New Theories of the Policy Process

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Introduction

A 2009 special issue of the Policy Studies Journal (PSJ) showcased the latest scholarship on the most established theories of the policy process (Eller & Krutz, 2009). In subsequent years, the journal published three additional special issues, each of which highlighted a single approach including the institutional analysis and development (IAD) framework (Blomquist & deLeon, 2011), the advocacy coalition framework (Weible et al., 2011), and the punctuated equilibrium theory (Jones & Baumgartner, 2012). As a collection, the four special issues exhibited the theoretical maturation, empirical breadth, and methodological sophistication of some of the most established theories of the policy process.

Arguably, these four special issues reinforced the status quo by offering the established theories an exclusive outlet to further advance their research programs. Assuming each theory offers a single lens of the policy process, could a collection of theories offer a collective lens that bound consciously or unconsciously the questions asked, the concepts studied, the measurements used, and the hypotheses tested? If critical thinking involves recognizing assumptions, seeing the world from different perspectives, and questioning causal relations, then could the established theories—while certainly benefiting the study of the policy process for decades—limit the diversity and quality of scholarship? While asking these questions is essential, we could only speculate about the answers. To move beyond speculation, we offer a collection of new theories that present different perspectives on the policy process and, perhaps, will help advance the scholarship into the future. These six new theories include:

1. The Institutional Collective Action Framework by Richard Feiock;
2. The Ecology of Games Framework by Mark Lubell;
3. The Policy Regime Perspective by Peter J. May and Ashley E. Jochim;
4. The Robustness Framework by John M. Anderies and Marco A. Janssen;
5. The Collective Learning Framework by Tanya Heikkila and Andrea K. Gerlak; and

This sample does not represent all of the latest theoretical innovations in policy process research. The collection was selected for their potential to support new research programs, to describe and explain policy process phenomena in a different or useful way, and for their clarity in description and explanation. This article introduces this special issue by interpreting the approaches as framework and theories, highlighting their potential contributions, and suggesting strategies for improvements.

*How Can the New Approaches Be Interpreted from a Framework-Theory Perspective?*

Policy process research is the study of stasis and change in public policy over time entailing (i) the surrounding actors that think and act individually and collectively; (ii) the structures that affect—and are affected by—actor choice including socioeconomic conditions, institutions, culture, infrastructure, and biophysical conditions; and (iii) the anticipated and unanticipated events from elections to scientific discoveries to chronic and acute crises and disasters. More concisely, policy process research is the study of the complexity of interactions involving public policy.

To understand and explain the complexity of the policy process, scholars often rely upon various “theories,” a term that we have used generically to encompass a nested triad of more precisely defined concepts for organizing social inquiry. This triad of concepts includes frameworks, theories, and models. Ostrom (2005, 2011) viewed frameworks as a rigorous means of “organizing diagnostic and prescriptive inquiry” (Ostrom, 2007, p. 25). Frameworks specify assumptions, identify scope, establish general categories and definitions of concepts and variables, and provide a shared language for scholars. A shared language not only allows for the accumulation of knowledge but also for the comparison and further refinement of theories. Using the shared language of a framework, analysts can be confident that common variables among theories have the same meaning. In contrast, theories tie concepts and variables together by specifying relationships and expected outcomes in the form of hypotheses and propositions and provide rationales (causal drivers and mechanisms) that explain the interconnections. Frameworks and theories provide a common platform that can help create and nurture research programs to support groups of scholars over extended periods of time in describing and explaining some of the most pressing questions and issues in society.

While we believe distinguishing between frameworks and theories is vital for the development and accumulation of knowledge in the social sciences (indeed, each of us bases our training of graduate students on frameworks and theories), our embrace of frameworks is uncommon among social scientists. Despite articulations of the framework-theory distinction dating back decades (Easton, 1953), as yet the
concept of framework has not caught on for a variety of reasons. Most importantly, the ontological and epistemological status of frameworks in the social sciences is murky. As Ostrom (1999) recognized, evaluative criteria for frameworks have not been established. What constitutes a good framework? How are frameworks developed and revised? What are the relations between theories and frameworks? These questions have not yet been given satisfactory answers. And, quite frankly, until the value of social science frameworks is more clearly established, working with and refining a framework is likely to appear as a fruitless exercise in organizing concepts into boxes and pushing them around on a page. Other reasons speak to the practice of social science research. The use of frameworks is intentionally constraining. A framework imposes discipline and consistency in the use of language and the development of theories. Whereas many social scientists pride themselves in their creative and loose use of language and in reinventing theories from earlier generations or from different disciplines, researchers working within a given framework usually focus on refinement and development of theory or theories therein.

The ambivalence toward the notion of a framework is apparent in this collection of new approaches to policy process research. Perhaps, not surprisingly, scholars who have been trained by, or who have worked closely with, Elinor Ostrom focus on framework development. Heikkila and Gerlak (2013) explicitly and consciously develop a framework for studying learning in policy processes. Anderies and Janssen (2013) introduce systems level analysis and evaluation through the application of a robustness framework. These two pieces have a different feel and quality to them than the other articles; they are more conceptual, identifying key concepts and variables and mapping out important features of policy processes.

In contrast, Feiock (2013) and Shanahan, Jones, McBeth, and Lane (2013), even though they use the term “framework” in their titles, present carefully specified and empirically tested theories about policy processes. Feiock (2013) develops a theory of collective action among local jurisdictions who seek to address spillover effects across jurisdictional boundaries as well as provide regional scale public goods. Shanahan et al. (2013) use narratives to explain coalitions and coalition behavior in policymaking processes. Both pieces have the feel and texture of theory, as relationships among well-defined variables are developed and tested.

May and Jochim (2013) and Lubell (2013) provide us with an up close glimpse of the process of theory development while laying out their emerging theories of policy regimes and ecology of games, respectively. May and Jochim (2013) are in the early stages of developing a theory that seeks to explain important features and aspects of policy processes that have been neglected using the concept of policy regimes. In their article, they are careful to explain and illustrate the major concepts and variables as they continue to develop empirically testable relationships. Similarly, Lubell (2013) has had notable success in publishing a number of articles using the ecology of games approach and, in this article, he takes a step back and more explicitly develops the major concepts, noting ties with other closely related theories, and reflecting on appropriate methods for addressing the propositions suggested by the ecology of games.
Given that some of the approaches in this special issue are frameworks and some are theories, we must be cautious in comparing them. For example, Heikkila and Gerlak (2013), in organizing diagnostic and prescriptive inquiry around learning, are engaged in a very different undertaking than is Feiock (2013), who is developing a robust theory to explain collective action among local jurisdictions.

**What Is Innovative about These New Frameworks and Theories?**

This collection of frameworks and theories is innovative in several ways. Some are innovative for integrating disparate parts of the literature. For decades, public policy scholars were engaged in a debate between postpositivists and positivists, leading to separate research programs. The narrative policy framework bridges this divide by placing theoretical emphasis on narratives in shaping coalitions’ beliefs, strategies, and goals while including scientific and transparent methods of data collection and analysis. Essentially, Shanahan et al. (2013) are trying to be clear enough to be proven wrong in their analysis of narratives in the policy process.

Other approaches are innovative because they adopt concepts and explanations from other disciplines and apply them to the policy process. Notably, Feiock’s (2013) institutional collective action framework provides an all-encompassing perspective that links research from public management and administration and economics with policy processes for understanding how a variety of mechanisms can be used to provide public goods and address institutional collective action problems, especially spillover effects among fragmented jurisdictions. While Feiock certainly provides original insight into the adoption of governing mechanisms for resolving institutional collective action problems, his theory is equally useful for its capacity to integrate across disciplines. In a similar way, Anderies and Janssen (2013) draw upon ecology, engineering, public administration, and policy to provide a set of ideas, concepts, and tools to explore feedback loops and effects between policy contexts and policymaking processes, particularly in social-ecological systems. Increasingly in policy process studies, attention and interest are turning toward system behavior and performance, i.e., punctuated equilibrium theory, and Anderies and Janssen (2013) provide a novel approach for studying systems.

Other approaches in this special issue are innovative for zooming in on a concept for enhanced clarity and insight. Many policy scholars would agree that learning is a critical dimension in policy processes. Yet, insufficient attention has been devoted to it, in part because it is a difficult, complex, and messy topic. Heikkila and Gerlak (2013) roll up their sleeves and begin sorting out and organizing important dimensions of the processes and products of learning. The contribution of Heikkila and Gerlak (2013) is providing theoretical traction on this intractable concept. Likewise, Lubell (2013) takes on venues, another pervasive concept in the literature. Moving away from a focus on a single decision-making venue, Lubell’s (2013) contribution is the attention given to multiple linked or overlapping venues and how this ecology of games (or venues) structures policymaking processes.

Some of the frameworks and theories are novel for their emphasis on the adaptability and feedback processes in a governing system. The policy regime perspective
(May & Jochim, 2013) and the robustness framework (Anderies & Janssen, 2013) conceive of systems as complex and adaptive. For May and Jochim (2013), complexity emerges from the different ideas, institutional arrangements, and interests that compose a regime. For Anderies and Janssen (2013), social ecological systems consist of combinations of a resource, resource users, public infrastructure, and public infrastructure providers. The relations and interactions among the social (users and providers) and biophysical (resource and infrastructure) aspects of the system are nonlinear. For both groups of scholars, system adaptation is a function of the structure of feedback loops and feedback effects. May and Jochim (2013) examine how feedback effects contribute to the quality of governance in terms of legitimacy, coherence, and durability. For Anderies and Janssen (2013), feedback affects robustness (how well the different parts of the system fit together) and fragility of the system.

How Can Advancements Be Made in the New Approaches?

Advancing social science requires clarity and practice. By this we mean that theories and frameworks require constant attention in the development and extension of their key concepts and variables as well as methods of data collection and analysis. Clarity is advanced through practice and learning, that is engaging in multiple and diverse empirical applications. Clarity and practice together are supported if groups of scholars work to advance shared research agendas. Rather than discussing how each contribution to this special issue could benefit from additional conceptual development, empirical applications, refinement, and extension of methods of data collection and analysis, we use the contributions to provide examples of what we mean.

Empirical applications and testing are central for theory and framework development. Although the preceding sentence needs little explanation in relation to theory, it does in relation to framework. Ostrom (2007), in reflecting on the IAD framework and its development, notes that the framework was developed hand-in-hand with the empirical development and testing of theories. Only after nearly two decades of empirical work, guided with a framework in mind, did Kiser and Ostrom (1982) explicitly identify, explain, and present it. Anderies and Janssen (2013) draw on the rich history of framework and theory development around the IAD. They are not starting from scratch. What they have done, instead, is to build a closely related framework off of the IAD framework that allows scholars to explore the robustness of social-ecological systems (and the policy processes embedded within them) by focusing on feedback mechanisms. Much of their recent and ongoing empirical work is devoted to developing and testing models based on the robustness framework. Heikkila and Gerlak (2013) have taken a different approach. They have used the framework mechanism to bring coherence to diverse literatures on learning processes. Although those diverse literatures represent considerable empirical work, very little empirical work has been conducted with their framework as a guide. Thus, whether the framework is useful in organizing diagnostic and prescriptive
analysis remains to be seen. The two scholars have laid out an ambitious and career-long research program for themselves and their students.

Constant conceptual development and refinement is a hallmark of vibrant theories and frameworks. Conceptual development may arise from empirical testing and from encounters with other closely related theories and frameworks. Feiock (2013) illustrates this process of development and refinement in his conclusion. He points to a number of promising lines of research that would further clarify and extend the institutional collective action framework, such as empirically measuring and testing the benefit cost curves of the different coordination mechanisms in relation to different levels of collaborative risk. Just as important is adopting and applying criteria to evaluate the performance of institutional mechanisms that move beyond concerns of efficiency to also include equity (the distribution of benefits and costs across actors) and political responsiveness. As Feiock (2013) notes, participants may reject efficiency-enhancing mechanisms to realize greater responsiveness to their demands. Each of these new lines of inquiry would make important contributions to theory development. Similar lines of inquiry can be found with, or need to be established for, the other approaches in this special issue.

Each of the contributions views policymaking processes as complex, whether it is multiple, overlapping, and interacting venues and institutional mechanisms composing regional governance, or adaptive social-ecological systems, or policy regimes, or policy subsystems, or the learning processes embedded within each. Adequately tackling the many questions raised and developing useful knowledge about policy processes and governance will require more than a single scholar or two working together. Grappling with multiple literatures and disciplines, gathering data in numerous settings, and using a host of analytic techniques require teams of researchers (Poteete, Janssen, & Ostrom, 2010). While professional incentives tend to work against extensive teamwork, the contributors to this special issue suggest that may be changing. Many of the contributors point to coauthors, colleagues, and students who are working together to further develop and extend research programs around the new frameworks and theories they are developing. We believe these efforts are worth joining.

**Conclusion**

To embrace the complexity of the policy process and the diversity of scholars who study it, this issue of PSJ presents six new theories. Ideally, these new theories will help scholars see the policy process from different perspectives and foster creativity and critical thinking. We, thus, support this collection for the potential contributions it may provide to the field. Even so, our support for these new theories does not mean that scholars should abandon their teaching and research using the more established theories. Research motivated by the established theories must continue for most of the major advancements in the field have emerged through decades of research by teams of scholars. To abandon the established theories would be the equivalent of starting over in developing descriptive and explanatory leverage on a range of topics from policy change to policy entrepreneurs.3
Adding these new theories to the mix, however, complicates the intellectual landscape for policy scholars. Readers will most likely ask how these new theories relate, compare, and contrast with some of the more established theories. To help answer such questions, the contributing authors have placed their theories into the existing literature. Readers will learn that these new theories emerged from a perceived dissatisfaction with the current approaches in solving some of the most central puzzles of the policy process. However, despite proper justifications for creating these new theories, questions will undoubtedly arise about their existence. Could Feiock’s (2013) institutional collective action framework, with its emphasis on strategic behavior among governments and organizations in developing institutional arrangements, fit within the IAD framework where it would find a close relative in the local public economies theory (Oakerson & Parks, 2011)? Should the methods and theoretical logic used for finding coalitions and understanding policy change from the narrative policy framework be incorporated within the advocacy coalition framework? Should the conceptual insights from Heikkila and Gerlak’s (2013) collective learning framework be further developed under the conceptual scaffolding of the IAD framework? While we encourage such questions and connections, we agree with Cairney (2013) that the best way to advance the field is to think of the multiple policy theories as complementary lenses. Thus, we recommend—at least for now—that scholars keep the new theories distinct from the old, reconsider the policy process from these new perspectives and, perhaps, take one or more of these new theories for a test drive. If we take these new theories seriously, we all might be surprised by the outcome.

Notes

1. There are other new and promising theories and approaches in the field that do not appear in this special issue. One is critical junctures theory, which was recently published in PSJ by Donnelly and Hogan (2012). Another is policy feedback theory (recently summarized by Campbell, 2012).

2. This description of theories is roughly comparable with Sabatier’s guidelines for theory development (1999, pp. 266–67). In comparison with frameworks and theories, models make very precise assumptions (when and where) in applying, testing, and developing a theory and specify the exact relationship among variables (e.g., mathematically).

3. There might be other reasons to abandon the established theories. For example, scholars should reconsider using frameworks and theories when the concepts are so poorly defined and inconsistently applied that knowledge fails to accumulate.

4. Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth (2011) have previously argued that the narrative policy framework is distinct from, and compatible, with the ACF.

References

