Our understanding of what policymaking is, and what policy analysts do, ineluctably evolved beyond a clear conception of policymaking as a linear, rational exercise to a more unsettled but pragmatic view of it as a complex, plurivocal, indeterminate, and often controversial act. This marked transition has been referred to as the argumentative (or discursive, linguistic, communicative) turn in policy (Fischer and Forester, 1983). As will be discussed, this opening up to this broader landscape has both enlivened and factured the policy discipline (to the extent that the word, discipline, is itself problematic). It has moved scholars and practitioners of policy to wonder, “what is our science?” or perhaps, more appropriately, “what is our folly”?

**Turning Points in the Practice of Policy**

The notion of policymaking and analysis as a rational process is traced to the rise of systems and decision analysis, beginning with the Second World War. This era saw the use of mathematics and the increasingly powerful growth in computer processing toward the systematic allocation of resources, first for military purposes but soon thereafter to large-scale social projects. The first policy thinktanks, of which RAND is perhaps emblematic, arose as seats of a grand planning endeavor, in which numerical optimization could be translated into optimal outcomes in the battlefield, in the emerging mega-cities and suburbs, in schools, hospitals, and other sites of social activity. This heritage draws, more than any other source, from the pioneering work of von Neumann and Morgenstern (1944) in conceptualizing a theory of games and decisions. This powerful analytical lens begins and ends with the notion of individual rationality as self-utility maximization, and of society as a collection of rational individuals. Translation of this system of rational thought to actual application would not be long—e.g., Schelling’s treatment war and conflict as multi-player games among rational actors (Schelling, 1980) or to Buchanan and Tullock’s use of the same model to analyze political institutions (1962). A central figure in the translation of the rational model to the public realm of allocation of goods and services is Karl Mannheim (1940), who provided an early vision of democratic social planning. In this modernist vision, exemplified by Le Corbusier’s utopian cities, society can be designed.

Where, then, did the turn away from the rational model occur? In part, we can trace some of it to a turn to reflection occasioned by a seeping disillusionment in these grand experiments in rational policymaking. Several key examples will suffice. But first, we ask the reader to excuse an inescapable “American-centricity” to this account. Much of the self-reflection one finds in the literature occurs in American academia and media. At the same time, we occasionally bring in examples from other regions to guard against monocentricity and, at times, as a counterpoint to some of these observations.

Disillusionment with the state’s grand social experiments began early. From the experience of Lyndon Johnson’s war on poverty, ending with every-increasing disparities between rich and poor, to military rational planning of the Cold War, ending in national defeat to the North Vietnamese, American ventures have failed in grand manner. In city planning, the rational design of large-scale Corbusian housing complexes ends with the demolition of the grandiose Pruitt-Igoe tenements in Chicago.
But this was not just the American experience. Indeed, one cannot look back on the great leaps in agricultural productivity of post-feudal China without recalling, at the same time, the social horrors of the Cultural Revolution. Across the world, grand state-led social engineering, led by institutions like the World Bank, resulted in large state agencies in developing nations that failed to deliver goods and services effectively and failed to eliminate entrenched poverty (Rapley, 1996).

In fact, much of this was foretold many decades earlier, in Weber’s description of the sweeping rationalization of society (Weber, 1904). In this account, rationalization involved the increasingly narrow reduction of social processes and institutions into means-end technocracies in which easily calculable or accountable outputs would be optimized in rationally designed institutions. In this type of zweckrationalitat, bureaus would maximize bureaucratic imperatives to the exclusion of deeper, perhaps more elusive social goals – e.g., energy departments would maximize energy output to the exclusion of environmental quality; transportation agencies would maximize road capacity to the detriment of walkable neighborhoods, etc. In his incisive critique of the Tennessee Valley Authority, Selznick described how the state agency itself became captured by the very entities it regulated (the power companies) because their interests coincided (Selznick, 1949). Skepticism over institutions grew ever deeper in the Watergate era, to be repeated from administration to administration, from the Iran-Contra affair to Iraq. A good summary account of the failures of the rational, modernist state is found in Scott’s description of high modernism (1988).

In contrast to the rationalist goal of clearly defined objectives and alternatives, Rittel and Webber describe pressing social issues as wicked problems – i.e., those for which no right or wrong exists, with ends for which there is no consensus in society, with alternatives and consequences that cannot be determined by technical analysis, and no good way to even ascertain if the problem has been solved or not (Rittel and Webber, 1973). In such a milieu, the maximizing impulse gives way to the question, “what is it exactly that we want to optimize?” and the consequentialist framework gives way to the question, “how do we act when we just don’t know what will result?”

Wicked problems are all around us. As this chapter is being written, society in the U.S. is caught in an ideological divide. As fiscal conservatives forced the country into a near default in pursuit of an ideological commitment to small government and low taxes, it became apparent how intractable the gulf was. The question quickly became that of choosing between maximizing individual wealth or social equity, and society itself was divided over the choice just as the liberals and conservatives in congress were. As to predicting consequences of one action versus another, one side clearly believed that budget-cutting would create growth, while the other believed that stimulus and near-term spending would pump-prime the economy. What is right when one side’s notion of rationality is a polar opposite of the other? At this time, there is evolving yet another turn in policy thought being precipitated by the Depression of 2008, and it is unclear how the policy disciplines will change from this time forward – that book is still being written.

**Turning Points in Policy Thought**

At the same time as the grand experiment at social intervention was beginning waver, there was evolving a revolution in the theoretical underpinnings of policy.

Part of the intellectual movement owes its trajectory to the ‘linguistic’ turn in the social sciences and humanities. The reference to language owes to the advancement in the field linguistics, beginning with Saussure’s structural theory of meaning (Saussure, 1916). Saussure posited that the meaning of words is not inherent in the words themselves, but something that arises in the place of the word in the constellation of other words forming the language system. So being, the word “poor” means what it means only in juxtaposition to
words like “destitute”, “rich”, “wealthy”, “penniless”, and all the other words that, by virtue of its position relative to each other, determine their respective meanings. Meaning is purely positional, which is why Saussure’s is said to be a structural theory of meaning. Post-structuralism comes on the heels of Saussure’s theory by positing further that not only is meaning relative and positional, it is not even fixed this way. Meaning is never determined and, instead, always subject to the free play or polysemy of language (Derrida, 1978).

Parallel developments include Wittgenstein’s philosophical treatise on logic, in which, contrary to logicians who maintain that fundamental truths can be arrived at by beginning with foundational facts and building logically outward, all truth claims are contingent. There is no logical truth, only language games wherein truth is established only within a particular language system, but never established categorically (Wittgenstein, 1922). Truth is socially constructed, subject to conventions established in social discourse, but always contextual, never categorical. In the sociology of knowledge, much of the unraveling of the notion of absolute knowledge is traced to Lyotard, who began by contrasting technical-scientific knowledge with narrative or folk knowledge, then argued that both were language games, no one more privileged than the other to any claim to truth (Lyotard, 1979). Lyotard’s declaration against universality of knowledge (what he called grand narratives) is thought to be the first emphatic statement of a new, postmodern age where there are no definitive truth claims, social norms, or teleological principles, but only individual and particular voices in a discursive babble (or paralogy, in Lyotard’s words).

This turning away from modernity, with its pursuit of universal truths and its espousal of the enlightenment of rationality and scientific inquiry, and a turning toward a never-ending questioning of purpose and meaning, had a profound effect on policy thought (and, as will be argued, a later and less dramatic effect on practice). Berger and Luckmann wrote about institutions as social constructs, subject to artifice and ever-changing convention (1966). This easily lends to a questioning of the institutional foundations of policy—the meaning of the state, the legislature, or the legal process. Others questioned even the primacy of science as a truth-establishing endeavour, showing that the scientific process itself is very much a cultural practice as other cultural practices such as taboo or courtship (Latour, 1987; and see Douglas, 1966 for an earlier statement of modernity and culture).

The effect of these intellectual revolutions on thinking about policy, and the institutions in which policy happens, has been deeply felt. Consider the linguistic turn and its turning away from logocentricity, which is the notion that words point to objective truths which language accurately represents. And consider the turn toward the idea that words themselves are not fixed in meaning but subject to play and debate. This extends immediately to the most physical object of policy, which are statements of policy, policy documents, and law. In this poststructural age, even a statement like “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness…” itself ceases to be self-evident. The words are enshrined for all of history, but its meaning changes. Equality and liberty mean different things today than when first written in Jefferson’s time. And what they mean today is itself subject to debate. Does equality mean extending the same bundle of rights and privileges to undocumented immigrants? If not, then these persons are constituted as less than citizens, which is what the Declaration of Independence meant by persons (which, in Jefferson’s time, referred to white, male landowners).

The telos of policy is also uncertain. What is the maximand of rational policymaking if we cannot even come to agreement over what liberty, rights, and public good mean? There is no transcending ethic that all can come to agreement over. In the context of the
ideological debates in the U.S. Congress, some have tried to appeal to an overweening ethical principle “Nation before Party!” but even this is questioned, as the nation’s good has been conflated on all sides with the party’s. As Sarah Palin said “Politics isn’t just a game of competing interests and clashing parties. The people of America expect us to seek public office and to serve for the right reasons. And the right reason is to challenge the status quo and to serve the common good.” Everyone, even the political maverick, lays claim to the public good.

The deconstruction of institutions has also had a profound effect, beginning with the decentering of the state (which parallels the decentering of the author as the font of meaning of the logos) away from the presumption that the state represents the people and acts for the greatest good of the greatest number (Mill, 1863). Devolution away from the state has been most marked in the ‘government to governance’ literature in which focus turns to networks of policy actors acting in often innovative ways (Koppenjan and Klijn 2004; Edelenbos et al., 2010; Schout, Jordan and Twena 2010).

It is perhaps no accident that a central figure in linguistics would emerge as one of the foremost critics of the new order, characterizing the state as a conglomerate of military, industrial, government, and big business interests (Chomsky and Herman, 1988). But perhaps the most trenchant critique would come from the French sociologist, Michele Foucault, who posited all modern institutions to be modeled after the same basic mold of the penal institution, designed to discipline the public and channel all human activity toward the furthering of the interests of the powerful (Foucault, 1977). And as the policymaking institutions go, so does the very integrity of the policy that emerges from them. And so, in a skeptical age, an action such as the TARP (Troubled Asset Relief Program), the U.S. Federal Reserve’s lending instrument that kept large financial institutions from bankruptcy, could be so casually described by political commentators in terms such as: “The bailout money is just going to line the pockets of the wealthy, instead of helping to stabilize the economy or even the companies receiving the bailouts: Bailout money is being used to subsidize companies run by horrible businessmen, allowing the bankers to receive fat bonuses, to redecorate their offices, and to buy gold toilets and prostitutes” (http://www.worldcrisisnewswatch.com/2011/05/tarp-bailout-scam-explained-government.html).

And, so, the postpositivist turn has come to mean not just a turning away from the notion that the public good was measurable and subject to systematic analysis and optimization. It, in fact, questioned the foundational meaning of policy itself, not only uncertainty over the correlation between policy actions and the public’s welfare, but that the very intent of policy could not be presumed to be aligned with such collective good.

**Policymaking in an Interpretive World**

To sum up the state of affairs thus far, if:

- policy goals cannot be set definitively, in a manner achieving broad consensus over them,
- policy situations cannot be described or analyzed in a positivist manner (i.e., their truth determined by some definitive measures),
- policy instruments and policy texts cannot be unambiguously determined with regard to their meaning,
- policymaking and implementing institutions cannot be assumed to have the capacity to realize policy targets, nor assumed to be aligned with them in purpose,

then what policy should be and how policy should be enacted cannot be determined in objective manner and, instead, a matter of interpretation. This is not a trivial proposition, inasmuch as the essence of community and political life, as Aristotle said in the Politics, is their “establishment with a view to some good.” If we cannot agree on what “good” means for the community, then how do we set policy and go about attaining its ends?

In an interpretive world, where meaning and good ends are subject to deliberation and debate,
policymaking is less about measuring and projecting the optimal trajectory for policy but the crafting of a compelling and consensus-building story that captures the public’s moral imagination and moves people and groups to action. In this account, we refer to a number of key works in the postpositivist policy literature—at this point, a handful of useful summary treatments can be found in Stone, Roe, Fischer and Forester, Fischer, Hajer, Kaplan, Schneider and Ingram, Yanow, Schon and Rein, and Dryzek.

Making sense of the world, and policy situations encountered in it, requires seeking satisfactory interpretations of these situations. For Ricoeur, people make sense of the world by crafting coherent narratives about it (Ricoeur 1981; also Bruner 1990). In Ricoeur’s words, “By means of the [narrative’s] plot, goals, causes, and chance are brought together within the temporal unity of a whole and complete action” (Ricoeur 1984, pg. ix). So it is, then, that by reconstructing a person’s underlying narrative account, we can best reproduce their experience of a situation. To do this, Ricoeur espouses a hermeneutic approach to narrative interpretation (Ricoeur 1976; 1991).

Goffman said something similar when he evoked the idea of frames, which were interpretive constructs used to create coherent meaning in an otherwise complex and incomprehensible situation (Goffman, 1974). Frames, as Goffman introduced them, are interpretive schemes that selectively highlight aspects of the issue and introduce a specific perspective that then allows one to capture reality in a simpler manner (Goffman, 1974; also Schön and Rein, 1994). But seldom found in this research is the explicit recognition that, very often or perhaps generally, these mental models, cultural models, and frames take on the appearance and essence of story. Bruner is one of the few to make this explicit connection (1987). As others have expressed it: “Given the amount of uncertainty about the world, people create cause-and-effect stories to fill in the blanks. Frames—also known as mental models, schemas—are essentially such stories” (Wesselink and Warner, 2010).

As a result, over several decades now, scholars have called for the systematic use of narrative analysis in public administration and policy research (Roe 1989, 1994; Yanow 1992, 2007; Balfour and Mesaros 1994; Sköldberg 1994; Schram and Neisser 1997; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Feldman et al. 2004; Ospina and Dodge 2005; Hampton 2009). This is joined by an already considerable literature on narrative approaches to studying organizational process and design (e.g., see Martin 1982; Boje 1991; Weick 1995; Boyce 1996; Czarniawska 1997; Pattriota 2003).

The move towards narrative approaches began with the interpretive turn in the social sciences (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Rabinow and Sullivan 1979, 1985). In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars like Fischer and Forester (1993) argued for an interpretive approach to public policy studies. The then prevalent positivist-instrumentalist bent of the social sciences had failed in carrying out its promise of giving a good account of what goes on in government and society at large (Dryzek 1982). The deductive approach of technical knowledge, with its search for objective measures and universal principles, failed to account for the fact that social phenomena mean different things to different people, and that such social constructions are highly contextual (Dryzek 1982, p. 310; also Fischer 1993). The primacy of technical knowledge was questioned and, increasingly, narrative knowledge began to be seen as equally valid (Lyotard 1979; Jameson 1984).
Among the first to use narrative analysis to study public controversies was Emery Roe (1989, 1994). His point was that narratives are one of the richest vehicles for the multiple and complex meanings that different stakeholders bring to a public issue. Martha Nussbaum says something similar when she describes how complex normative positions are best expressed in narrative form (Nussbaum 1990). Deborah Stone speaks to the power of “causal stories” which public managers and politicians craft, to construct reality in a way that best captures their interests and policy goals (1989). Given this irreducible element of social construction, she argues, understanding deliberation in the public realm requires an interpretive approach (Stone 1997). In our work, we look for stories that are told by different publics, including citizens’ groups and media.

In this discussion, we understand a narrative to simply mean a story, composed of a coherent sequence of events, involving a set of characters, which are actors with definite traits (e.g., see Ryan 2007; Bal 2009). When we reconstruct a narrative underlying an issue, we are simply composing a story, with events and characters, as if a narrator were recounting it to us directly. It is possible that no one source (whether a respondent or a text) ever gives us a complete narrative en toto, or that it gives us only one particular account of a larger narrative, and it is the analyst’s role to construct a story that reflects the different aspects of the issue in a coherent way. The resulting, reconstructed narrative is akin to the *fabula* (or storyline) of a literary piece – i.e., it presents the plot even when it cannot be found in any single narrator’s particular account (Bal 2009). Stories, then, are used to capture the imagination and support of decision-makers and public to rally around a policy initiative and form a coaliton in support of it. Sometimes, in fact, the stories themselves organization these coalitions and networks of policy actors –literally, policy movements and networks are emplotments of characters and events into one coherent narrative (Lejano, Ingram, and Ingram, 2012).

But this should not devolve into mere political “spin doctoring”, as the stories one finds in the policy realm can be accepted or ridiculed, engender belief or incredulity. How can we tell a good, from a bad, narrative interpretation of a public issue? We draw from two theoretical frames, first, a legal hermeneutic approach, second, a more pragmatic, policy-oriented one. The first approach, as found in Bennett and Feldman (1982), argues that stories contain some structural properties that help us perform three vital tasks in make social judgments (of which legal judgments are a subset). These tasks are first, to locate the central action of the story, and then to connect the various symbols in the story through the use of rules of interpretation (empirical, logical, normative, aesthetic and so on) that allow us to make sense of the pieces of information that surround this action. Third, these connections are evaluated for internal consistency, completeness and implications for the central action.

This coherence test also underlies Kaplan’s conditions for good narratives, namely, that they have to be empirically verifiable, rich and consistent, and coherent and unified (Kaplan 1986). When there is more than one, or conflicting accounts of a story can be empirically verified – that is to say, there is more than one “true account” – then the richer account has the upper hand. And finally, it has to be credible and believable – that it has to meet the “same consistency, congruency and unity tests that literary theorists have applied to fictional narratives” (Kaplan 1986).

The pragmatism test lies in the ability of the reconstructed narrative to explain the different contingencies and particularities surrounding the issue. Does it help us better understand the motivations of the different actors and their actions? In the case study to be taken up herein, does it help us understand why opposition to the project was so strong and effective, and why attempts by the agency at knowledge transfer did not suffice to quell this opposition?

Why is there a need to find meanings beyond the surface of what people say or write? First of all,
there may be processes or conditions, like ocean currents beneath a surface calm, that influence the proceedings even though these processes may be well removed from the matter at hand. Tradition, power, culture, and other forces of structuration act like this. Secondly, there may be issues that stakeholders, consciously or subconsciously, relegate to the background. Yanow notes that in public decision-making, some issues are verboten – i.e., “publicly unspeakable because there is no explicit public consensus underlying them” (Yanow 1992, pg. 400). This is also tied up with political necessities such as maintaining “public silences about contradictions” (pg. 418).

**Policy Institutions and the Postmodern Condition**

In the previous section, we took up the task of analyzing policy ends and determining policy directions when truth and good could not be unambiguously stated. We then, now, ask the closely related question of what is the policy enacting institution (an agency, a community, or an individual) to do under such uncertainty? How do policy actors proceed to act in the public realm?

If, taking a cue from Lyotard, all policy discussions were simply nothing other than language games, then policymaking must then be simply a competition over the best discourse. This can devolve into the classic pluralist model of competition over policy agendas. In this game, the better, more influential, better resourced interest group wins the policy battle. But this process can take different forms, in part determined by how policy institutions view the policy question.

Karl Popper’s epistemological framework viewed the establishment of truth and good as unachievable by any objective, scientific model but rather the contingent and defeasible setting of truth claims. By defeasible, we mean a process whereby claims are constantly subject to testing and confirmation or revision in the world of practical implementation (Popper, 1994). This incrementalist view of knowledge leads to a pluralist model such as that of Lindblom’s mutual partisan adjustment, wherein, through a tug of war of competing interests, society finds some reasonably optimal trajectory that is cognizant of the differing interests and their strength of preference (Lindblom, 1865). In this model, process determines the right.

But process can determine what is right in other ways. Habermas believed in the possibility of a kind of rationality that had a transcendent moment that allowed the diverse and conflictual set of policy actors to come to agreement over what is right (1984). In this model, what is true and good is not available a priori but reached through a process of agonistic debate. It is still a tug of war, carried out through dialogue, but with a difference: in this model, policy actors can come to a mutually agreed resolution of what is right and good, through the force of better argument. The key, in this communicative model of rationality, is the practice of the ideal speech situation, where all have an ability to speak and be heard and communication is nondistorted. This epistemological framework finds its application in different practical models for public deliberation and consensus-building (Bobrow and Dryzek, 1987; Healey, 1996; Innes and Booher, 2009; Susskind et al.,1999). In these situations, consensus can be reached through compromise across fixed but divergent interests (Fisher, Ury, and Patton, 1991), or through the construction of new understandings of a situation that move policy actors to reconsider their positions or to realize a higher goal that exceeds the provincial limits of individual preference (Schön and Rein, 1995).

The social construction of policy pertains not just to the identification of solutions to pressing social problems, but the active construction of the problems themselves. As Schneider and Ingram depicted it, what the issue is, what the stakes are, who the stakeholders are, and what their roles in the policy issue as constructed might be –that is, as targets, beneficiaries, victims, or agents of policy (Schneider and Ingram, 1997). In this framework, the key step is reached well before problem-solving begins.
but in the earlier phase of issue identification and stakeholder analysis. This view of policy lends a constructionist interpretation to the issue-salience and policy windows model of the policy process (see Kingdon, 1984). Issues do not exist a priori to be solved—rather, they are constructed in response to the priorities of agenda setters. In some cases, policy solutions pre-exist issues and can take the form of policy responses waiting for appropriate problems to be identified in order for them to be employed (March and Simon, 1958). In this point of view, military action (to take one example) is seen not as a response to an emergent conflict, but the other way around, i.e., conflicts are identified (or designed) as a response to an unmet demand for military action.

In this type of policy milieu, ideas (which are what social constructions are, after all) and the rhetorical skill by which they are deployed become the focus of policy attention (Throgmorton, 1991; Howlett and Rayner, 2008).

Models of the policy process taken up in the first section of this book still pertain. We are well advised to not jettison the idea of a policy process template, as de Leon advises. In the context of the linguistic turn, however, each of the stages in the policy cycle are now seen as forums for public deliberation, i.e., as part of an extended communicative process. As Laswell first suggested, an initial step still remains that of issue identification, but since meaning of policy can no longer be fixed, interpretations of issues (and their salience in the public mind) continues all throughout the policy process. Moreover, in the postmodern era, these processes need not necessarily lead to outcomes, at least as idealized, nor transition from one stage to another. Habermas’ speech situation need not lead to decisions, as the focus is on the communicative process. In Lyotard’s model of paralogy, consensus is never envisioned—it is enough to simply have debate and an airing of disparate views. In the postpositivist age, talk is action.

But this is just short step away from a complete rethinking of the policy process.

Deconstructing the Policy Process

Classic models of the policy process, involving stages or cycles of issue identification, analysis, and finally, implementation are actually translations of the rational model into institutional form. The classic rational model of analysis involves just these stages, from identification of overall goals or values, enumeration of policy alternatives, evaluation, decision, and enaction. The idealized policy process is a hypostatization of the model of rationality.

But just as, not merely poststructural theory, but the practice and follies of real-world policy has forced us to reconsider the rational model, just so is it possible to deconstruct the entire policy process. In part, this deconstructionist turn is guided by the new institutionalism that emerged from the fields of public administration and organization theory. In this postmodern view, institutions are themselves social constructions (e.g., Olsen and March, 1989) that themselves are crafted after well-constructed narratives (Weick, 1995). When institutions take on a repeatable form, it is not because of some objective property of these institutions, but rather, because their social constructions become norms or standards that diffuse from polity to polity (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991).

Just as the turn away from logocentricity involved an undoing the idea that meaning if fixed in the words of policy, so it goes that it undoes the primacy of the author as the center of meaning. From this point onward, policy will be, as Barthes put it, a “writerly” text (1975), where the implementors and targets of policy are just as much author as the writers of policy. This turns the policy process inside out. For example, where and at what stage is policy designed? In a deconstructed process, policy is not simply designed in a central location and diffused outward; rather, it undergoes transformation and redesign as new policy actors take on the institutional norm and make use of it.
Consider a policy on conditional cash transfers for the poor, wherein payments are made to recipients so long as the latter pledge to or prove that they use the money for medical or educational purposes. Then consider a situation wherein field agents who implement the policy by making the actual transfers to recipients and collect information, decide to allow a women’s cooperative to pool their outlays and obtain credit from a local bank. Are the field agents not also participating in design of the policy, not as formally laid out but as actualized in the field?

As Pressman and Wildavsky showed, neat boundaries between the policy design and implementation become blurred in practice (1979). In practice, all such conceptualizations of the policy process do blur in many different ways. For this reason, one can take a phenomenological approach to analyzing policy processes. Instead of beginning, in positivist fashion, from the universal concept and applying it to actual processes deductively, one can instead begin and end with the actual process in place, in actual context. As Husserl, the pioneer of phenomenological thought, put it: to the thing itself (Husserl, 1900). That is, do not analyze the process according to a pre-constructed template, whether it be one of stages or cycles of policymaking; rather, describe it as it is, as experienced and observed in place. For example, Argyris and Schön wrote about how actual programs might be characterized by theories-in-practice rather than theories underlying their design (1974).

An example of phenomenological description is seen in Lejano (2008), wherein habitat conservation policy is described not according to its formal design, but in the informal, dynamically evolving practices that made up the policy as experienced. In such a mode of description, formal descriptors of policy processes (e.g., designers, implementors, organizational roles and rules, bureaucratic structure) all blur into sometimes new categories requiring new modes of description. For example, in the afore-mentioned study, instead of describing the program as a set of rules, the author modeled it as a web of relationships, all cohering with each other in dynamic fashion.

Another mode of studying a deconstructed policy process is to study it in the same way as one might study the social construction of a narrative that is shared with others. The formation of such a narrative is congruent with the formation of the network of actors that share it. Latour, Callon, Law, and others have sought to describe the process by which such actor-networks are formed (Latour, 2005; Callon, 1986; Law, 1992). Callon describes it as the translation of the policy story into forms that can be assimilated by (or, perhaps more accurately, can emplot) other actors. In this translation process, he posits four stages (1986):

**Problematisation**: defining a problem that requires joint action, and set of actors who are potentially enmeshed in it.

**Interessement**: the negotiation of actors’ involvement and roles in the initiative.

**Enrollment**: actors acceptance and acting out of these roles.

**Mobilization**: the expansion of the network to include communities of support.

It is not an accident that the above sequence also resembles the exposition of a story’s plot –i.e., identification of the conflict, description of the setting and cast of characters, and mobilization of action on the characters’ part. The description of the network process is not far from the act of emplotment –in fact, they are essentially one and the same.

The turn away from the positivist notion of determinate problem solutions and a functionalist notion of the policy process leads to a turning toward, instead of the linear process of locating solutions, the discursive process of issue construction and deliberation. The focus is not on the location of the optimal solution, but on the gathering together of a critical coalition (or network) that supports and champions a policy idea to completion. Callon and Latour
took this same road by focusing on the network formation process. Howlett and Ramesh (1998) discussed how to delineate the characterize policy subsystems (which are quite the same as the networks described above) in terms of their openness to new policy ideas and givenness to policy change. In this literature, the postpositivist focus is not so much on the narrative and its narration, but on the formation of coalitions and shifts in memberships and allegiances (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993), which one reasons, leads to shifts in their shared narratives. By retaining the classic notion of interest-based coalitions, these theories are able to combine frame, interests, and knowledge base in one process theory.

There are other ways to modify the otherwise linear, rational process model. As Goffman had shone light onto social and organizational processes that occurred “backstage” (e.g., on the street, at home, in the coffee shop, smoky room, etc.) rather than the foreground of policymaking (e.g., senate floor, parliament, executive boardroom, etc.), researchers began paying attention to informal processes (e.g., Innes and Booher, 2010), decentralized decision-making in the field (e.g., Lipsky, 1980), or policymaking within complex networks (e.g., Kickert, Klihn and Koppenjan, 1997). The transition away from formal institutional processes finds its most ambitious form in a growing literature on practice (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984). The modernist impulse would seek to find universal rules in the structures that govern individuals in society (as in dialectical materialism or classic political institutional theory) or within the individual (as in rational choice or behavioralist theories). In contrast, theorists of practice aim to represent meaning and action as traversing the structure-agency divide. For example, Bourdieu discusses how individual decision-making is an improvisation guided by sometimes rigid controls, often not transparent to the individual and often immanent in the body’s own habitual movements (1990). In this framework, enacting of reproductive health policy, as an example, is as much or more determined by the everyday routines women and men follow subconsciously than formal rules and programs. The functioning of political institutions is steered by similar habitual patterns, such as talk and dress and relationships between members of an organization. Such focus on practice, while by now well established in the organizational literature, is just beginning to have an effect on policy studies.

Furthermore, if policymaking proceeds through the construction of a policy narrative, then perhaps it is also through narrative means by which the process is best described. This involves soliciting stories from policy actors caught up in the process (as in Pentland, 1999; also Lejano, Ingram, and Ingram, 2012). Description of the process is captured by narrative. These stories can vary from place to place –perhaps aligned with easily recognized templates (e.g., policy stages) in some respect, but finely and richly different in the way it unfolds. Through a postpositivist lens, these fine differences are as important as the general commonalities. Whereas the positivist lens emphasizes deductive reasoning from universal principles (e.g., policy stages), postpositivism focuses on the particulars of the phenomenon.

To sum up: why are processes not so easily circumscribed in a postpositivist frame of analysis? Because policy no longer can be seen as an object that can be objectively determined, and neither can we place exactly where policy is crafted and how. Policy meanings cannot be pinned down and, so, where there used to be analysis, we have deliberation all throughout the policy process, and where there used to be pure implementation, we now have redesign and reinterpretation of policy. Authorship of policy is not fixed and determinate, and where a policy is authored is similarly deconstructed to include a new constellation of policy actors.

The Problem of Social Construction

Contrary to a radical constructionist interpretation of policy, most of the scholars cited above do not espouse simple constructionism (Fischer, 2003). Policy stories
are not simply fictions crafted out of sheer artifice. We discussed, earlier, certain tests of validity and pragmatic value that allow us to discern whether one narrative is more credible than another. Just because we weaken the notion of objective standards for truth does not mean an inability to tell better from worse policy narratives. Social constructs have to be coherent, and the parts of their story have to be internally logically consistent.

As importantly, policy stories have to, ultimately, be grounded in the real experiences of policy actors. The last ten years have been a sobering experience for us all, but especially policy scholars. Notwithstanding the concerted effort to build momentum for the war in Iraq, at some point, policymakers had to reconcile their policy narrative with the nagging fact that there were no Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq. Notwithstanding the degree to which the homeownership narrative captured the public psyche, at some point in the last few years, the socially constructed value of property had to reconcile with the limitations of earning power of the would-be property owners, and bubbles began to burst. There are not an infinite array of narratives that can capture the public agenda, but only those that cohere with how people and policymakers understand themselves and the world around them. Such understandings are borne by learning over lifetimes of experience.

Whether bubbles or WMDs, what confronts the public today is the turning back of the pendulum away from a hapless constructionism to a sober realization that policy narratives are not fictions but rather attempts to represent reality. The failure of cherished institutions (market, state, and community) have created a void in the way we idealize policy process.¹ What are needed now are approaches that reconcile the desire for objective foundations for policymaking with the inescapable indeterminate nature of policy. Perhaps what we are beginning to see is a turn toward a post-constructionist understanding of policy and its processes. Doubtless, we see this in the recent focus on evidence-based policymaking (Pawson 2006; Bochel and Duncan 2007; Khagram and Thomas 2010). But another part of it may be a reversion to pure ideology. It seems that politics, the world over, are now caught in a divide between requiring more and better-informed judgement from decision-makers or giving up on rational process altogether and relying on exhortations from political extremists (and the latter occur in many forms – pastors, mullahs, talk show hosts, governors and former governors). In this ironic age, the new freedoms of digital communication and social networks seems to go hand in hand with the increasing demise of free and democratic public discourse.²

The challenge for political life is to discover a new middle ground where polities are free to imagine and craft new futures while grounding deliberation on the realities of everyday life. But where is that middle ground? As we stumble onto the second decade of this century, we should expect that, given the constructed dilemmas of Iraq, the property bubble, and others, society should take a turn toward a new pragmatism. Perhaps this is starting to happen. And yet, at the same time, we see broad swaths of society, in different countries, turn not to pragmatism but an ever more radical, more extreme ideological position from which, it would seem, no rational argument or even deliberation is possible.

Policy studies have to find such middle (or higher) ground, as well (Lejano, 2006). Perhaps as a necessity, policy scholars who take the route

¹ As an example, the ongoing financial crisis gripping the European Union threatens institutional models that envision new regional modes of collaborative policymaking. Asian models of state-sponsored interventions in the market begin to reveal wicked trade-offs between productivity and quality of life and liberty. And the American model...

² As this chapter is being written, the author’s own university is undergoing a crisis over free speech – e.g., students arrested for writing, with chalk on pavement, against runaway tuition free increases.
of postpositivism have espoused a deep critique, and often wholesale rejection, of the positivist model. But this has created a bifurcated literature, with neither side wary of the achievements of the other. Doctoral students in the fields of policy and public administration are asked to choose, early in their academic careers, to choose one or other of these alternatives. To postpositivists, quantitative models seem to merely scratch the surface of institutions, and to positivists, discursive approaches appear to be pure artifice. If the first decade of this new century is any indication, measurement and discourse need a new reconciliation.

As one recalls the turn that policy studies took after the crises of the 1960s and 70s, one wonders what corner we are turning now.
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