even for students who choose academic careers in public policy who must have one foot, or at least a few toes, in practical policy analysis.

Although both purely academic and more applied studies of policy have an essential place in public policy studies, there is more than a little tension between them. The academic version of policy studies is interested in explanation, and often is retrospective. At least when practiced by political scientists and by public administration scholars, academic research is less interested in the details of costs and benefits in economic terms and more interested in the political and social costs and benefits. In other words, these

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4   This to some extent reflects the role of Harold Lasswell and his advocacy of the policy sciences.

5   See the discussion below on policy transfer and "evidence-based policy".

disciplines (see below) want to know how politics and society shape policy and its implementation.

Usually described as policy analysis, the more applied version of policy studies may be somewhat less interested in the correlates of choice than it is with the correlates of success. The policy analyst is less interested in why a policy was selected than if it will work once it is selected. Thus, this strand of policy studies is inherently prospective, and must have strong theories about the ways in which policies (and the societies and economies within which they are implemented) function to be able to make their analyses and make their predictions.

Policy Studies Involves Insights from Other Disciplines

Leaving aside the question of whether policy studies itself constitutes an academic discipline, public policy has a number of dimensions, and consequently, policy studies is informed by a variety of different academic disciplines and approaches. The effective student of policy studies will therefore have to have some acquaintance with a range of academic approaches. He or she may be, and indeed should be, strongly grounded in one discipline but need to be able to integrate findings from others into their research on policy.

My own discipline, political science, has a great deal to say about public policy. That is perhaps natural since political science explores how the public sector functions, and the processes through which legislation is adopted.[6] As well as examining the processes by which policies are made, political science also attempts to explain the choices that governments make, using a variety of political and social variables. And a burgeoning body of literature examines how the agendas of government are determined, and which issues are addressed and which are not.[7]

Economics constitutes a second foundation for policy studies. Many of the techniques central to policy analysis, e.g. cost-benefit analysis, are based on the utilitarian logic of economics. These methods that utilize a common measuring rod for public program based on money enable the policy analyst to compare policies and help decide which will be of greatest benefit for society. While some argue that the monetization of the outcomes of public programs is misguided and ignores many important features of public action, economic analysis of policies remains central to studying public policy. Economics has also supplied analytic perspectives such as principal-agent models and transaction cost analysis that can aid in the design of public programs.

Mathematics and statistics have also contributed to the study of public policy. The contribution of these disciplines is both in providing means of measurement and analysis and in supplying ideas about the design of programs. The first set of contributions may be rather obvious, involving the use of statistical analysis in particular, to analyze the possible causes of desired outcomes of policy interventions and to evaluate the success of programs. The second sort of contribution involves approaches such as game theory that enable modeling of decision contexts that may enhance the capacity to design programs.[8]

Economics, along with mathematics and statistics, are perhaps especially important in public policy studies because they permit the modeling of the future impact of policy interventions. Economics provides a strong theoretical base for such models, and its assumptions about the behavior of individuals in society when faced with certain incentives and disincentives permit more prospective analysis than might be possible for other approaches. And obviously mathematics and statistics provide the techniques to develop and to evaluate those efforts at modeling future impacts of policy choices.

Public management and public administration are also important for public policy. Any policy that is formulated and adopted will have to be implemented, and if the designers of programs do not take into account sufficiently implementation questions their programs will be more prone to failure. Within many

6   Birkland, T. A. (2015) *An Introduction to the Policy Process*, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge).

Jones, C. O. (1984) *Introduction to the Study of Public Policy*, 3rd ed. (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole).

7   John, P. (2006) The Policy Agendas Project; A Review, *Journal of European Public Policy* 13, 975-86.

8   McCain, R. A. (2009) *Game Theory and Public Policy* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar).

academic institutions, policy administration and public policy are closely linked, but there are also approaches that denigrate the public administration and focus only on the more "scientific" economics and statistical issues rather than the more unruly issues of actually making a program work.

Students of public policy ought also to have some grounding in law. In all societies, public policies are generally written as law, so simply being able to convert policy ideas to viable legal statements is important. And understanding law will also help understand the administrative process, perhaps especially the process of writing secondary legislation necessary for implementation.

Policy scholars, and perhaps especially policy practitioners need to have a grounding in philosophy, and particularly ethics. What is a good policy? Is it more than just one that creates the greatest economic benefits for society, regardless of the distribution? Questions such as these illustrate how and why analysts need to be prepared to bring a set of principles to bear

when thinking through policies. Some classic studies of policy issues, e.g. Calabrese and Bobbitt have built on ethical challenges facing decision-makers in the public sector, and the ethical challenges for policy will only become more pressing as continued austerity, demographic changes and technology require thoughtful decisions about complex issues.[9]

Finally, it is imperative that policy studies are informed by the academic disciplines that are concerned with policy problems–policy analysis requires substantive policy knowledge. Policy analysts involved in health policy, for example, would be well served by an understanding of public health issues and the structure of the medical industry. Without this substantive knowledge, they can make some very fundamental mistakes when designing programs. Some aspects of policy analysis are fungible across policy fields, but many are not, so the task of the analyst is to bring policy analytic expertise to bear in a field that is already crowded with experts.

Policy Studies Is an Approach of its Own

Although policy studies has borrowed a great deal from other academic disciplines, it also has a distinctive set of questions and approaches of its own. These go beyond the rather obvious focus on policy and the emphasis on decision-making about policy to include specific bodies of research that are in some ways the core of policy studies. Other disciplines will have something to say about these research questions, but the bulk of the discussion has been among policy scholars themselves.

One of the most distinctive elements in policy studies is the study of policy instruments.[10] Although this focus of policy research has some roots in economics and in political science, it has developed more autonomously within policy studies.[11] Like so many other aspects of policy studies, there are different

perspectives on instruments. For example, some approaches have focused on catalogs of instruments and attempts to detail the choices available for policymakers. Others have examined the way in which those decisions on instrument choices are made.[12] Still other components of the instruments literature attempt to link instruments with political and social forces operating within the policy process.

A second distinctive element of policy studies has been the emphasis on policy problems. To attempt to improve the economy and society, governments and their allies must solve problems, but to do that they must understand the nature of the problems. While there may be "solve leverage" gained by using common sense functional names for policy problems–health, infrastructure, etc.–more leverage

9   Calabrese, G. And P. Bobbitt (1978) *Tragic Choices* (New York: W. W. Norton).

10   Hood, C. (1984) *The Tools of Government (*Chatham, NJ: Chatham House).
Salamon, L. M. (2002) *The Tools of Government: A Guide to the New Governance* (New York: Oxford University Press).
Lascoumes, P. And P. Le Gales (2007) Introduction: Understanding Public Policy Through its Instruments–From the Nature of Instruments to the Sociology of Public Policy Instrumentation, *Governance* 20, 1-21.

11   Kirschen, E. S. (1964) *Economic Policy in Our Time* (Amsterdam: North Holland).

12   Linder,S. H. And B. G. Peters (1984) From Social Theory to Policy Design, *Journal of Public Policy* 4, 237-59.

can be gained by thinking about the problems in a more analytic manner.[13] For example, does the problem involve public goods or private goods? How complex is the problem? These analytical categories can be linked, at least to a limited degree, with the design of interventions by government.[14]

"Wicked" problems are an important subset of the problems faced by the public sector in a number of countries and may require more detailed attention. Although there are a number of characteristics that describe wicked problems in full, the fundamental notion is that it is difficult to identify causation, or even to define the problem in any definitive manner.[15] These problems are also linked with other problems and differentiating those issues can be difficult or impossible. To those difficulties for policymakers scholars have added the problem of time and the absence of governing institutions to create "super-wicked problems".[16]

The study of wicked problems is not important only because of the interesting name; the category of problems grouped as "wicked" represent the most difficult challenges for contemporary governments and includes issues such as climate change, poverty, and obesity.[17] In addition, these problems lead the policy researcher on to thinking about problems of complexity in policy problems, and the policymaking process.[18] Most of our thinking about public policy is linear, while the world is often extremely non-linear: in other words, small changes in one variable may produce large and unruly changes in other variables. Consequently, many of the most important problems facing governments entail a fundamental rethinking of our conceptions of policy and policy analysis.

Evaluation research is a third distinctive element of social science research within policy research.[19] Although evaluation research has roots in academic disciplines such as public administration and sociology it has developed and flourished within policy studies.[20] As the name implies evaluation research is dedicated to assessing the impacts of public policies and using that information to improve policies. Although many of the research techniques used in evaluation research are similar or identical to those used in other social sciences, the questions being asked may not be. For example, for a good evaluation researcher it may not be sufficient to know if a particular intervention was successful, he or she would want to understand the unintended consequences as well, and include them in the analysis.[21]

Public Policy is a Game many People Can Play

Up to this point, the discussion of public policy has been more centered on government than might be true of actually policymaking and implementation in the real world, or in much of the academic literature on public policy. Public policy commonly involves some relationship between State actors and the private sector, whether market or not-for-profit. It is, however, generally useful to begin with the formal policy activities of the State and then see what other actors are involved. After all, public policy depends on the authority of the State, regardless of what entity may actually be making and implementing the policy.

But even with a legitimate and effective State for making public policy, involving private sector

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13   Hoppe, R. (2010) *The Governance of Public Problems: Puzzling, Powering and Participation* (Bristol: Policy Press).

Peters, B. G. And J. A. Hoornbeek (2017) Understanding Policy Problems: A Refinement of Past Work, *Policy and Society, forthcoming*

14   Peters, B. G. (2018b) *Policy Problems and Policy Design* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar).

15   Rittel, H. W. J. and Webber, M. M. (1973) Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences* 4, 2, 155-169.

16   Levin, K., Cashore, B., Bernstein, S. and Auld, G. (2012) Overcoming the tragedy of super wicked problems: Constraining our future selves to ameliorate global climate change. *Policy Sciences* 45, 2, 123-152.

17   The concept of wicked problems has become extremely popular, and any number of problems that by no means meet the criteria for "wickedness". See Candel and Peters (2017).

18   Geyer, R. And S. Rihani (2010) *Complexity and Public Policy* (London: Routledge).

19   Vedung, E. (2007) Policy Evaluation, in B.G. Peters and J. Pierre (eds), *Handbook of Public Policy* (London: Sage)

20   Freeman H.E. and Rossi P.H., and Wright, S.R. 1980. *Evaluating Social Projects in Developing Countries*. Paris: OECD.

21   Sieber, S. D. (1980) *Fatal Remedies: Dilemmas of Social Intervention* (New York: Plenum).

actors in the policy process is still common and even necessary. Many of those organizations have substantial legitimacy of their own and can also provide public sector decision-makers with information that can improve the quality of policy. The State can also coopt private actors, making them in part responsible for the policy and minimizing future opposition. Finally, involving the private sector can reduce costs for the public sector and leverage private resources and expertise.

The means for involving the private sector in public policy are numerous, and in some instances rather complex. At the stage of policy formulation and design a number of advisory committees can structure the provided inputs from social actors, and think tanks often linked with political parties or interest groups also become involved. There may also be mechanisms for ordinary citizens to make comments on proposed legislation in open hearings and the like. The most powerful example of such mechanisms is clearly the referendum.[22] All of these mechanisms may help improve policy, and also improve the democratic nature of policymaking.

The role of the private sector in implementing policy can be even more important than that for policy formulation. Many public policies are contracted out to private sector actors, whether market or non-market. These services may range from protective services, e.g. private prisons to the full range of social services including health and education. Public-private partnerships may also be used to implement and perhaps to design, public policies. The modern State is much less a direct provider of public services than the designer and source of funds of those services,[23] and therefore to understand policy one must additionally understand the role of the private sector.

A number of Arab countries have achieved progress in establishing PPPs and improving the contribution of the private sector in providing public services, such as the United Arab Emirates. Private corporations play an increasing role in providing security services for public entitites and even in providing troops in military combat. Again, the UAE provides an interesting example. This reliance raised its own questions marks regarding public accountability and human rights.

The role of the private contractors, including international consultants, received its share of scrutiny in the countries that utilized this approach. One clear example has been the implementation of School Based Management (SBM) in Qatar – a project that was contracted to RAND Corporation. This project raised unfamiliar public opposition and open criticism of the government educational policies for reasons that range from capacity limitations that affected implementation, to fears of cultural invasion and diluting the Islamic and Arab character of the country. After 13 years between 2004 and 2016, Qatar's public school system reverted back to centralized control by the Ministry of Education.

Making and implementing public policy using the private sector assumes, of course, that there is a viable private sector, just as it assumes there is a viable State. Both assumptions may be incorrect. In many developing societies the civil society is weak and does not have the proliferation of not-for-profit organizations, other than perhaps religious organizations, that are so much involved in public policy in developed systems. And likewise the market may be weak and poorly organized, meaning that many means of delivering services such as contracting out will not be viable. And those deficiencies may be faced within the context of a weak state in which effective policymaking is already difficult.

Policy Studies Should be Comparative

Most policy studies are conducted within a single country and for a single policy question, or within a single policy domain. This narrow focus of policy

research may make a good deal of sense for more practical studies of public policy, attempting to provide the best answer for a policy question facing a

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22   Qvortrup, M. (2018) *Referendums Around the World (*London: Macmillan).

23   This corresponds to the advice coming from the New Public Management that government should "steer and not row". That is, governments are better at setting goals than they are in actually delivering the policies.

government. For the academic pursuit of public policy, however, such a narrow focus is much less desirable. The world constitutes a natural laboratory for public policies, and by comparing policy interventions made in different settings there is the opportunity to develop stronger theoretical understanding of how public policies perform.

Comparison should not be limited to comparison across political systems.[24] Comparisons across policy domains can also be useful for understanding what factors influence the success or failure of public programs. Gary Freeman has argued that the differences across policy areas are often more significant than the differences across political systems.[25] Take for example, a policy domain such as health that is dominated by skilled professionals and serves the entire population as compared to a domain such as social welfare that has less powerful service providers and serves only a relatively disempowered segment of society. The politics will certainly be different, as will the patterns of provision.

The use of comparative evidence from other political systems, and to some extent other policy domains, has become all the more important as "evidence based policymaking" has become a popular approach to designing public programs (Pawson, 2006).[26] While one would hope, and expect, that all policymaking is based on evidence, this phrase has come to signify greater attempts to use evidence coming from policy interventions made in other settings as guides for policymaking. This evidence not only can guide better policymaking but can be a means for policymakers to ensure that their own interventions appear validated by experiences elsewhere.

But comparative policy analysis is not easy, and successful evidence-based policy may be even more difficult. To do comparative policy analysis requires both a strong foundation in policy studies and also some understanding of comparative politics and/or comparative sociology. What factors in the political and social systems are likely to influence the adoption of certain types of policy, and their level of success once adopted? There are numerous examples of failures when attempting to copy policies and make them work in different settings, most based on faulty assumptions about the generality of incentives and motivations for individuals across cultures.[27]

This special issue is dedicated to public policy in the Arab countries, and as such may provide an important opportunity to think about learning and policy transfer. This opportunity is available both within the countries of the Arab region as well as between the Arab region as a whole and the remainder of the world. Examples of policy learning within the region are plentiful. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries share similar policy directions because of both policy transfer as well as regional competition. Economic liberalization and education decentralization are important examples that deserve further examination. Recently, Egypt has started its Government Excellence Award building on the experience of, and technical support from, the UAE.

Learning and engaging in reform experiments based on international practices are also widespread. The Arab Maghreb region is clearly influenced by Europe as well as other regions. Egypt's education reform strategy in 2017 builds on cooperation with international partners such as the UK and the World Bank, in addition to consultants and international corporations such as Pearson. Qatar's neoliberal education reform experience, which was originally designed by the RAND Corporation and ended up in 2016 with the return to the Ministry of Education (MOE) system, should draw attention to the importance of surveying and understanding the local context as a pretext for successful reform.

For the latter part of the exercise, developing some idea of what the essential elements of policy and policymaking are in Arab countries[28] and then attempting to see how they compare with what are the apparently dominant ideas about policy in other countries could be important for comparative analysis.

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24   Comparisons across subnational units within a single country can also be useful, especially in federal regimes where the states or provinces have a good deal of autonomy to make their own policy choices.

25   Freeman, G. P. (1985) National Styles and Policy Sectors: Explaining Structured Variation" *Journal of Public Policy*. 5, 467-496.

26   Cairney, P. (2016) *The Politics of Evidence Based Policy* (Berlin: Springer).

27   Batory, A, A. Cartwright and D. Stone (2017) *Trial and Error: Policy Experiments, Failures and Innovation in Central and Eastern Europe* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar).

28   For some idea of principles that may guide policy and administration in Arab countries see Samier (2017).

This might be done first for non-Arab, majority Muslim countries such as Indonesia and Pakistan before being expanded to include a broader cross-section of states. Again, this comparison could inform both academic theory and more practical policymaking.

In summary, although there are many challenges in learning effectively about policy across political systems, there are also many potential benefits from investing in learning from other policymaking systems. Rather than having to confront every new policy challenge with a tabula rasa the policymaker can learn from the experiences of others, provided he or she learns carefully. Meanwhile, the academic student of policy can also learn more about what patterns of causation, or at least of association, exist, and how our theories and analytic schemes can be improved through comparison.

Policy Studies Should be, at Least in Part, Prospective

As mentioned above, the policy analytic strand within policy studies is very much future-oriented. The work of the policy analyst is in large part to advise policy makers which policies would be most likely to solve the policy problem at hand. That does not involve looking into some crystal ball but rather the application of social science models and methods to predict the consequences of an intervention. This prediction of future consequences has obvious perils but is necessary if governments are to make informed decisions.

But even the more academic approaches to public policy have begun to think seriously about policies prospectively. I say "begun" but there has been some interest in policy design in this strand of policy research for some time.[29] The earlier design literature, and indeed much of the contemporary discussion of policy design, has focused on how best to link policy instruments with policy problems.[30] This literature has been somewhat technocratic, with an assumption – implicit or explicit even – that it may be possible to develop an algorithm that maps instruments into problems and provides the designer a clear and effective solution for the problem.

Some of the newer design literature in public policy has, however, moved away from the technocratic approach that uses engineering as an exemplar to think about policy design as analogous to the design of a product. The exemplar here may come more from the arts than from engineering. For example, much conventional design has emphasized narrowing choice until some final decision is made, but the newer design literature argues for focusing more on broadening the range of options to be considered.[31] Similarly, rather than focusing on an individual policy, or even policy domain, the new design literature attempts to expand the analysis and to link any newly designed policy with relevant policies in its own and surrounding policy domains.

The new policy design approach is very appealing intellectually, but it also may be difficult to implement politically. Political leaders want, and need, answers for their problems. They expect their policy analysts to provide those answers and not to be spending their time generating more choices rather than narrowing the choices. Further, those policymakers may want very specific answers for very specific questions rather than more diffuse answers that cover the interactions of a range of policy areas. While the new policy design methodology may ultimately produce better answers, it may not do so in the timely manner that the policymakers would desire.

Whether the approach to policy design is old or new, the need for policy scholars to think about the future is inherent in the craft. While it is important to understand the political dynamics involved in the creation of a policy, and to understand policy history, policy analysis is about thinking about the future. Even if the policy scholar is attempting to understand the past, s/he should be thinking about what can be learned to make future policies more effective,

29   Linder, S. H. And B. G. Peters (1984) From Social Theory to Policy Design, *Journal of Public Policy* 4, 237-59.

Bobrow, D. And J. S. Dryzek (1987) *Policy Analysis by Design* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press).

30   Howlett, M. I. Mukherjee and J. J. Woo (2015) From Tools to Toolkits in Policy Design Studies: The New Policy Design Orientation Toward Policy Formulation Research, *Policy & Politics* 43, 291-311.

31   Peters, B. G. (2018b) *Policy Problems and Policy Design* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar).

or what can be done to make the policy process function more effectively. Again, the academic and the practical aspects of public policy studies are, and should be, closely intertwined.

Policymaking Never Ends

Much of the literature, and the practice, of public policy appears to assume that each policy is being written on a *tabula rasa.* Although each policy is designed to meet the particular needs of the time, and even if it is successful at that time may well require revision and reform. Most policymaking is remaking existing policies, based on changing circumstances, changing political priorities, or new ideas. In some ways the remaking of policies is easier than actually making a truly new policy. The issue has already been accepted on the policymaking agenda and there is some general understanding of the issue. On the other hand, however, there are interests – clients and government employees – who may have a vested interest in the existing policy and may feel threatened by attempts at change.

The experimental nature of public policy is central to the continuous nature of policymaking. Although politically it may be necessary to advocate policies as if they were the definitive solution for the problem being addressed, the policymaker and the analyst would be aware that many policies are in essence experiments.[32] In policy domains such as social policy, and even climate change, the knowledge of causation and of the complex interactions among variables is so weak that decision-makers are essentially experimenting. Their experiments are done in good faith, may be based on some evidence, and it is hoped that they will, but they remain experiments.

The continuous process of policymaking is a means of learning and refining policies. Following from the (almost inherently) experimental nature of policies, policymaking must be open to refining policies, and remaking policies, more often than might be hoped by policymakers and by citizens.[33] But having the openness and the capacity to refine policies should produce better outcomes for citizens. That said, politicians often can make more gains for their careers by advocating new and (presumably) innovative policies, rather than engaging in the difficult work of refining existing programs.[34]

Policy Studies is a Normative Enterprise

When going through the catalog of disciplines that are related to public policy studies I mentioned the importance of philosophy and ethics. It is crucial to understand the normative nature of public policy studies, and the need to integrate moral reasoning into any analysis of policies.[35] Alan Meltsner once argued that policy analysts who did not have their own values and did not use them when working on policy issues were only "baby analysts".[36] The adult analyst will be conscious of his or her own values and use them to assess policy proposals.

Public policies always involve values. They involve advantaging some portions of the society and imposing burdens on other members of society, usually the taxpayer. Deciding on social policies involves deciding how much government values the well-being of less affluent citizens relative to the well-being of more affluent citizens who will be paying taxes to support the programs (Hills, 2017).[37]

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32   Campbell, D. T. (1991) Methods for the Experimenting Society, *American Journal of Evaluation* 12, 223-60.

van Egen. N., L. Tummers, B. Bekkers and B. Stein (2016) Bringing History In: Policy Accumulation and General Policy Alienation, *Public Management Review*, 18, 1085-1106.

33   Carter, P. (2012) Policy as Palimpsest, *Policy & Politics* 40, 423-43.

34   The continuing attempts to "repeal and replace" the Affordable Care Act in the United States is a good example. For ideological as well as political reasons members of Congress have invested thousands of hours attempting to repeal the Act rather than working to make it perform better.

35   Klimczuk, A. (2015) Public Policy Ethics, in D. Wright, ed., *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (Oxford: Elsevier).

36   Meltsner, A. (1976) *Policy Analysis in the Bureaucracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

37   Hills, J. (2017) *Good Times, Bad Times: The Welfare Myth of Them and Us*, rev. ed. (Bristol, Policy Press).

Deciding on defense policy involves values of security and safety, as well as fundamental issues of war and peace. Normative concerns are much more difficult to quantify than are the economic values that tend to dominate the consideration of public policy, but they are no less real.

Policymaking does involve values, and it almost always involves favoring one set of values at the expense of others. When any significant policy is being considered the values of the actors involved will almost inevitably clash. Consider, for example, the array of think tanks that dot the landscape in Washington and in other national capitals. Within these organizations there are advocates of programs within the same policy domain that have very different values and based on those values also have very different solutions for the problem being addressed. No analysis of the costs and benefits of the programs is likely to be able to resolve those differences–they are much more fundamental.[38]

And perhaps the most important normative feature of policy studies is the commitment to solving public problems. While policy studies can be an interesting academic exercise, its ultimate goal is to improve the lives of citizens, whether in one nation or more broadly across the world. The tools that have been developed for analysis can be used to assess the best ways to make those improvements, but regardless of the methods the purpose of public policy studies is elimination, or at least amelioration, of problems facing societies. In this sense policy analysis is apolitical, although the final choice of the policy will be intensely political.

Summary and Conclusions

This paper illustrates an attempt to present some of the central features of public policy studies, and to demonstrate how policy research is developing, and should develop. This is true for the Arab world, and indeed for any other setting. Policy research both borrows from other academic disciplines and adds its own unique features to produce a comprehensive approach to the problems facing society. Policy studies is also both retrospective, attempting to explain outcomes; and prospective, attempting to shape those outcomes. Policy studies is a complex and multi-faceted field of inquiry that has some elements that may appear contradictory.

Scholars of public policy in Arab countries need to understand that policy studies are culture-bound. Therefore, they need to develop models for policy analysis, both retrospective and prospective, based on analyzing the context in the region. Arab scholars also need to understand the diversity of influences and richness provided by the variety of theoretical contributions to the fields of policy analysis and policy studies, mainly political science, economics, ethics, public administration and policy, and statistics. In this endeavor, there is a need to draw lines between universal and culture-bound approaches to analysis.

The complexity and the internal tensions are to some extent what give policy studies its strength and its dynamism. The interplay between academics focused on theory and analysis and applied analysts focused on questions of "what works?" can enhance both strands of thinking. That said, getting the two communities to come together and to collaborate may be easier said than done. Each will stereotype the other in rather unfortunate terms and may contest the control of the field. But the opportunity for cross-fertilization of academic and applied approaches to policy research is there for the taking.

For all its virtues, policy studies can never be a panacea for all the problems confronted by present-day societies. Policy analysts can advise decision-makers about the benefits and costs of policy options, and perhaps also generate some of those options, but policy analysis cannot make decision-makers select the best option. Any number of other factors–ideology, partisan politics, personal preferences–can and do intervene to produce less desirable policy choices. As Aaron Wildavsky argued some decades ago, the task of policy analysts, and the discipline of policy studies, is to "speak truth to power", but power will not necessarily pay attention.

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38   Cost-benefit analysis itself, and indeed almost all economic analyses of policy, involve values in an implicit manner. These analyses are utilitarian and assume that consequences–measured in financial terms–are more relevant than other types of values. See Sunstein (2013).

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