Advancing Policy Process Research at its Overlap with Public Management Scholarship and Nonprofit and Voluntary Action Studies

by

Christopher M. Weible & David P. Carter

Abstract

A scholarly nexus is defined as identifiable spheres of theoretical and empirical overlap between academic fields or disciplines. This essay explores the nexus between policy process research, public management scholarship, and nonprofit and voluntary action studies, oriented from the perspective of policy process scholars. The essay begins with a description of policy process research, including some of its major thematic emphases regarding governance problems and processes. It next discusses limitations of policy process research imposed by its scope of inquiry, theoretical black boxes, and omitted factors. Three strategies – filling, zooming, and linking – for addressing these limitations are introduced. The essay ends with rationales for leveraging research at the nexus to advance both specialized and general knowledge about public policy processes and governance issues.
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In the pursuit of knowledge concerning governance problems and processes, scholars tend to specialize by partitioning complex subjects into tractable fields of study. For example, some governance researchers consider themselves public policy scholars, others are thought of as public management scholars, and still others are seen as scholars of nonprofit and voluntary action.\footnote{We use the term “governance” in reference to studies that focus on politics and government, specifically, while also including scholarship on public policy, public management, and the roles of nonprofits therein, as well as societal outcomes that result from these ordered processes and collective actions (Kettle, 2000; Stoker, 1998).} Although practically necessary, such partitioning assumes some independence of individual topics and dismisses the causal or conditioning effects of one field’s topic on another’s. Over time, within-field knowledge accumulates and important questions are answered. Eventually, however, interactions and effects between fields become too important to ignore, necessitating a conscious effort to understand how previously partitioned fields relate (see Simon, 1996).

This essay explores the nexus – defined as identifiable spheres of theoretical and empirical overlap – between three existing partitioned fields in the study of governance: policy process research, public management scholarship, and nonprofit and voluntary action studies.\footnote{Reflecting this essay’s discussion regarding partitioned fields, there is considerable scholarly debate regarding the relationship between public administration and public management (e.g.: Lynn, 2005, 2006). Consistent with this Policy Studies Journal special issue and Sowa and Lu (2016), we use the term “public management,” recognizing that some readers will consider materials cited and discussed to fall under the label of public administration.} The essay is consciously orientated from the standpoint of policy process research. From this perspective, the contributions and limitations of policy process research are used to identify and elaborate potentially fruitful connections with nonprofit and voluntary action studies and public management research. We argue that policy process research can be advanced by acknowledging the potential that public management scholarship and nonprofit and voluntary action studies have to: (i) extend policy process research beyond its typical scope of inquiry, (ii) clarify theoretical black boxes commonly exhibited by policy process literature, and (iii) enhance the explanatory potential of policy process theories by identifying undervalued causal factors.

When contemplating the overlaps that policy process research shares with other literatures concerning governance problems and processes, this essay could have justifiably included a range of fields and disciplines, such as sociology (e.g.: Brinton and Nee, 1998; Rose and Miller, 2010), criminology (Houston et al., 2008), and political science (Ranney, 1968; Sabatier, 1991; Hacker and Pierson, 2014). We focus on the relationship between policy process research, public management scholarship, and nonprofit and voluntary action studies, in part, because it is the theme of this special issue. More importantly, we focus on the nexus of these three fields because it lies at the center of many graduate and undergraduate programs, and because it makes up the core of many important governance questions.

Conducting research at the overlap of policy processes, public management, and nonprofit and voluntary action offers benefits for scholars of all three fields, including the ability to apply several theoretical lenses to understand a complex problem (Whetsell, 2013) and theoretical refinement through the synthesis of explanatory factors from across fields (Whetten, 1989). Perhaps most notable, the effort offers a more comprehensive understanding of multi-faceted governance
phenomena that extend beyond the artificial boundaries of partitioned fields. Thus, incorporating public management’s emphasis on the actions of public managers and their relationships with the structures and environments in which they operate (Sowa and Lu, 2016) and nonprofit and voluntary action’s emphasis of topics such as voluntary contributions to policy activity and nonprofit relationships with government entities (Bushouse, 2016) can provide fuller, and arguably more realistic, understandings of public policies, the processes in which they are embedded, and their impacts on society. As this essay is primarily concerned with a policy process perspective, the benefits to policy process scholarship are the focus of the discussion that follows. We direct readers to accompanying essays in this special issue for similar discussions from the perspective of the public management (Sowa & Lu, 2016) and nonprofit and voluntary action (Bushouse, 2016) fields.

This essay proceeds in three sections. The first section provides an overview of policy process literature and a summary of some of its major research themes to orientate readers to the field. The second section provides general categories through which the limitations of policy process research can be understood, highlighting opportunities for research at the nexus between policy process research, public management scholarship, and nonprofit and voluntary action studies. The third section offers strategies for working at the nexus towards greater insight into governance problems and processes. The essay explores the nexus in both abstract and concrete forms. In the abstract, we offer manners of conceptualizing and strategies for acting at the nexus that are applicable to spheres of overlap that exist well beyond the foci of this paper. In the concrete, we provide illustrations drawn from policy process research, public management scholarship, and nonprofit and voluntary action studies that illuminate the nexus and its promise.

I. An Overview of the Policy Process Field

Conceptualizing “Public Policy”

Because policy process research, public management scholarship, and nonprofit and voluntary action studies are concerned with shared governance problems, and often ask similar or parallel questions, we begin with a discussion of what comprises “policy processes” as a field of study. A first distinguishing characteristic is that it emerges from a research tradition in which the explicit focus is one or more public policies. Drawing from this tradition, we define “public policies” as deliberate decisions by governments or equivalent authorities to take action or non-action toward specific objectives (Dye, 1972; Birkland, 2016; Stoker, 1998).

Admittedly, this simple definition overlooks the ambiguity inherent in the term “public policy.” Scholars have struggled to define public policy since its study began in earnest with empirical and

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3 The field of public policy is often divided into policy analysis and evaluation (Bardach, 2011; Weimer and Vining 1992; see also Polski and Ostrom 1999) and the study of policy processes. The former is client-oriented advice focused on evaluating the effectiveness of past policies and programs or analyzing the potential effects of proposed policy alternatives. The main text of this essay pertains to the latter. Partitioning public policy into policy analysis/evaluation and policy processes dates back to Lasswell and Lerner (1951). Like all partitions, the division is artificial but nonetheless a useful simplification. Additionally, substantial public policy has been conducted focusing on substantive policy areas, such as education policy (e.g. Bell & Stevenson 2006) and social policy (Hudson & Lowe 2009). The scholarship in this essay has certainly been influenced by such work, however, this discussion maintains a more general policy theory perspective.

4 See Parsons (1995, pg. 3) for a discussion on the meaning of “public” in public policy, which “presupposes that there is a sphere or domain of life which is not private or purely individual, but held in common.”
theoretical work in the 1950s and 1960s (Lasswell and Lerner 1951; Lowi, 1964; Ranney, 1968) and with academic programs in the early 1970s (Lepawsky, 1970; Wildavsky 1979; Allison, 2006). This ambiguity arises in part because of the difficulty in determining the extent to which government action or inaction can or should be classified as public or private. Ambiguity is further fostered by the nearly infinite manners in which government actions and inactions might be conceptualized and observed. This diversity poses serious challenges to the development of the field, while at the same time contributing to the richness of policy process literature.

For example, one way in which public policy researchers have attempted to cope with public policy diversity is by classifying policies as governmental output types. These types include, but are not limited to, constitutions, executive orders, legislative statutes, administrative rules and programs, court decisions, county and municipal ordinances, and the decisions of street-level bureaucrats. The specific contextual and procedural attributes associated with each output type have important implications for the development of policy process theory. To illustrate: if the goal were to understand policy change and stasis in the United States, it is necessary to recognize that the processes and politics of creating new regulations in administrative rule-making are different those found in the passage of a statute by Congress. Because of the variety of public policies as types of government outputs, the scope of the policy process field is extremely broad with the potential to touch upon almost any government venue or collective action situation where there is authority to generate decisions.

Alternatively, public policies can be categorized according to their functional attributes. In a classic example, Lowi (1964, 1972) proposes four functional categories: distributive policy, constituent policy, regulative policy, and redistributive policy. Other scholars more simply describe policies as emphasizing incentives to induce behavior changes in target populations – characterized as “carrots” – or relying on coercion – characterized as “sticks” (e.g. Bemelmans-Videc, Rist, and Vedung, 1998). Engaging public policy functional diversity has proven to be an important undertaking in policy process theory, as the functional attributes of policy choices can often be traced to the political dynamics that preceded them (Howlett, 1991) and systematically shape the political and societal realities of target populations (Schneider & Ingram, 1997).

In addition to simplifying public policy diversity through classification, public policies can be described by their contents. The building blocks of policy content are usually considered to be the textual content, or written form, of policy documents. Yet, some public policies are not written but rather understood and applied (often implicitly) among a group of people involved in a government body or equivalent situation. Such policies fall under what Ostrom (2005) refers to as rules-in-use, or working rules. An example of such working rules is seen in the regular practices adopted through the discretion of street-level bureaucrats delivering public services (Lipsky, 1980; Ostrom, 2005; Meyers and Vorsanger, 2005). Public policy researchers have found that in order to fully understand policy activities and their consequences it is necessary to examine both conceptualizations of public policy, as the working rules that guide and define policy dynamics can either conform to, or diverge from, written policies (Ostrom, 1986; Carter et al. 2016).

The “Processes” of Policy Process Research

Still other scholars choose related, yet distinct, dimensions upon which to base categorization. An example is describing policies as being more substantive or procedural (Van Dyke, 1968; Howlett, 2000). Many other policy typologies and categorizations exist, sharing the objective of simplifying the diversity of public policy forms for conceptual and analytical tractability.
Public policies lie at the intersection of many processes. The “processes” of policy process research are informal or formal sets of relations and interactions among people that unfold over time and in a discrete location or context. They feature regular or unexpected events and occurrences revolving around a distinct (but not isolated) topical area, underpinning one or many public policies, and potentially (and usually) effecting societal outcomes. A process emphasis, thus, orientates the study of policy processes to system dynamics where interactions can be informal or formal, involve governmental and non-governmental entities, individuals and organizations, and take place over time, usually without a distinct beginning or end (Shipman, 1959; Lindblom, 1959; Simeon, 1976; Weible, 2014a).

The most common description is the policy cycle that depicts a process in the form of a life-cycle. The policy cycle has been described differently over time, but usually features a series of stages starting with problem definition and agenda setting to formulation of a public policy to its adoption and implementation and ending with its evaluation and maybe termination (Lasswell, 1956; Brewer, 1974; Brewer and deLeon, 1983). To some extent, the policy cycle describes the steps – identified as the governmental routines and procedures – by which citizen ideas materialize into public policy and result in outcomes. However, the policy cycle has been thoroughly criticized for its inaccurate and limited portrayal of the “process.” Some of these criticisms have included an absence of a causal explanation regarding how an idea progresses from one stage of the policy cycle to the next, an over-emphasis on top-down policymaking, and an overly rationalistic interpretation of what is, in reality, a politically messy set of interactions (Sabatier, 1991).6

Fortunately, there are other depictions of “processes” in policy process research (Weible et al., 2011b). For example, a vibrant body of literature examines the diffusion, mutation, and transfer of public policies across government units (e.g. Berry and Berry 1990; 2014; Shipan and Volden 2008; Walker 1969). In such studies, the process is an evolutionary one akin to natural selection where some policies are selected and maintained, and others overlooked or rejected over time. Some processes reject rational and linear depictions as found in the policy cycle to emphasize entrepreneurial agency and the promotion of ideas in contexts conditioned by ambiguity and timing (e.g., Kingdon 1984, Zahariadis, 2014). Other processes emphasize conflict and cooperation among and between networks of individuals, such as coalitions (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014). Over time, the intensity of related political interactions waxes and wanes as coalitions diverge and converge on policy positions; such interactions can involve multiple public policies and cut across the policy cycle in what might be imagined as ongoing competition over the direction of government and society. Yet another common form of a process involves adaptive decision-making where individuals continually adjust public policy through constant tinkering over time (e.g. Basurto and Ostrom 2011). In policy tinkering, the people involved in adjusting public policies are often those involved in their implementation, diverging from the image

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6 The policy cycle also does not capture the ontology of the public policy concept, especially given the variety in output types of public policies described above and the existence of multiple interdependent public policies originating from multiple venues at any given period of time for a substantive area. Despite these limitations, the policy cycle has helped to advance the field and can serves as a handy heuristic or framework for the purposes of organization and discussion (e.g.: Howlett, McConnell, and Perl 2015a, 2015b). The policy cycle becomes an inhibition on the field’s progress when it is the only depiction of the process considered or when its rigid structure is imposed on different conceptualizations of the policy process – as its simplicity imposes tight constraints on one’s understanding and imagination and, hence, impedes recognition of the diversity of interactions surrounding public policies.
typically associated with the policy cycle. Finally, whereas these examples of processes usually occur among government units or group of individuals in organizations, other processes zoom in on the micro-behavior of how individuals interact. These micro-level processes can also be informal or formal, and include bargaining, cooperating, commanding, competing, and opposing (Dahl, 1963; Mitchell and Mitchell, 1968; Lowi 1972).

While the conceptualizations of processes applied in policy process research are diverse, including and extending beyond the examples provided above, there are common constitutive elements that cuts across most process depictions. Most pivotal, as discussed, is a focus on one or more public policies. The remaining can be summarized in the following parts:

- **Context.** Processes occur in a context defined by, but are not limited to, institutional, cultural, social, economic, and physical conditions. Contexts shape policy agendas, determine policy options, and enable or constrain policy implementation, and have thus received a considerable amount of scholarly attention (see the Contextual (or Structural) Effects on Policy Processes subsection below).

- **Actors.** Either directly or indirectly, all processes involve people as individuals or in groups in the form of associations, organizations, networks, and coalitions. These people could be represented by those individuals actively involved in a policy topic or members of the general public affected by the public policies in question or others. A key strength of policy process research has been the emergence of clearly articulated models of the individual usually based on assumptions of bounded rationality (Simon, 1985; Jones, 2001). Given the cognitive limitations of people in politics, the major theories of the policy process assume additional drivers of human thought and action that involves topics of ambiguity, attention shifts, mechanisms of selecting and filtering information, and the role of emotion (Sabatier and Weible, 2014). As a result, the causal drivers of policy processes incorporate both system-based and individual-based explanations that spur the formation and testing of hypotheses and theoretical advancement.

- **Temporality.** All process conceptualizations emphasize how events unfold over time, such as policy diffusion across government units, policy network evolution, or the tinkering with policy content. In reality, these processes go on indefinitely. An important consideration for any scholar seeking to explain or understand policy processes is at what points in time an analysis is to begin and conclude, particularly given the conventional axiom that it takes an extended period of time for policy process inputs to filter into policy outputs or outcomes (Sabatier, 1988).

- **Events.** All processes involve expected or unexpected occurrences that can alter the context and actors under study. These range from elections to disasters to emergent technologies to revolutions. Policy process scholars conceptualize such events as situations that offer (or impose) opportunities for change. The impact of an event or a cascade of events on policy actions and decisions is contingent on the other policy process elements discussed in this section. For example, the incentives and motives of policy actors, in concert with the previously discussed cognitive limitations, influence individual and collective responses to events (Birkland, 1997; Ostrom, 1990, 2005). Similarly, the institutional and political contexts of a given setting determine the possible and viable policy responses that policy actors have in response to a past, or expected, event (Jones & Baumgartner, 2005).

- **Outputs and/or Outcomes.** Outcomes are the result of public policies, contexts, events, and actors on society. Of course, outcomes are often an important dependent variable, but can also be important system inputs (Lowi, 1964). In understanding the consequences that result
from policy activities and decisions it is crucial for scholars to recognize the difference between policy outputs and outcomes. For example, a public policy might be considered an output that is enacted to address a societal problem, while administrative outputs are comprised by the actions of entities charged with implementing the policy, and the outcomes tied to both of these are measured by “how, if at all, the world changes because of the outputs” (Wilson, 1989, pg. 158). To equate the adoption of a given policy intervention with a policy outcome, therefore, is to ignore the societal impacts stemming from a policy process, as discussed later in this essay.

Altogether, the preceding elaboration of policy process research can be summarized by the following definition: policy process research is the study of the interactions that occur over time between public policies and surrounding actors, events, contexts, and outcomes. This definition of policy process research places an emphasis on the systems in which policy processes take place, and different scholars with their distinct emphases and approaches will focus on separate aspects of these systems. A system emphasis does not preclude studies that focus on a single policy or a single organization in the policy process. Inherent in the definition is the recognition that politics are ever-present as people vie to influence public policy either directly or indirectly by targeting the outputs of decision-making venues, changing the rules structuring government often through creating, altering, and eliminating decision-making venues, or by electing people into official positions.

As in the study of any complex system, to develop deep and generalizable knowledge researchers simplify by focusing on discrete aspects of policy process systems, which is often done overtly through the use of various approaches in the form of frameworks, theories, and models. Some of these approaches have lasted decades and others have emerged, were used, and discarded. Some of the more established approaches include the Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier 1988; Jenkins-Smith et al 2014), the Institutional Analysis and Development Framework (Kiser and Ostrom 1982; Ostrom 2005), Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones and Baumgartner 2012), Policy Feedback Theory (Mettler and SoRelle 2014), and the Multiple Streams Approach (Kingdon 1984; Zahariadis 2014). Some of the newer approaches include the Narrative Policy Framework (Jones et al 2014), the Institutional Collective Action Framework (Feiock 2013), and the Ecology of Games Approach (Lubell 2013). A close look at these approaches uncovers both similarities and important differences in the meaning and understanding of policy processes (Cairney and Heikkila 2014; Weible 2014b).

**Major Themes in Policy Process Research**

Given the diversity public policy forms and functions, the variety of associated processes, and the numerous corresponding theoretical approaches for studying policy process, scholarship in this field is extremely diverse. The findings of policy process research are equally diverse, and as a result, adequately identifying and summarizing all of the major themes is nearly impossible. With these important caveats in mind, we describe three of the major themes to illustrate areas where scholars have focused their energy and where there have been advances in knowledge about government, political systems, and the policy process.7

**Descriptions and Explanations of Policy Change.** A major theme of policy process research is the study of policy change. Due in part to the nature of individual and organizational attention and information

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7 Given the topical overlap of theories and the added value of integrating the knowledge gained from them, we organize the topics of this section by theme and not by particular theories. The theoretical underpinnings of these major themes are dutifully cited in the text.
processing, among other factors, the frequency of public policy change has been found to be mostly incremental with occasional episodic and unpredictable punctuations (Jones and Baumgartner, 2012; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). If a policy process course were taught 40 years ago, the patterns of policy change would be described as mostly incremental, punctuations would be described as an anomaly or, at best, a function of critical elections (Burnham, 1970). Today, numerous identifiable patterns of policy change, reflecting varying amalgams of incremental and punctuated change, have been confirmed multiple times and across different settings, based on major advances in data collection and analysis.8

The dynamics of public policy change can also be understood as occurring within and between units of government (Blomquist, 2007). This is illustrated by the voluminous body of research on the diffusion and innovation of public policies. Past understandings of policy adoption were often theoretically constrained to factors within a government unit, or focused almost exclusively on external influences at the cost of ignoring internal factors (Blomquist, 2007; Berry and Berry, 2014). These studies also suffered nontrivial methodological limitations with regards to integrating the influence of internal and external diffusion factors. It is now well recognized that government units, be they national, subnational, or local, act interdependently when formulating and adopting public policies, or when those ideas underlying public policies are imitated, transferred, and mutated (Berry and Berry 1990, 2014; Karch 2007; Shipan and Volden 2008, 2012; Peck and Theodore, 2010). Similarly, many of the cited methodological limitations have been overcome through the bundle of analytical approaches associated with Event History Analysis, allowing for the empirical testing of enriched theoretical explanations focusing on the mechanisms underlying these adoption patterns (Berry and Berry, 2014). Such advances in quantitative methodologies have paralleled advances in qualitative approaches in the study of policy diffusion (Starke, 2013).

Whereas considerable amount of research has focused on building knowledge about the patterns of policy change across space and time, a related theme is the explanations of change that focus on a number of factors that vary considerably in their influence across cases. A list of these factors include learning (Bennett and Howlett, 1992; May, 1992; Heikkila and Gerlak, 2013), major events, negotiated agreements (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2014), arguments and persuasion (Majone 1989), partisan and pluralistic pathways (Conlan et al., 2014), social movements, policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon, 1984), and symbolic stories and narrations (Stone, 1989; Fischer and Forrester, 1993; Shanahan et al., 2011) – all of which are supported to various extents and degrees by the different frameworks and theories populating the field.

Continuous Feedback between Policy and Society. Underlying the preceding descriptions and explanations of policy change is the recognition that long-term time perspectives are critical for understanding a continuous policy process. The importance of a broad temporal perspective reinforces arguments and empirical research that indicate the study of policy consequences cannot stop at policy adoption, but rather continue over time to affect future policy processes. Lowi (1964) and Schattschneider’s (1935) arguments that “policy creates politics” were such an effort to shift thinking away from policy change as a theoretical and analytical end point, and towards the notion of many continuous interactions comprising policy processes. Taking this perspective has led to the recognition that policies shape, reshape, and reinforce social constructions (Schneider and Ingram, 1997), the

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8 See John (2006) and the Comparative Agendas Project (http://www.comparativeagendas.info/)
engagement and influence of particular policy actors and groups (Pierson, 1993; Hacker and Pierson, 2014), patterns of civic engagement (Mettler, 2002), and dynamics of mass politics (Campbell, 2012).

Central to the dynamics between policy and society has been research on the “policy content” and “functional categories” of public policies and the relationship with broader policy processes. Seemingly synonymous terms are applied to describe identifiable policy categories, such as policy designs (Linder and Peters, 1989; Schneider and Ingram, 1997), policy instruments (Doern and Phidd, 1983; Howlett, 1991; Linder and Peters, 1989) and tools (Hood, 1986; Salamon, 2002). Terminological similarities, however, sometimes obscure theoretical nuances regarding conceptualized linkages between policy types and the processes in which they are embedded – often reflecting the context in which each approach was developed (Howlett, 1991). Nonetheless, a general lesson can be taken from these approaches: policy processes can be usefully understood by systematically sorting policies according to the contexts, purposes, or functions for which policy makers are likely to choose them, the political dynamics that produce them, and the societal consequences that result from them (Lowi, 1964, 1972).

The emphasis on policy content is not to say that societal consequences of public policies are realized by only a technocratic exercise of the implementation (Hill and Hupe, 2002). Rather, it is subject to congruence in values and objectives among the many organizations and individuals involved (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; Lipsky, 1980; Hjern and Porter, 1981; Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1989), vulnerable to resource constraints and interorganizational coordination challenges (O’Toole, 2012), and conditioned by the social, institutional, and political governing arrangements and contexts in which implementation takes place (May, 2015; Hupe and Hill, 2015; Moulton and Sandfort, 2016). Similar to the policy-politics dynamic, the focus on the content and categorization of public policies overlap considerably with issues regarding implementation as well as agenda setting.

The continuous feedback inherent in policy processes also involves questions of how policy ideas reach the attention of governments through agenda setting. Governing systems have limited capacity to address all potential problems or consider all possible policy options. This observation has spurred efforts to clarify different types of agendas (Cobb and Elder, 1971) and identify the factors that shape agendas. Resulting scholarship suggests that agenda setting outcomes are not deterministic, but rather the result of a combination of factors, most likely conditioned by the public policy area and broader context. For example, agendas are susceptible to windows of opportunity marked by timing and the coupling of the right problems (e.g., focusing events), political dynamics (e.g., elections, national mood), and policy options and alternatives (e.g.: the technical feasibility of policy ideas; Kingdon, 1984; Birkland, 1997; Zahariadis, 2014). Notably, Kingdon (1984) championed the importance of policy entrepreneurs; those individuals who commit the time, expertise, contacts, and resources towards achieving their policy-related goals. The policy entrepreneur concept has been applied, studied, and extended by a range of subsequent scholars across a variety of topics and contexts (Birkland, 1997; Cobb and Elder, 1983; Mintrom and Norman, 2009; Schneider, Teske, and Mintrom 2011; Zahariadis, 2014).

**Contextual (or Structural) Effects on Policy Processes.** Policy change and the dynamic interactions that take place between politics and public policies are always conditioned by the contexts in which they take place. This fact has been long recognized in policy studies – at one time contextual factors were considered to be the fundamental drivers of policy adoption (Blomquist, 2007), at the cost of disregarding other important contributors. For example, basic demographic and socio-economic indicators (Cairney, 2012; pgs. 111-131), might be considered the determinants of policy decisions, neglecting the role of politics and human agency in shaping policy outputs. Today, policy process
scholarship recognizes that these contextual factors condition the behavior and decision-making that occurs within policy processes, and, over extended periods of time, the reverse is also true (Mettler & SoRelle, 2014). For instance, embedded in the context of policy processes are the rules that structure policy-making settings, be they formal rules or implicitly understood working rules, thereby determining the constraints and opportunities that shape the array of viable policy options, and ultimately the form and function of resulting policy interventions (Kiser & Ostrom 2982, Ostrom 2005). Depending on the social and physical context in question, particular rule configurations are more likely than others to result in favorable governance outcomes (Basurto and Ostrom 2011; Ostrom 1990).

From a global perspective, an ongoing challenge is to better understand the contextual effects exhibited within individual countries, as well as generalized knowledge applicable across countries (Lodge, 2006; Schmitt, 2012). Examples of similarities across countries include similar distributions in punctuated and incremental policy change over time (Baumgartner et al., 2009), common set of principles for governing localized common pool resources (Ostrom, 1990), and the stability of coalitions in policy conflicts, especially in democratic systems of governments (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2014). The literature also displays a trajectory of identifying country-specific contexts and their consequences, notably reflected in recent summaries regarding countries outside of Western Europe and North America (Ma and Lin, 2012; Mooij, 2007).

These themes in policy process research highlight the major areas of emphases as well as some of the general lessons to emerge from decades of theoretical and empirical scholarship. Underlying all of the listed and omitted themes is a proliferation of theoretical understandings regarding what elements fundamentally constitute policy processes, how and why they function, and their consequences for societal governance. These theories are not just guides to conducting research, or mere descriptions of interrelated concepts in the form of hypotheses and propositions. Theories encapsulate and represent accumulated knowledge.

II. General Categories of Research Limitations

To advance a scholarly field requires a way to recognize and discuss its limitations – a task that is complicated by the effects of paradigmatic thinking among the members of a field’s community (identifying another reason for nexus-oriented research; Kuhn, 1962). To address this challenge, we draw from scholarship on the philosophy and practice of (social) scientific endeavors (Bunge, 1963; Whetten, 1989; Zahra and Newey, 2009) to identify three manners of conceptualizing research limitations: scope of inquiry, theoretical black boxes, and omitted factors. Guided by these conceptualizations, we isolate general limitations exhibited by much of the policy process literature. It is important to note that the following examples are not limitations of the entirety of policy process literature – in fact, opportunities presented by exceptions to these general trends are discussed later in this essay. The following limitations, however, are reflected (in our assessment) by the bulk of the policy process scholarship.

The Limitations Imposed by Scope of Inquiry. A first limitation exhibited by any literature is the subject matter that lies beyond a literature’s scope of inquiry – the range of empirical phenomena examined

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9 We use the term “limitation” in the descriptive sense, as the identified categories represent limits or boundaries of current inter-field scholarship. As discussed in the essay’s introduction, these limitations serve a constructive function in that they define tractable areas of study, practically accessible research agendas, and shared foci of study. As also stated in the introduction, and argued throughout this essay, occasionally crossing such boundaries also offers potentially valuable opportunities in the form of learning and theoretical development.
and explained by a literature’s scholarship (Zahra and Newey, 2009). Of course, all academic fields are constrained by scopes of inquiry, as it is not possible for any one field to study everything. The point of understanding a scope of inquiry is to better identify and appreciate the boundaries of a field, thereby recognizing the most likely opportunities, and potential benefits, of crossing them.

One of the most common criticisms of policy process research is that much of it stops short of examining outcomes, which are what some consider the most consequential links in a policy process causal chain (O’Toole, 2000; Robichau and Lynn, 2009). To understand this limitation we return to our definition of policy processes as involving a series of system interactions, and the observation that these interactions can be conceptualized, measured, and analyzed as consisting of a series of outputs and outcomes (Koontz and Thomas, 2012; Robichau and Lynn, 2009). We made the distinction between policy outputs (such as the adoption of a policy by a legislature or the actions of entities charged with implementing the policy), and outcomes (“how, if at all, the world changes because of the outputs” [Wilson, 1989, pg. 158]). This limitation highlights the fact that often policy process literature chooses some form of policy output as the dependent variable of interest, stopping short of examining policy process consequences in the form of outcomes.

This scope of inquiry limitation is readily observed in the wide body of policy process scholarship that examines how policy interventions are generated and diffused across administrative units, geographical areas, and over time (e.g.: Berry and Berry, 1990; Karch, 2007; Shipan and Volden 2008, 2012). This literature has made considerable progress in explaining how policy outputs are adopted and disseminated, from competition between geographical entities to administrative imitation (Karch, 2007). The literature is nonetheless bound by its scope of inquiry in explaining differences between seemingly comparable policy outputs and resulting variance in policy outcomes. A parallel limitation is shared by research that seeks to describe or explain policy processes resulting in the array of policy output forms, but that do not extend into the administrative realities of achieving policy objectives (Robichau and Lynn, 2009). For example, research that focuses on legislative policy outputs while ignoring divergences in policy structures and objectives that might take place during administrative rule-making processes (Kerwin and Furlong, 1994). A final illustration of this limitation is the strong emphasis of many of the established policy process theories on changes in agendas and public policies, without much examination of the resulting outcomes (Jenkins-Smith et al., 2014; Jones and Baumgartner, 2012; Zararadis, 2014).

A second scope of inquiry limitation exhibited by much of the contemporary policy process research is identified by reflecting on the fact that a central motivation drawing attention to the study of policy processes was the need for relevance (Lasswell and Lerner, 1951). This is manifested today in several ways, most notably in the science and craft of generating client-oriented information through policy analysis and evaluation (Weimer and Vining, 1992). Yet, much of policy process research developed in a tradition of pursuing scientific rigor – often at the expense of making outright normative societal contributions or taking into account the societal consequences of policy decisions (deLeon, 1997). The extent to which making normative evaluations of policy decisions is an appropriate objective for policy scholars has long been the focus of debates about the purpose of the field and whether and how it should be made relevant for society (deLeon, 1997; Schneider and Ingram, 1997). While this debate

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10 A notable exception here is found in the policy feedback and social construction literatures (Schneider and Ingram, 1997; Mettler and SoRelle, 2014).
will undoubtedly remain a contested matter, it is undeniable that a reluctance to engage in normative questioning marks a scope of inquiry limitation, for better or worse.

**The Limitations of Theoretical Black Boxes.** A second limitation that may be exhibited by a body of literature can be conceptualized as a theoretical “black box.” A black box is a component or process that, when part of a theoretical causal chain, converts inputs (or stimuli) into outputs (or responses). The defining characteristic of a black box is that the mechanics of this conversion process are unspecified – its internal workings are unknown (Bunge, 1963).

A classic theoretical black box example in the early writings related to policy process research is seen in David Easton’s (1957) systems theory of government, where citizen demands and political support (as environmental inputs) affect a political system, resulting in government decisions – the outputs that feedback into the broader system. Within this theoretical framework, the decision processes of a political system represent a theoretical black box, as the means by which citizen demands and political support are translated into government policies was unspecified. Subsequent policy process scholarship has posited a number of mechanisms that help explain the black box of government decision-making, such as analytic debate between policy stakeholders (Majone, 1989) and the constraints established by rules structuring collective policy making within a given setting (Kiser and Ostrom, 1982).

As is the case in the study of any complex system, theoretical black boxes will always be found in policy process research. However, there are opportunities to shed light on some black boxes by leveraging opportunities at the nexus between policy process scholarship, public management scholarship, and nonprofit and voluntary action studies. Perhaps the most widely recognized of these is public policy implementation, which despite an array of concerted efforts over decades (e.g.: Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1989; Hill and Hupe, 2002) is considered by some to be the “missing link” in policy studies (Robichau and Lynn, 2009). The criticism that implementation is a missing link in the policy literature could be considered a scope of inquiry limitation in which policy research is often limited to explaining policy outputs, however, it goes one step further in explicitly recognizing administrative processes and actions as comprising important links in the policy process causal chain that results in policy outputs.

Beyond focusing on policy implementation, broadly understood, policy process scholarship exhibits more narrowly defined theoretical black boxes. For example, rather than consider “policy implementation” in a generic manner, one can consider the implementation structures set forth by public policies as more precisely construed and more diverse black boxes (Hjern and Porter, 1981), or Moulton and Sandfort’s (2016) related, yet more current, “strategic action fields.” These constellations of organizational entities arranged by a public policy for the purposes of realizing policy objectives were intentionally incorporated into early some policy process theories (e.g.: Sabatier, 1988). In practice, however, limited attention has been paid to the administrative operations of these inter-organizational configurations, in favor of a focus on their advocacy activities (Weible, Sabatier, and McQueen, 2009).

Finally, whether it be within or outside of implementation structure frameworks, the internal mechanisms of organizational decision making and action are often overlooked by policy process researchers and theorists (Crosby, 1996; O’Toole, 2000). Whether they are involved with the administration of public policy, advocate over policy issues, or simply constitute part of the relevant context in which policy processes operate, organizations represent promising theoretical black boxes in understanding the outputs and outcomes resulting from policy processes. An advantage of directing
scholarly attention to organizations-as-black boxes is that such a focus moves away from a policy cycle conceptualization of policy processes and more closely aligns with the systems emphasis reinforced in this essay.

**The Limitations from Omitted Factors.** A third limitation that may be exhibited by a body of literature is the omission of a variable, or set of variables (hereby referred to as factors), that may have explanatory power within context of the theoretical framework from which it is excluded (Whetten, 1989). To be clear – the simple presence of a possible factor does not necessarily justify its inclusion for the sake of comprehensiveness. Rather, a factor should be considered based on the relationship and causal consequence the factor displays with the phenomenon of interest, thereby balancing theoretical comprehensiveness with parsimony (Whetten, 1989, pg. 491).

Similar to black box argument above, there will always be omitted factors in our understanding of policy processes because of the sheer number of influences and causal mechanisms linking policy process inputs to policy outputs and outcomes. That is, no single framework, theory, or model will ever encapsulate all of the factors necessary to describe and explain its phenomena comprehensively. We suggest that the solution to this limitation is not to create new frameworks, theories, and models every time an omitted variable is discovered. For example, assume an established theory does not adequately incorporate the influence of managerial values; this does not mean that a new theory needs to be created to include managerial values with essentially the same components as an established theory. Rather, the concept could be carefully integrated within the structure of an appropriate existing framework, producing the benefit of the ability to examine how the explanatory framework or theory are improved by the inclusion of the previously omitted factor. These caveats notwithstanding, policy process research tends to observe the prevalence of certain factors in policy processes, such as political maneuvering and advocacy efforts, while undervaluing others, such as administrative practices and functions, managerial values, and resource-based organizational strategies (Matheson, 2009).

Of course, there are many more examples of how scope of inquiry, theoretical black boxes, and omitted factors limitations are manifested in policy process research than those provided here. Our primary goal in presenting these abstract categories of limitations is to provide a way to conceptualize and consider broad trends or patterns of research limitations as a guide for pursuing the most fruitful opportunities for leveraging the nexus of policy process research with public management scholarship and nonprofit and voluntary action studies. In the following section, we draw on these same categories of limitations to provide a way to think about conducting research at the nexus of policy process research and other fields.

### III. Strategies for Working at the Nexus

The preceding discussion identified three categories of limitations to current policy process scholarship: scope of inquiry, theoretical black boxes, and omitted factors. This section provides a corresponding set of strategies, alongside examples of how these strategies can be applied, for addressing these limitations. As with the preceding parts of this essay, a central purpose is to address the elementary challenge of developing a foundation for communication and collaboration while conducting research at the nexus. We argue that policy process research can be advanced by drawing on public management scholarship and nonprofit and voluntary action studies through three strategies: (i) linking to extend policy process research beyond its typical scope of inquiry, (ii) zooming to clarify
common theoretical black boxes, and (iii) filling to identify and address omitted factors within current policy process theories.

**Linking.** This first strategy involves using the outputs of one study as the inputs for another as a way of addressing scope of inquiry limitations, and generating knowledge across the boundaries between fields. Policy process scholars can identify the assumed scope of inquiry within their area of study, and ask themselves what important events, processes, and artifacts lie before or beyond this scope. This can often be guided by the simple question: “What came before, or what happens next?” With an understanding of the limitations imposed by scope of inquiry, the next step is to apply a linking strategy whereby the inputs of public management and/or nonprofit studies become the input for policy process research, or alternatively the outputs of the policy process research become the inputs for public management and/or nonprofit studies.

The most obvious manner in which public management scholarship and nonprofit and voluntary action studies can help to extend policy process research’s scope of inquiry is by informing how public managers and nonprofit entities respond to policy decisions. For instance, a common policy process research output is public policy adoption, such as passage of a law or a legislative statute. Such public policies are what top-down implementation perspectives describe as blueprints, or initial sets of instructions, for policy implementation by administrative agencies (Hill and Hupe 2014; Hupe and Hill 2015; Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; Mazmanian and Sabatier, 1989). To apply the strategy of linking in this case might involve extending studies of policy adoption by examining how responses by administrative organizations and implementing entities vary systematically based on the attributes or content of adopted policies, taking the policies themselves as input – the starting point for inquiry and empirical examination. As Sowa and Lu (2016) point out, policy designs establish the service delivery arrangements through which a public program is to be administered, such as direct government provision, contracting, collaboration, and coproduction, and around which entire public management sub-literatures have developed (e.g.: Aldford 2009; Bozeman 2013; Brown and Potoski 2006; Gazley 2008).

An illustration of linking across the boundaries of policy process literature can be found in governance literature on organic food policy. During the latter half of the 20th Century many states across the United States, and eventually the federal government, adopted standards for the labeling and regulation organic foods. Studying organic food policy adoption has been appropriately conducted through policy process diffusion research (Lee, 2009). The implementation of national organic food policy has been further examined from a traditional top-down implementation perspective (which arguably falls under policy process scholarship; Carter et al., 2015). Due to the nature of U.S. organic food policy, however, understanding the dynamics of program administration requires drawing on the insights of public management and nonprofit studies, and such research suggests that there may be notable differences in how organic regulations are administered among the public, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations charged with organic food policy implementation (Carter, 2016a, 2016b; Carter et al., 2016). Thus, a more comprehensive understanding of organic industry policy processes over time is garnered through the linking of input-output sequences across the boundaries of fields, as the effects of one spillover into the other.

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11 Of course this strategy can be as effectively applied within the boundaries of a field’s scope of inquiry as it can across the boundaries between fields.
Falling within a linking strategy, another promising literature at the intersection of policy process research and the fields of public management and nonprofit and voluntary action is in the generation and flow of information in governing arrangements (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015). Exemplifying this work is Workman’s (2015) study that shows how the size and shape of bureaucracies affect legislative agendas and policy outputs. Similarly, both public management scholarship and nonprofit and voluntary action studies highlight the manners in which information, as an important input into policy processes, is created, provided, and withheld by the public and nonprofit entities that generate them (Fyall 2016; Hartley et al 2014; Saidel 1991). Program performance data generated by administrative agencies influence future policy decisions, and the content and emphases of performance metrics vary widely depending on the manner in which they are constructed and disseminated by public managers (Moynihan and Pandey 2010). Nonprofit organizations generate substantial amounts of information that informs policy debates and policy making. For example, a central function of many nonprofit foundations is to develop and disseminate information that informs public policy decisions, often with the intent of supporting a specific policy position (Bushouse 2009; Hammack and Anheier 2013). A related understudied link between policy processes and nonprofit and voluntary action research is the formation of philanthropic organizations in funding these information providers and their connection to politics and policymaking (Bushouse, 2016).

Sometimes linking involves the integration of different forms of outputs or outcomes in assessing similar phenomena – a task which may involve recognizing terminological differences despite conceptual similarities. For example, crossing academic boundaries is the enduring study of polycentrism—the interdependence of multiple centers of authority in delivering public services (Ostrom et al., 1961). Related conceptualizations have emerged in policy process research, particularly in the study of government agendas and outputs (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015), the choice of institutional mechanisms to overcome institutional collective action dilemmas (Feiock, 2013), and the interdependence of policy decisions in an ecology of games (Lubell, 2013). Research akin to polycentrism is also commonly studied in public management in the examination of intergovernmental networks in the delivery of public services (Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004; O’Toole, 2012). The gains that these theoretical parallels offer can be realized by comparing and contrasting various conceptualizations of polycentricity, and by linking the effects of polycentricity to public services (in the case of policy process research) or from agenda setting and policy outputs (in the case of public management scholarship and nonprofit and voluntary action studies).

These are just a few examples of how public management scholarship and nonprofit and voluntary action studies can be leveraged to extend the lessons of policy process research beyond its traditional scope of inquiry. As stated above, an important characteristic of nexus research aimed at addressing scope of inquiry limitations is the use of output-input connections to link across typical field boundaries. This process is facilitated with a recognition of, and ideally consistency in, the desired unit of analysis for a particular study. This challenge is discussed further in the following section.

**Zooming**. This second strategy assumes that the unit of analysis for one scholar will be the unit of observation for another. As a result, one scholar’s theoretical black box will constitute another’s central object of study. This observation— that different fields often operate at different units of analysis—is a major source for disconnect between fields in terms of both dialogue and research. Differing units of analysis can lead to different research questions, different methodological approaches (both data collection and analysis), and ultimately conclusions that may be most appropriate or relevant to the unit of analysis chosen, and difficult or impossible to generalize to another. Addressing divergent units of analysis across different fields is therefore an important
challenge for scholars attempting to work at the nexus scholarly boundaries. To address theoretical black box limitations, we recommend a zooming strategy. This strategy can often be guided by the simple question: “How does X lead to Y [within the specified space].”

Perhaps the most apparent black box opportunity in policy process research is the examination of the inner workings of organizations and venues involved in policy processes. Out of necessity, many policy process studies do not zoom into the internal workings and intricacies of activity within an observed organization. Public management scholarship and nonprofit and voluntary action studies, in contrast, do exactly that.

Public management scholarship directs researchers to focus on the activity of public agencies and public managers to better understand the roles that these entities play within policy processes. This includes understanding how public managers navigate the various aforementioned administrative arrangements—such as direct service production, contracting, collaboration, and coproduction—within and outside of their organizations, and how differing managerial actions and responses result in different policy outcomes (Brown and Potoski 2006; Gazley 2008). It also includes questions of organizational culture, values, and accountability procedures that can support, or conflict with, policy goals (Adams and Balfour 2009; Jorgesen and Bozeman 2007). Additionally, in contexts that involve delegated administrative responsibilities, zooming into the organizational level of analysis might include understanding whether and how public managers participate in policy formation through rule-making or oversee policy-related activities through instruments such as negotiation, contracts, and grants (Frederickson and Frederickson, 2006; Rosenbloom, 2015).

Similarly, nonprofit and voluntary action studies direct researchers to focus on the activity of nonprofit organizations and voluntary associations to better understand the roles that these entities play within policy processes. For example, policy process scholarship has long recognized the roles that nonprofit organizations play in policy processes, particularly as organizational participants in advocacy coalitions, issue networks, or other forms of policy networks (Baumgartner and Leech, 1998; Smith and Lipsky, 1993). More recent scholarship, however, has focused explicit attention on the characteristics and behaviors of nonprofits engaged in policy activity, resulting in benefits to both policy process and nonprofit and voluntary action scholarship. Among the insights offered by these studies are the findings that nonprofit organizations engaged in policy advocacy and political activity appear to realize a greater influence over public agendas (Schmid, Bar, and Nirel, 2008); that higher levels of nonprofit policy activity are associated with greater levels of organizational revenue through private contributions (Nicholson-Crotty, 2011); and that non-advocacy oriented nonprofits engage in policy activity, and like their interest-groups counterparts, shop among different government units in pursuit of policy goals (Buffardi, Pekkanen, and Smith, 2015).

Additionally, Fyall (2016) finds that nonprofits often participate in coalitions to obfuscate their political influence and avoid any retribution in losing their government funding. This explanation for overcoming collective action dilemmas complements existing explanations based partly on shared beliefs as found in the Advocacy Coalition Framework in understanding and explaining the formation and maintenance of coalitions. A logical next step is to integrate the insights from these organizational-level analyses with insights from the system-level analyses to gain a better understanding of the direct and indirect drivers of system outputs (e.g.: the selection of policy alternatives), political behavior (e.g.: coalitions), and outcomes (e.g.: policy impacts).
**Filling.** This third strategy for working at a nexus is filling in missing factors. In the explanation of any social phenomenon, there are invariably a countless array of variables that might contribute to a phenomenon of interest, and any explanation of the phenomenon will emphasize some contributing factors at the expense of omitting others. Attempting to account for all possible explanatory factors runs the risk of diluting theoretical insight and risking conundrums such as the “too many variables” problem of past implementation research (Goggin, 1986). As a result (and as emphasized earlier), when executing the filling strategy scholars should carefully consider the causal consequence a new factor exhibits with regard to the phenomenon of interest, thereby balancing theoretical comprehensiveness with parsimony (Whetten, 1989, pg. 491).

Compared with limitations extending from scope of inquiry and theoretical black boxes, limitations stemming from omitted factors may be difficult to identify. This third strategy is facilitated by the question: “What have we missed?” Answers to this question can be found by exploring the public management scholarship and nonprofit and voluntary action studies to see how those scholars might differently describe and explain the phenomenon in question. One example of the promise that incorporating public management factors in policy process theories is evident in this special issue. An established body of policy process research documents that policy making can be generally characterized by small, incremental change, interrupted by episodes of large, rapid changes (Jones and Baumgartner, 2012; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). The primary explanations provided by this literature for this pattern of policy making are institutional friction and disproportionate information processing. Drawing on public management theory, Flink (2015) demonstrates that including the performance of administrative organizations and corresponding (in)stability in organizational personnel provides a more complete account of the factors that influence the relative distribution of policy changes. Flink’s study thus provides one illustration of how an existing policy process theoretical framework can be improved by drawing on public management scholarship to fill in a previously undervalued factor.

A second example of filling questions at the nexus of policy process research and public management scholarship can be found in the contemporary literature regarding the administrative burden in citizen-government experiences (Moynihan and Herd, 2010; Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey, 2015). This research suggests that political actors may shift the costs of accessing public services to potential service recipients in order to deter public program participation (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey, 2015). The strategic use of administrative burdens in policy formulation poses an important omitted factor in how policies are designed as well as the realization of public value (Mintrom and Luetjens, 2015) with theoretical relevance to the feed forward effects of administrative burdens on citizens’ future political and social rights (Moynihan and Herd, 2010). The study of administrative burden is thus an apt area of nexus research combining the study of administrative policies and the politics of policy choice, to potentially reveal missing factors in understanding the antecedents (and consequences) of policy design.

A final example of promising filling questions, found at the nexus of policy process research and nonprofit and voluntary action studies, is in the reciprocal relationship between public policies and the formation of nonprofit and voluntary activity. Bushouse (2016), for example, summarizes various theories, such as the Three-Failures Theory, that condition the supply and demand of nonprofit organizations. Similar foci can be found in theories connecting public policies and politics, particularly those connecting public policy adoption to both increased civic engagement (Campbell, 2012) and the formation of interest groups (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015). Comparing parallel theories of the formation organizations in response to public policies and political action is a clear avenue of research
that could identify some of the omitted factors in both nonprofit and voluntary action studies and policy process research.

In this section, we have proposed simple concepts and terminology such as linking, zooming, and filling to describe decidedly challenging and complex endeavors. Such heuristics hopefully will be useful in providing a language for teams of scholars from across the fields of policy process research, public management scholarship, and nonprofit and voluntary action studies. In this manner, we are providing a very general framework for guiding research at the nexus. As with all frameworks, there is simplification and distortion and it cannot possibly capture the nuances of reality or all the ways these fields overlap. Ideally, it provides a new perspective that spurs original research – an undertaking that offers significant benefits – as addressed in the following conclusion.

**Conclusion**

The partitions between policy process research, public management scholarship, and nonprofit and voluntary action studies (among the other fields engaged in the scholarly pursuit of governance problems and processes) are inevitable and necessary if we are to make progress in answering important governance questions. Yet, policy process scholars must not become numb to the limitations that are inherent in these partitions, or overlook the potential gains in answering questions that lie at the nexus of scholarly fields. This essay provides a foundation for the advancement of policy process research through the nexus it shares with public management scholarship and nonprofit and voluntary action studies. We argue that policy process research can be advanced by acknowledging the potential that the nexus has to extend policy process research beyond its typical scope of inquiry, clarify theoretical black boxes, and enhance theoretical explanatory potential by identifying causal factors unaccounted for in current policy process scholarship.

As indicated by this essay’s title and argument, our primary objective is to highlight the value that public policy scholars can derive from the overlap policy process research shares with adjacent literatures. It is worth noting however, that public management and nonprofit and voluntary action scholars can benefit equally from nexus-oriented research. At a basic level, public and nonprofit organizations are embedded in policy processes which shape the opportunities, constraints, and incentives facing organization personnel, from head administrators to street-level bureaucrats. Policy process scholarship provides theoretically-informed insights into the contexts affecting public and nonprofit action, alike. At a deeper level, and as demonstrated by some of the studies cited in this essay, public and nonprofit entities are active policy process participants—often motivated by a desire to influence policy process operations and outcomes. Appreciation for the connections that public management scholarship and nonprofit and voluntary action studies have with policy process research thus offers a better understanding of the motives, behaviors, and implications of government and nonprofit action.

A closing comment is called for on the extent to which working at the nexus requires a new or different approach to the research enterprise, including data collection and analysis. In some situations, it might be useful to engage in joint data collection and/or the consolidation of datasets, particularly when scholars from across fields are actively collaborating at the nexus. However, this need not always be the case and in some situations data will not be commensurable, as they often focus on different scales and operate at different units of analysis and observation. In such a situation, combining insights from the simultaneous analyses of incommensurable data sources can still contribute to knowledge at the nexus. While data synthesis may not always be possible, the sharing and publication of datasets will
foster work at the nexus, and facilitate the identification of data needed to work across partitioned fields. The end goal is to generate specialized knowledge of the policy issue at hand, as well as to generalize across policy issues and governance contexts. Most important, explicit and clear conceptual definitions, paired with transparent and replicable operationalization, are essential for the development of nexus-oriented research and resulting knowledge.

The gains in conducting research at the nexus are rooted in several rationales. Perhaps the simplest rationale is that many contemporary governance problems are complex, and that by incorporating insights from across multiple areas researchers might be able to leverage a plurality of theories and methods for greater insight into empirical issues “…[for] which no one theory or set of theories will be able to cope with in isolation” (Whetsell, 2013, pg. 613).

A second rationale is theoretical development – incorporating explanatory factors from another field can improve a theoretical framework’s ability to explain a phenomenon of interest (Zahra and Newey, 2009). Alternatively, applying a theory from one field in a context that is generally considered the domain of another can facilitate valuable theoretical refinements (Simon, 1996; Whetten, 1989). After all, the goal of the scholarly endeavor is knowledge attainment, and theoretical advancement is the engine that drives knowledge accumulation. Ignoring the potential represented by nexus-driven theoretical development unnecessarily constrains collective knowledge of governance matters.

A third, and arguably most important, rationale is to strengthen governance processes and improve governance outcomes. The deeper and more comprehensive understanding offered by working at the nexus presents scholars the opportunity to better advise public policy makers and public management practitioners (Ranney, 1968). Furthermore, improved understanding across disciplinary boundaries can be leveraged towards societies better equipped to “confront the complexity of collective action” (Kirlin, 1996, pg. 418), improve the human condition, and support human dignity (Lasswell, 1971; Raadschelders, 2009).

Research at the nexus is not for everyone, and is challenging enough that individuals working in isolation are unlikely to realize substantial progress in the endeavor. Teams of scholars from across the fields of public policy process research, public management scholarship, and nonprofit and voluntary action studies sharing insights and collaborating are likely the most fruitful strategy. This essay hopefully provides a way for such teams to begin to work together and prompt new research that advances the science of policy processes as well as other fields. Not all questions require nexus-centered research. However, we should not overlook questions that do, especially those that promise significant advancements in both the science and practice of governance.
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