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## *A Comparison of Theories of the Policy Process*

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Scholars compare theories to consider how to combine their insights or accept some and reject others (Sabatier 2007a, 330). They often do this implicitly or in an ad hoc way. Our aim is to add some rigor to this process by examining the three criteria used most frequently by Sabatier and Weible:

1. To what extent does the approach cover the basic elements of a theory, such as a shared vocabulary and defined concepts?
2. Are the scholars who are applying the theory developing an active research program?
3. Does the theory explain a large part of the policy process?

Our goal is not to judge the best theories in this volume.<sup>1</sup> Rather, we aim to make these theories comparable by identifying their key concepts, when and how each is particularly useful, and the extent to which the insights of different theories can be combined.

This takes place in the context of a policy theory field that is not conducive to systematic comparison. The literature contains a complicated mix of frameworks, theories, and models (Schlager 1999, 2007). The major theories and frameworks have generally been produced independently of each other and were not designed with these comparisons in mind. They contain different frames of reference, foci, and concepts. Some are used to produce a parsimonious understanding of a large number of cases; others tend to emphasize in-depth understanding of single cases. Their assumptions and findings may complement or contradict each other. They may attach different meanings to the same concepts (Cairney 2013a, 7). They may require extensive training to

understand fully. So a systematic comparison is an important aim in itself—to foster broad agreement on how we, as a group of scholars, can understand and judge different approaches. This is as much a practical requirement as a scientific statement: we need to know what information to pay attention to and what to ignore and to ensure that the information we receive can be meaningfully compared with our own.

## HOW SHOULD WE COMPARE THEORIES? THREE CRITERIA

The first criterion is the extent to which the basic elements of a theory are covered. Following Weible (2014), we consider the extent to which each theory has (1) a defined scope and levels of analysis, (2) a shared vocabulary and defined concepts, (3) explicit assumptions, and (4) identified relationships among key concepts or variables. Following Schlager (2007), we also consider (5) a model of the individual grounding the theory. People making choices are at the heart of policy studies, but not all theories conceptualize this process extensively.

The second criterion is the development of an active research program. We consider four indicators of this criterion: (1) the degree to which the theory has been employed actively by researchers and published as journal articles and books; (2) whether the theory has been tested in multiple contexts and with multiple methods; (3) whether scholars involved in employing the theory have made an attempt to actively develop shared research protocols, methods, or approaches; and (4) how the theory has been adapted or modified over time.

Developing indicators of the third criterion—whether a theory explains a large part of the policy process—is the most challenging because we know that the policy process is complex and there is no “general theory” (Smith and Larimer 2009, 15–19). This prompts us to consider a fundamental question: Given that we must simplify a complex world to understand it, which elements do policy scholars treat as crucial to explanation? These crucial elements are identified in similar ways (see, e.g., Weible 2014; John 2003; Cairney 2012b; Schlager 2007).

We are interested in how each theory describes the following elements and explains the interactions between them to provide an overall explanation of policymaking systems:

1. *Actors making choices*: The policymaking world may include thousands of people. To simplify, policy theories often categorize and describe key actors. Actors can be individuals or collectives, and collectives can range from private companies to interest groups to governments bodies (Weible 2014).
2. *Institutions*: These are the rules, norms, practices, and relationships that influence individual and collective behavior. The choices of

actors are explained partly by their understanding of and adherence to rules. Rules can be formal and widely understood, such as when enshrined in law or a constitution, or informal and only understood in particular organizations. Institutions at one level (e.g., constitutional) can also shape activity at another (e.g., legislative or regulatory), establish the types of venue where policy decisions are made, and make the rules that allow particular types of actors or ideas to enter the policy process.

3. *Networks or subsystems*: These are the relationships between actors responsible for policy decisions and the “pressure participants” (Jordan, Halpin, and Maloney 2004), such as interest groups with which they consult and negotiate. Senior policymakers delegate responsibility for policymaking to bureaucrats, who seek information and advice from groups. Groups exchange information for access to and potential influence within government. Bureaucracies and other public bodies (or forums for collective choice) may have operating procedures that favor particular sources of evidence and some participants over others.
4. *Ideas or beliefs*: This broad category captures how theories deal with ways of thinking or the knowledge that plays a role in the policy process. This category may include beliefs, knowledge, worldviews, and shared definitions of policy problems, images, and solutions within groups, organizations, networks, and political systems. Some ideas or beliefs may be taken for granted or rarely questioned—such as core beliefs, values, or paradigms. Others may be more malleable, such as proposed solutions to policy problems.
5. *Policy context*: This category describes the wide array of features of the policymaking environment that can influence policy decisions. It can refer to the often-changing policy conditions that policymakers take into account when identifying problems and deciding how to address them, such as a political system’s geography, biophysical and demographic profile, economy, and mass attitudes and behavior (Hofferbert 1974). It can also refer to a sense of policymaker “inheritance”—of laws, rules, institutions, and programs—on entry into office (Rose 1990).
6. *Events*: Events can be routine and anticipated, such as elections that produce limited change or introduce new actors with different ideas. Or they can be unanticipated incidents, including social or natural crises or major scientific breakthroughs and technological changes (Weible 2014). Their unpredictability makes them difficult to theorize, and they can often be treated as “errors” or external factors providing an additional source of explanation. Or they can be

incorporated within theories that focus on how actors interpret and respond to events.

The main complication is that policy theories do not treat these concepts in the same way. First, these terms are ambiguous, producing debate about their meaning and most useful applications. For example, there are at least four major approaches to studies of institutionalism (rational choice, historical, sociological, and constructivist), and it is still difficult to place many texts within those categories (Lowndes 2010, 65; Hall and Taylor 1996, 939–940; Peters 2005, 108; Cairney 2012b, 77). These problems are compounded when we try to connect terms and use a range of other ambiguous concepts—such as power, evolution, punctuated equilibrium, and policy entrepreneurs—to provide a complete explanation (Cairney 2012b, 271–273). Additionally, each of the elements we identified above includes multiple subelements, and scholars may debate whether the subelements can be combined or form part of the same overarching concept.

Second, the boundaries between terms are fluid. As one example, institutions are defined primarily as rules and norms, which make them difficult to disentangle from ideas or networks. In particular, “constructivist institutionalism” challenges the suggestion that institutions represent fixed structures (Hay 2006, 65; Béland and Cox 2010, 4; Cairney 2012b, 83–84). Other studies identify shared rules and norms as the main explanation for network or subsystem stability (Jordan and Maloney 1997). Similarly, one person’s event or context is another person’s idea, particularly if events only become important when important people pay attention to them.

Third, theories explore these processes at the level of the individual, network, or system. The metaphor of the telescope is useful: (1) zooming in to see individuals, then zooming out to see groups and organizations, networks, and political systems (Cairney 2012b, 346); and (2) shifting one’s focus from the “top” to the “bottom” or from one organization to another. Further, not all theories focus on all aspects of the policy process. Some focus on a small number of these terms—partly because trade-offs exist between explaining either one element in depth or the whole process. So we should not assume that each theory refers to each term in the same way or shares the same focus. Rather, we consider how each theory uses these elements of the policy process and describes their interaction to produce an explanation of a significant part of the policy process.

### **Comparative Criterion 1: Elements of a Theory**

To help organize our comparison, Table 10.1 presents a brief summary of the indicators we use to explore our first criterion: key elements of a theory. These indicators include (1) a defined scope and levels of analysis, (2) shared vocabulary and concepts, (3) defined assumptions, (4) identified relationships among key concepts, and (5) the model of the individual.

TABLE 10.1 How Are the Elements of a “Theory” Covered?

|  | MSA   | PET  | SCF  | PFT  | ACF   | NPF   | IAD   | DOI   |
|--|---|--|--|--|---|---|---|---|
| Scope and levels of analysis           | Scope: policy choice under ambiguity<br>Level: system, but implicit, and focus is on actors' coupling streams | Scope: political system toward stability and periodic major change<br>Level: system                | Scope: policy dynamics and target populations<br>Level: system, but implicit   | Scope: how policies shape politics and subsequent policymaking<br>Level: system, but implicit  | Scope: advocacy coalition interaction, learning, and policy change<br>Levels: coalitions and subsystems | Scope: influence of narratives on public opinion, policy dialogue, agenda setting, and policy change<br>Levels: individual, coalition, societal | Scope: how people devise institutions and the outcomes of those processes<br>Level: the “action situation” may be broadly interpreted                                       | Scope: policy diffusion<br>Levels: policymaking venues/states   |
| Shared vocabulary and defined concepts | Primarily the five structural elements of the framework   | Numerous key concepts  | Numerous key concepts  | Primarily policy feedback and the types of effects   | Numerous key concepts   | Numerous key concepts, some borrowed  | Numerous key concepts, expanded further by SES  | Primarily diffusion and key concepts explaining diffusion   |
| Assumptions                            | Explicitly defined; see assumptions 1 to 3 in Zahariadis (2014)   | Included (e.g., logic of decision-making), but not explicitly labeled as assumptions               | Explicitly defined   | Implicitly defined assumptions underlying the rationale for effects  | Explicitly defined  | Explicitly defined  | Defined, but very generally at the framework level  | Some assumptions explicitly defined for the models  |
| Model of the individual                | Challenges assumptions of comprehensive rationality; focus on ambiguity                                       | Bounded rationality, particularly relating to attention  | Boundedly rational, but emphasis on decision-making based on values, emotion via heuristics  | Not explicitly discussed in this volume; suggests individual choice is shaped by policies and institutions   | Boundedly rational; emphasis that individuals are motivated by beliefs and prone to devil shift         | Homo narrans; builds on bounded rationality with extensive focus on use of heuristics   | Multiple are compatible, but the researcher must be explicit with the model   | Not explicit, but recognizes that both bounded rationality and rational choice models may be compatible |
| Relationships among key concepts       | Broadly, three “streams” that come together during “windows of opportunity” to cause major policy change      | Factors that lead to major policy change and those that constrain change or produce incrementalism | How policy designs identify and affect target populations and how social constructions result in different types of policy designs | The effects of public policy on the meaning of citizenship, form of governance, power of groups, and political agendas—all of which affect future policy | Factors that influence coalition formation, policy learning, and policy change                          | Influence of narratives on public opinion, coalitional strategies, and policy learning  | Not specifically at the framework level, but at the theory level (e.g., conditions that lead to collective action and principles of robust common-pool resource governance) | Determinants of policy diffusion and adoption   |

**Scope and levels of analysis.** Each of the theories in this volume has a relatively well-defined scope and provides a different lens on the policy process. All of the theories, to some degree, address questions related to policy formulation and change within their scope. Multiple Streams Analysis (MSA), Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (PET), and Diffusion of Innovations (DOI) models tend to emphasize the stages of the policy process more than the other theories, although each poses distinct questions. MSA explores how government makes policies under conditions of ambiguity (see Chapter 2). PET explains why and how political processes, generally characterized by stability and incrementalism, occasionally produce large-scale departures from the past (see Chapter 3). DOI considers how policies diffuse across states and other jurisdictions. The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) and Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) also place a premium on studying questions related to policy formulation and change, but they study other policy process questions as well. The ACF digs into questions around coalition formation and learning, for example. The NPF looks at how narratives influence public opinion, how these narratives are structured, and how they reflect policy beliefs. Although two of the theories, the Social Construction Framework (SCF) and Policy Feedback Theory (PFT), address policy formulation and change, they focus more on questions of policy design and dynamics, such as the feedback of policies into society. The Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) Framework differs from the other theories in that it is open to a more generic investigative scope; namely, it considers questions related to how institutions (as rules) are crafted and how they affect human behavior. Within that scope, issues of policy formulation and change can and do arise, as do questions about the effects of policy design on action situations (e.g., through its emphasis on diverse evaluative criteria).

For most of the theories or frameworks covered in this volume, the level of analysis, or where conclusions from the research are drawn or inferred, is often a policy “system” or subsystem. However, it is important to differentiate between the level of analysis and the unit of observation. Often researchers applying the theories rely on units of observation that differ from the primary level of analysis. For example, ACF studies typically use individuals or organizations as the unit of observation to draw conclusions about coalitions or subsystems.

Some theories are more explicit than others about what levels of analysis are of interest. The NPF directs researchers to three possible levels of analysis (macro, meso, micro), whereas the ACF identifies and defines two levels of analysis (policy subsystems and coalitions). PET discusses the nature of decision-making in political systems but does not define them as directly as the ACF. The SCF, MSA, and PFT also explore questions related to policy systems but do not pay close attention to the boundaries of those systems. DOI studies look at policymaking venues for the level of analysis. Still, DOI draws inferences about how policies diffuse across a system or collection of states

(i.e., a political system made up of states, such as the United States or European Union). The primary level of analysis in the IAD also diverges from the others in that it looks at action situations. However, the breadth of the concept of the action situation means that it could be viewed as a coalition, network, or other type of collective action venue, depending on the research question addressed. Decision-making within the action situation can also operate at constitutional, collective, and operational levels.

**Shared vocabulary and defined concepts.** All of the theories or frameworks presented have developed shared vocabulary and a set of concepts that inform the research scope. Most are explicit about their definitions and have incorporated the primary key concepts into principal diagrams and figures that represent the scope of the theory. The IAD and its spin-off framework, the Social-Ecological Systems Framework (SES), may have the most extensive set of shared vocabulary, likely due to its broad scope (see Table 8.2, XXX). Whether an extensive set of vocabulary is a useful guide or a possible hindrance to the novice scholar adopting the theory or framework is an open question. Additionally, the set of key concepts identified within these theories can evolve, or the theory may incorporate new concepts or shift their emphasis. We discuss some of these changes below in our examination of research program coherence.

**Assumptions.** All of the theories in this volume offer at least implicit assumptions that underlie their theoretical logic. The IAD's assumptions are the most general and least specified at the framework level. Implicitly, the IAD draws out some assumptions about institutions or rules (e.g., that they range from highly visible statutes to regularized patterns of behavior and that they may operate at operational, collective, or constitutional levels). MSA bases its theoretical logic on three key assumptions: individual versus systemic information processing; the time constraints of policymakers; and the independence of the politics, policy, and problem streams. PET's assumptions are compatible with the first two assumptions of MSA, emphasizing the nature of individual and collective decision-making, but PET presents a more sophisticated logic of decision-making, which includes the drivers of positive and negative feedback in the political system and the importance of a policy image. Many (and PET and the ACF in particular) assume that the focus of policymaking activity is the subsystem. The SCF and NPF assume that the world is socially constructed. The other assumptions underlying the two frameworks differ to some degree. The SCF, shown in Figure 4.1 (XXX), emphasizes the logic of how target populations are portrayed in policy designs and how policy designs are affected by past designs. The SCF further argues that policies create politics. The NPF recognizes that social constructions matter in public policy but adds assumptions about the structure of narratives.

**Model of the individual.** The model of the individual in many theories is part of the stated assumptions. Almost all theories adopt a broad focus on bounded rationality, which recognizes that people do not have the time, resources, and cognitive ability to consider all issues and act optimally, so they use informational shortcuts and other heuristics or emotional cues to produce what they perceive to be good-enough decisions. This produces a range of interesting directions for further research on the consequences of these limits. A few examples include actors framing the same problem very quickly in very different ways (MSA, PET), actor attention lurching dramatically from one problem to another (MSA, PET), actors using biased judgments with selective information to support or institutionalize their understanding of the problem and its solution (SCF), coalitions competing fiercely because they romanticize their own cause and demonize their opponents (ACF), and states emulating others without learning why they are perceived to be successful (DOI).

Despite the widespread recognition of bounded rationality among the theories, we find different emphases in the models of the individual. The SCF and NPF go further than the other theories in recognizing that humans draw from emotions in making decisions, and the NPF identifies “nonrational” gut feelings and confirmation bias. The theories also differ in their recommendations about how to work with the model of the individual. The IAD accepts that its framework can accommodate differing models of the individual; some make the assumption of comprehensive rationality, whereas others explore bounded rationality. DOI also recognizes that both bounded rationality and rational choice models may be compatible with the theory. The NPF seeks to synthesize approximately ten ideas about rationality and decision-making to produce a model that is more nuanced but difficult to falsify. On the opposite end of the spectrum, PFT is the least explicit about its model of the individual. Like the other theories, however, PFT suggests that individuals are not perfectly rational because their choices and understanding of the political world are influenced by policy designs.

**Relationships among key concepts.** Each body of literature presents relationships among key variables that build on the logic of the theory’s assumptions and models of the individual—often in the form of explicit hypotheses or propositions. Most often these relationships explore how different factors (e.g., contextual variables, narratives, coalitional structures, institutional venues, or framing of target populations) affect an outcome within the policy process (e.g., major or minor policy change, public opinion of policies, policy efficacy). Among the theories, MSA appears to offer more generic or conceptual relationships between variables. The main argument of MSA is that three “streams” (problems, policies, politics) come together during “windows of opportunity” to cause major policy change. PET is more specific in laying out

key relationships. It identifies institutional, subsystem, and decision-making factors that lead to major policy change, as well as those that constrain change or produce incrementalism. Within its models, PET further develops more precise hypotheses, such as explanations of the distribution of budget changes over time. Similarly, DOI refers to highly specified variables of both internal and external “determinants” in its models that aim to explain why a policymaking venue is likely to adopt a new policy. NPF also develops a number of hypotheses that detail how narratives influence public opinion, coalitional strategies, and policy learning.

The SCF and PFT highlight the importance of policy feedback and dynamics. For example, the SCF’s hypotheses explore both how policy designs identify and affect target populations and how social constructions result in different types of policy designs. PFT does not present specific hypotheses in the overview chapter in this volume, but individual studies that examine policy feedback have explored how different types of policy designs influence outcomes such as the power of groups and political agendas. PFT research also seeks to examine the mechanisms that drive these relationships.

Both the ACF and the IAD are open to tackling diverse sets of relationships among key concepts or variables. They present these relationships both at the general “framework” level (see Figure 6.1, XXX, and Figure 8.1, XXX), identifying the broad categories of factors that can influence policy processes (or action situations in the case of the IAD), and at the theory level in explaining more precise phenomena within the policy process. The ACF’s theory-level explanations address the nature of coalitions, policy learning, and policy change. The IAD is less explicit about its hypotheses at the theory level than the ACF, but it does lay out the conditions that lead to collective action around common-pool resource governance, as well as the principles or factors associated with robust common-pool resource institutions. Game theory models employed by IAD scholars have been used to identify more specific relationships about collective action.

Not all of the theories offer causal or explanatory hypotheses; rather, some present descriptive hypotheses. These would include the ACF’s propositions on coalitions or PET’s propositions about the frequency and characterization of budget distributions. At the same time, some propositions stem directly from their assumptions, such as the ACF’s ordering of beliefs. The SCF’s propositions are also good examples. Its third proposition starts with the assumption that “social constructions emerge from emotional and intuitive reactions and then are justified with selective attention to facts.” It is not clear whether this portion of the proposition is meant to be tested or is simply designed to lay out the logic underlying the second part of the proposition: “Policymakers, especially elected politicians, respond to (and exploit) these emotional and intuitive judgments in their rationales and selection of policy elements.” PET’s assumptions also appear as propositions or hypotheses. For instance, PET argues that

bounded rationality produces disproportionate attention and that ambiguity leads to reframing or institutional “friction” may produce punctuations. When wrapped up with assumptions, the underlying logic of such propositions or hypotheses may be difficult to test directly—although the implications of the assumptions can be, and have been, observed across these theories as indirect tests of these hypothesized relationships.

### **Comparative Criterion 2: Activeness of Research Programs and Their Coherence**

Table 10.2 presents a summary of our assessment of the theories’ levels of research activity and coherence. Most have produced a relatively large number of publications (in the hundreds), perhaps with the exception of the NPF, which is a relatively new framework in the policy literature. As the number of applications of each of the theories has grown, so too has the diversity of contexts within which they are applied. Still, the majority of applications across the theories covered here have been in the United States or Europe, often across national or state levels, with few at local levels. The IAD and its companion SES framework are the exception. Some tend to employ quantitative methods with sophisticated modeling techniques (e.g., PET and DOI); others have relied more heavily on qualitative or case study applications (e.g., MSA, SCF, PFT). Others, like the ACF, IAD, and NPF, have emphasized both quantitative and qualitative approaches and multiple types of data sources, such as surveys, document coding, and experiments.

Across the theories, we find strengths and weaknesses in how each advances its research program in terms of the extent and diversity of the research applications, the shared research protocols, and adaptations to the theory over time. When the MSA is applied, its strength is also its weakness. Its core concepts have broad intuitive appeal, which may make it feasible to apply without being immersed in the research program over a long period. It also has been modified to make it more readily applicable outside the United States. Most applications have been cases studies that use the concepts of contingency and ambiguity to focus in detail on why key decisions at particular stages were made in particular places at particular times. The explanations are impressive but difficult to generalize. The MSA will benefit from meta-analysis to gauge the coherence of the literature and its insights.

When compared to MSA studies, PET research generally has treated its core concepts and their interaction consistently and coherently. Some concepts have been modified, and methods have advanced over time. There is potential for reduced clarity as the Comparative Agendas Project expands and new scholars (with different backgrounds and less training in PET) become involved, although PET’s history of shared datasets and methods may help. When applied, PET has two major strengths. The original work produced in-depth case studies

TABLE 10.2 How Active Is the Research Program?

|  | MSA   | PET  | SCF   | PFT  | ACF  | NPF   | IAD  | DOI  |
|--|---|--|---|--|--|---|--|--|
| Extent of publications                                   | Kingdon's two editions plus numerous applications   | Extensive and growing rapidly, with over three hundred publications in Web annex   | Numerous applications: 111 listed between 1993 and 2013   | Numerous applications, including books and journal articles  | Numerous applications: 224 listed between 1987 and 2013  | Fewer than others, but growing  | Numerous, especially common-pool resource applications   | Numerous, with rapid growth; over one hundred per year since 2010  |
| Tested in multiple contexts and/or with multiple methods | Applications: diverse policy domains, including subnational, national, and international levels<br>Methods: mostly case studies                           | Applications: budgets and agendas in diverse policy domains, both national and international<br>Method: mostly quantitative  | Applications: many different policy issues/areas and multiple levels of government<br>Methods: mostly case studies                              | Applications: social welfare policies and case studies, but more attention to other policy areas<br>Methods: mostly case studies and some quantitative | Applications: multiple countries and settings, but with initial bias toward U.S. and environmental policy<br>Methods: mixed (e.g., surveys, case studies, document analyses, interviews) | Applications: mostly to the United States in a few policy contexts, but still new<br>Methods: mixed (e.g., case study, document coding, experiments, surveys) | Applications: mostly common-pool resources around the world, but other policy domains too<br>Methods: mixed (e.g., meta-analyses, field research, experiments) | Applications: multiple policy topics, often at the U.S. state level, but also national<br>Methods: mostly quantitative |
| Shared research protocols, methods, approaches           | Unclear, but studies appear inspired by broad, intuitive concepts   | Shared models of budget changes, agenda change; shared datasets, website, and so forth   | Unclear, but some aspects (allocation) tested more than others  | Unclear, but publications highlight common research agendas among the diverse community of scholars  | Coding forms and surveys often available as appendices; many ACF survey questions replicated, but application of protocols not always consistent   | Shared codebooks and methods for identifying narratives, but too soon to tell how scholars will adopt the methods   | Framework is the shared approach with a large and active network; a number of shared datasets and models; less guidance on SES                                 | Key methods and variables identified for internal determinants model; common use of event history analysis             |
| Change or adaptation to the theory over time             | Scholars such as Durant and Diehl and Zahariadis have modified the theory to apply to foreign policy or European cases, but not as part of a core program | Hypotheses added, concepts modified, methods advanced; major shift from case study focus on the United States to a general punctuated hypothesis applied in new contexts | Propositions slightly modified over time, with some recent emphasis on the policy change argument, but relatively stable over past twenty years | Some evolution of the underlying theory of feedback and mechanisms   | Hard core of the theory maintained, with multiple revisions, including 1993 (major edited volume), 1998 (European focus), and 2007 (clarifying shocks)                                   | New theory; arguably represents a change in the wider positivist approach to studying policy narratives   | Has evolved since the 1980s, clarifying vocabulary and concepts and links to theory and models; addition of the SES is the main adaptation                     | Diffusion mechanism has been made more explicit and tested more explicitly and rigorously in the models                |

combining qualitative and quantitative methods of postwar policy continuity and change. The general punctuation hypothesis extended the analysis to a quantitative account of stability and instability in budgets and legislative outputs. This has helped shift the focus from agenda setting to the broader process (although the original work, covering decades, examined policy continuity and change over several “cycles”). The explanations are increasingly generalizable, across levels of U.S. government and in multiple countries (particularly budget distributions), although a meta-analysis would be useful to determine the effect of this application on PET’s core focus.

The SCF is generally applied to in-depth qualitative case studies (and non-empirical theoretical studies), partly because the role of ideas underpinning power relationships is difficult to operationalize and observe. The framework’s strength is its relative coherence, based on the identification of two key drivers of policy, which structure multiple case studies. Its most frequent application has been to the U.S. federal level, but its reach is expanding, and its focus on multiple policy areas is impressive. Similarly, PFT has tended to emphasize in-depth case studies, especially on social policy topics in the United States. Yet, the research has begun to expand in recent years to include large-N datasets and experiments and applications outside the United States. With both the SCF and PFT, it is not directly apparent that the research programs promote shared research protocols or approaches.

As with the PET, the ACF’s core studies treat key concepts and their interaction consistently and coherently—but with considerable scope for independent scholars to use the ACF very loosely, without testing any of its hypotheses. The framework’s authors describe its strength in explaining “high-conflict situations involving coalitions, learning, and policy change” (see Chapter 6, XXX). It is increasingly applied beyond the United States and environmental policy, prompting its key authors to adapt the theory to make it more generalizable. ACF also has shared approaches and protocols that are commonly made available to scholars, but the consistency in application of these protocols is less clear. The framework has maintained its basic assumptions, but hypotheses and concepts have been modified over time.

The NPF’s attempt to advance “constructivist” or “postpositivist” accounts by making the process measurable and more conducive to testable hypotheses has led NPF scholars to develop shared codebooks and methods for identifying and quantifying the nature and effect narratives. The research program is in its infancy. Many hypotheses have yet to be tested, and outputs so far have been produced by a small core team of coauthors.

The IAD’s long-standing research program has been structured around the framework as the shared approach for a large and cohesive network of scholars, as well as the development of shared datasets, models, and methods (see Poteete, Janssen, and Ostrom 2010). Its most prominent strength is in the study of common-pool resources, with Ostrom winning the Nobel Prize in

Economics in 2009 for demonstrating how people can create and enforce rules to ward off common-pool resource exhaustion. Its applications to public policy beyond environmental and geophysical policies are more limited. However, as noted by Ostrom, Cox, and Schlager (2014), early IAD research emphasized the provision of public goods and services in metropolitan areas, and recent work has extended to topics such as the digital commons, the study of international aid provision, and public agency collective action. The framework has evolved since its inception, clarifying vocabulary and linking theories and models within the framework. The Social-Ecological Systems Framework is a recent attempt to extend IAD insights to broader governance issues, but its components are less well understood and applied.

DOI has exhibited substantial growth in recent years not only in terms of the number of applications but also through advancements in the methods and models. The research approaches and methods have also been relatively cohesive over time. Walker's (1969) initial study set the agenda, and core authors such as F. Berry and W. Berry have continued to extend the research. Early models focused primarily on communication and learning (the voluntary adoption of policies), and later models have devised a mix of five explanations for diffusion. Berry and Berry identify a major shift in the last ten years, from asking whether a policy diffuses to investigating how and why it does so. Traditionally, the focus has been on U.S. states, supplemented recently by studies of EU diffusion.

### **Comparative Criterion 3: How Does Each Theory Explain “the Policy Process”?**

Table 10.3 identifies how each theory describes the six key elements of the policy process and explains how they interact to produce policies.

***Multiple Streams Analysis.*** Kingdon's (1984) focus was on the interaction between two kinds of ideas: the type of policy solution that could draw attention and catch on quickly and the established set of beliefs in a policy community that would slow its progress. Government attention may lurch quickly to a problem, but a feasible solution (i.e., one acceptable to the community) takes much longer to produce. This highlights the role of relatively open networks—the interaction between wide groups of actors in a policy community to refine a solution—and actors, who include the policy entrepreneurs trying to find the right time to propose solutions (when attention is high) and the policymakers needing the motive and opportunity to adopt them. The role of institutions in MSA comes from its recognition of policy venues and can be inferred from the recognition of informal rules in each political system, such as when to introduce a bill in Congress, but it is not conceptualized significantly (Zahariadis 2014). Focusing events can be important to shift levels of attention to a

TABLE 10.3 Explains or Emphasizes What Portions of the Policy Process?

|  | MSA  | PET   | SCF   | PFT  | ACF   | NPF   | IAD   | DOI   |
|--|--|---|---|--|---|---|---|---|
| Actors making choices                              | Policy entrepreneurs and policymakers  | Broadly, interest groups and other organizations, as well as individuals within groups and different venues | Policy makers characterizing target groups  | Implicitly actors who are affected by policy may in turn become policy actors            | Policy actors who form coalitions, act strategically, learn, and so forth                         | Actors and groups interested in policies use narratives strategically to influence public opinion and decisions | Actors, primarily individuals, who make choices                                       | Policy makers, experts, entrepreneurs   |
| Institutions as rules or venues of decision-making | Informal rules and formal venues, recognized but institutions not emphasized               | Institutional venues and their rules  | Implicitly, policy “designs” set the rules of the game  | Policies institutionalized in rules and programs   | Types of policy venues and rules in the broader context, but less directly                        | Part of context   | Institutions as rules and norms that shape behavior; typology of rules                | Indirectly, “institutionalized channels of communication”   |
| Networks/subsystems                                | A broad “policy community” of actors, with relatively little focus on insulated subsystems | Subsystems as sources of stability and power  | Not directly addressed  | Groups mobilizing to protect programs  | Subsystems and coalitions   | Modifies the ACF’s flow diagram on subsystems and explores the idea of focusing on regimes                      | Networks within action situation, but no explicit attention to subsystems             | Loosely, information networks   |
| Ideas or beliefs                                   | Policy solutions proposed and amended over time to become acceptable to a policy community | Monopoly of understandings in established subsystem; new solutions or ideas that breakthrough               | Social constructions/frames of target populations   | Ideas about policy benefits and political attitudes via “interpretive effects” of policy | Belief systems that drive policy actor behavior   | Narrative strategies, grounded in belief systems, and ways of thinking that are embedded in cultures            | Shared preferences or norms of actors, but not explicit                               | Policy solutions emulated or the perceived norms of policy adoption that influence policy borrowers |
| Context  | National mood, policy conditions, pressure groups, admin turnover, and so forth            | Endogenous subsystem context; wider policy environment  | Past policy (design), but also societal characteristics and culture                                 | Past policy decisions and broader context, but implicit                                  | Stable parameters—social, cultural, economic, physical—and institutions structuring the subsystem | Legal, constitutional parameters, geography   | Physical and material conditions, community characteristics, preexisting institutions | Socioeconomic conditions, education, ideology, religion, and so forth                               |
| Events   | Focusing events draw attention to problems   | Events shift the macro-political agenda   | Crises, game changing elections, and so forth, that can be exploited to change social constructions | Not directly addressed   | External events and internal events (e.g., shocks, change to governing coalition)                 | Not directly addressed, but may combine with narratives to focus attention                                      | Not directly addressed  | Indirectly addressed (e.g., crises), but part of context  |

problem, but the MSA is about the need for other processes to occur before the event has more than a fleeting importance. Key sources of context include the “national mood,” interpreted by policymakers, and the policy conditions in each case, such as levels of congestion, fuel availability, and pollution when policymakers consider transport policy. We can tease out the interactions among all elements, but a lack of clarity in some aspects may produce studies describing this interaction in different ways.

**Punctuated Equilibrium Theory.** The PET emphasizes the interaction between two types of ideas: (1) the “monopoly of understandings” underpinning established subsystem relationships, and (2) the new solutions that could “catch fire” following successful venue shopping or prompt endogenous change (when attention shifts and issues are reframed). Subsystems are a source of stability, power, and policy continuity for long periods (decades in some cases). Instability and major change can come from the interactions among institutions, such as venues with different rules and understandings, or between the policy subsystem and the macro-political system (a conceptualization also found in some evolutionary and complexity theories [Cairney 2013b]). The latter is unpredictable: lurches of macro-political attention can destabilize subsystems, but most subsystems can remain unaffected for long periods.

The concept of institutional friction describes the amount of effort required to overcome established rules. High friction suggests that a major or cumulative effort is required to secure institutional change, which may produce a pressure-dam effect and a major policy punctuation. Major events, like wars that change budget patterns, as well as sustained and cumulative attention to minor events may also cause punctuations. Different sequences of events help explain different processes across countries. However, the focus is on serial attention to events. Similarly, context is important, but the focus of the PET is often the endogenous change in subsystems in the absence of similar change in the wider policy environment. Overall, the PET covers all the major elements of the policy process.

**Social Construction Framework.** SCF examines policy design in relation to target groups and populations—the good groups entitled to rewards and the bad groups deserving of burdens or punishments. The focus is on agenda setting—framing, assigning values, using emotional characterizations of people and problems—and the cumulative effect of distribution. Policymakers make quick emotional judgments, back up their actions with selective facts, and distribute benefits. A key aim is to reconceptualize studies of interest group politics by considering the effect of past policy design on current debates. For example, a sequence of previous policies based on a particular framing of target populations may produce “hegemony” when the public, media, and/or policymakers take for granted (as natural) and rarely question that framing.

The SCF does not conceptualize subsystems, arguing that subsystem theories are based too much on interest group power rather than the powerful context of past decisions (Schneider, Ingram, and deLeon 2014). Nor does it conceptualize institutions as venues or regular sources of rules; rather, it sees “policy design” as describing a similar importance for the institutionalization of frames and rules. More explicitly, it examines group power influenced by the way that target groups are framed by policymakers. Past policy represents the main context for policymaking. The distribution of benefits is cumulative, influencing future action by signaling to target populations (and the public) how they are described and will be treated. For example, senior citizens may be favored by spending programs and given great incentives to engage regularly in politics, and both factors reinforce each other. Social constructions are difficult to overcome because policy and strategy may reinforce hegemony, based on a dominant interpretation of social groups and how to treat them (an argument that builds on second- and third-dimensional conceptions of power [Pierce et al. 2014; Cairney 2012b, 62]). Some groups can grow more or less powerful and become categorized differently over time, but this may take decades in the absence of a major external event, such as an economic crisis or game-changing election, perhaps exploited by “entrepreneurs” to change the way that policymakers and the public view particular groups (Schneider and Ingram 2005, 444; Pierce et al. 2014).

**Policy Feedback Theory.** PFT has its roots in historical institutionalism, which suggests that policy commitments made in the past produce increasing returns and make it costly to choose a different path (Pierson 2000; Cairney 2012b, 76). When a policy becomes established and resources are devoted to programs, it helps structure current activity and provides advantages for some groups more than others (Mettler and SoRelle 2014).

Although PFT may not directly conceptualize many elements of the policy process, we can identify a broad focus on actors, networks, and ideas. Actors are present when policies assign different citizen rights to groups, influencing their ability and incentive to mobilize and engage. Networks are implied when government agencies mobilize support for, and groups mobilize to protect, programs. Ideas appear in PFT because established policies and rules represent institutionalized beliefs or dominant policy frames (public opinion on programs may also shift after they have been introduced). Further, in historical institutionalism, “sensitivity to initial conditions” describes a particular sequence of past decisions that sets the broad context for current policy, and “critical juncture” highlights the major event that may be required to prompt institutional change when policies are “locked in” (Cairney 2012b, 84). Consequently, using our identified elements, we can infer that various elements of the policy process underlie or inform PFT.

**Advocacy Coalition Framework.** According to the ACF, people engage in politics to translate their beliefs into action (Jenkins-Smith, Nohrstedt, and Weible 2014). There are three main types of beliefs: core, policy core, and secondary. Actors with similar beliefs become part of the same advocacy coalition, and coalitions compete with each other. We can identify a role for institutions as venues when coalitions compete for influence in multiple arenas. However, the main focus of the ACF is the subsystem, which represents a key venue (with particular rules of engagement) for coalition interaction. The ACF's conceptualization of subsystems is distinctive, focusing on actors beyond government and interest groups, to include, for example, academics and analysts. The ACF flow diagram identifies spillover effects from other policy subsystems and events, such as a change in government or a shift in governmental priorities, on subsystems. However, its focus is on how coalitions interpret and respond to events—as external or internal shocks. Major responses to shocks are far less frequent than policy learning and the revision of secondary aspects of coalition beliefs. Overall, the ACF covers all the major elements of the policy process as well as interactions among these elements, although the role of institutions is addressed less directly than the other elements.

**Narrative Policy Framework.** The NPF seeks to measure how narratives are used in policymaking. Narratives are stylized accounts of the origins, aims, and likely impacts of policies. They are used strategically to reinforce or oppose policy measures. Narratives have a setting, characters, plot, and moral. They can be compared to marketing, as persuasion based more on appealing to an audience's beliefs than on the "facts." People will pay attention to certain narratives because they are boundedly rational, seeking shortcuts to gather sufficient information, and prone to accept simple stories that confirm their biases, exploit their emotions, and/or come from a source they trust. McBeth, Jones, and Shanahan (2014) situate this process within the "meso level" of subsystems, by adapting the ACF to identify advocacy coalitions competing to present the most compelling narrative, and the "macro level" of institutions, by arguing that successful narratives may become embedded in the culture of policy systems.<sup>2</sup> Context is important in the NPF. Context includes the factors that actors have to account for when constructing narratives (e.g., legal and constitutional parameters, geography, scientific evidence, economic conditions, agreed-on norms) and can be compared to the "props" or setting for a play that can be taken for granted or, at times, dominate attention. Events are treated primarily as resources, used to construct focusing events and apportion blame. Overall, when integrated with other theories, there is a discussion of all elements.

**Institutional Analysis and Development Framework.** The IAD focuses on the ways in which actors make choices within institutional environments that

structure (or at least help explain) their behavior. There is no single assumption about the role of the individual because different theories can adopt bounded or perfect rationality assumptions to explore the effects of scaled-up action (Ostrom, Cox, and Schlager 2014). Nor is there a single assumption about how institutions are established or how they perform because people can interact in an institutional environment conducive to selfish behavior or one where norms and rules help explain why people are likely to cooperate with each other. Rather, the focus is on how different sets of actors and institutions produce different outcomes, often evaluated in terms of a trade-off among efficiency, equity, accountability, and other criteria such as robustness. The IAD contains a typology of (seven) rules regarding, for example, who can take part, how extensive their involvement can be, who is in charge, how to share information, and how to punish defectors—but it notes that many rules are implicit and difficult to identify in practice. One set of operational rules is nested in a set of rules on collective action, which in turn is nested in constitutional rules.

The institutional context is underpinned by physical and material conditions that affect how people can act and which rules can be set. This wider context may produce the incentives for people to act selfishly or cooperatively or to produce public goods. This context influences the rules that people generate to regulate individual behavior. Ideas are not discussed explicitly, but shared preferences or norms underpin the production of rules—for example, an institutional solution in the United States, with its tradition of market-based solutions, will likely differ significantly from one in China, with its tradition of state-based solutions. Similarly, subsystems are not theorized, but the role of networks (the interaction of actors in venues with specific rules) is important within the concept of the action situation (Ostrom 2009). Overall, the IAD focuses explicitly on actors, institutions, and context and more implicitly on ideas and networks or subsystems.

***Diffusion of Innovations models.*** Innovation is the adoption of a policy that is new to the individual government. Diffusion occurs “if the probability of adoption of a policy by one governmental jurisdiction is influenced by the policy choices of other governments in the system” (see Chapter 9, XXX). The focus is on discrete political systems containing states, including the United States (with fifty) and European Union (with twenty-eight). DOI puts forth five main explanations for diffusion: learning, imitation, normative pressure, competition, and coercion. In practice, policy change may occur through a combination of these effects. To some extent, this is an ideas-based account because diffusion often follows the perception by policymakers in states that they need to keep up with norms. The properties of policy solutions may also influence the extent to which they receive attention. However, diffusion is also something to be explained in terms of how attractive they are to policymakers. Internal determinants models express this role for perception and demand most strongly.

Regarding actors, the broader policy transfer literature identifies the “usual suspects” within each state (including elected policymakers, officials, and interest groups), plus actors who operate across states, including supranational or federal organizations, multinational corporations, epistemic communities containing networks of experts (Haas 1992), and entrepreneurs selling policies from one government to another (Cairney 2012b, 263). Institutions are conceptualized minimally, in terms of the “institutionalized channels of communication among governments” that “encourage the thorough mixing of states,” without a discussion of rule-based action (see Chapter 9, XXX). Networks are defined loosely as information networks, not the more regular and systematic patterns of behavior in subsystems.

Context and events are more important: economic crises or unsuccessful wars make government more vulnerable to coercion, larger cities are more likely to learn, and diffusion is dependent on information technology (Berry and Berry 2014). Some models use proximity to explain adoption, from physical proximity (regional models) to a wider similarity between states (ideology, biophysical properties, social composition, attitudes, etc.). Leader-laggard and other models partly explain innovation in terms of context (e.g., levels of economic development, education, “slack resources,” and research capabilities). Individual case studies focus more on the properties of states, including levels of unionism, the religious mix, the perceived severity of the problem, and the amount of time before the next election. F. Berry and W. Berry (2014) recommend focusing on policy adoption as a sequence of events—the adoption of policy *A* may make it more or less likely that a government adopts *B*, *C*, and *D*. Overall, innovation/diffusion models focus primarily on actors, ideas, and contexts, with other factors discussed implicitly.

### **COMPARING THEORIES: COOPERATION OR COMPETITION?**

What should we do with this comparative information on the coherence, activity, and coverage of each theory? We discuss two main choices. The first is cooperation, in which we seek to use these insights to clarify our shared knowledge and/or generate as broad as possible an understanding of the policy process. The second is competition, in which we consider how to decide which theories are worthiest of our resources (e.g., attention, funding, and journal space).

#### **Cooperation: Can We Consolidate Our Shared Knowledge to Generate a Broader Understanding of the Policy Process?**

Potentially, we could consolidate knowledge by combining the insights of research programs. This can be done in two main ways. First, we can produce a series of distinct insights that represent the accumulated knowledge of the public

policy discipline. For example, Cairney identifies “key tenets” of public policy to “demonstrate the enduring insights of public policy studies” (2012a, 230), and Cairney (2014) and Weible et al. (2012) draw on multiple policy theories to provide practical advice to policymakers about how the policy process works. In this sense, theories or theoretical insights can be compared to tools that perform distinct functions and can be used at different points to build a house.

Second, we can provide an overall sense of the interaction between actors, institutions, networks, ideas, contexts, and events from the theories covered in the book. This approach can be done only to some extent, because the theories present different theoretical emphases in some categories. For instance, some theories focus on a very wide range of actors in groups or coalitions, whereas others focus on exceptional individuals (entrepreneurs). Further, some theories only cover some categories: the MSA and SCF do not conceptualize institutions significantly, and the IAD and SCF do not conceptualize subsystems as extensively as the ACF and PET.

Consequently, sometimes we can produce general conclusions on particular elements of the policy process only if we draw on a smaller number of the most relevant accounts—but even then our understanding varies. For example, most theories treat subsystems as the forum for most political activity, often as a source of rule-bound behavior, and often as an indicator of the power of certain groups or coalitions. However, for example, the ACF and PET do not conceptualize subsystems in the same way (subsystems are much more open in the ACF). Further, these concepts may be used differently in different countries. For example, in the United Kingdom we may be more likely to find a top-down explanation for subsystems (Jordan and Cairney 2013, 237). Policymakers at the “top” break a complex policymaking process down into a large set of more manageable issues involving a smaller number of participants. They can only pay attention to a small number of these issues and delegate other issues to bureaucrats, who rely on specialist organizations for information and advice. Further, action in these subsystems can be insulated from the wider policy process for long periods but is subject to unpredictable crises and levels of external attention.

Sometimes we can identify common discussions, but with different theories using different categories, such as ideas, beliefs, contexts, and institutions, to describe them. The category of ideas and beliefs is also so broad that we may be concerned about a common meaning. For example, ideas and beliefs are often described as ways of thinking that people accept to the extent of taking them for granted or rarely questioning or that they are otherwise unlikely to challenge. This is described in different ways, with reference to monopolies of understanding, hegemony, institutionalized narratives, and core beliefs. In some studies this aspect is linked to the category of ideas, but in others the focus is institutions, or paradigms form part of an actor’s policymaking context. Or the word “idea” describes the use of information and persuasion to influence policy

agendas by prompting actors to reassess their ways of thinking about problems. Examples include new policy solutions, information generated to inform policy learning, innovations, and/or new causal stories. The policy process involves actors competing to identify problems and solutions in a particular ideational and/or rule-bound context that gives some actors more resources than others. Some can exploit a dominant understanding of the world, or the policy problem, to pursue their beliefs or interests. In that sense, we talk separately about “ideas” but do not give them causal weight independent of the role of actors (Cairney 2012b, 227).

In other cases, such as events, we have to infer the meaning of certain elements and how they fit into a wider picture. They are not central to many theories and are often treated as external factors or errors. Few accounts give independent explanatory value to events without considering how they are mediated by actors. Events prompt lurches of attention to issues but not policy change in the absence of sustained and cumulative attention. They are exploited by coalitions to establish a new position within subsystems, or they combine with narratives to construct focusing events and apportion blame. They may also represent a chain of events following decisions made in the past.

Similarly, we can piece together common messages about policy change. Most theories tend to state or imply that the policy process produces a small number of large policy changes and a large number of small policy changes—and they tend to use the same level of dramatic or metaphorical language to explain major changes (including shocks, punctuations, and windows of opportunity). Yet, this general sense of agreement comes largely at the expense of precision: we struggle to define and measure major policy change but perhaps know it when we see it.

In this context, what can we say about theoretical consolidation? It is clearly in the minds of several chapter authors who discuss their theories’ potential to be linked to other theories or wider frameworks. For example, Berry and Berry (2014) suggest that diffusion models can be combined with broader theories to explain why some states follow others. They discuss the role of advocacy coalitions in paving the way for adoptions (note that policy transfer is also a future concern in Jenkins-Smith, Nohrstedt, and Weible 2014) and highlight Kingdon’s discussion of the rarity of major policy innovation and the window of opportunity for change. Schneider, Ingram, and deLeon (2014) also discuss in broad terms how social construction can complement other theories, while McBeth, Jones, and Shanahan (2014) go further to argue that “the NPF has embraced the use and integration of multiple theories and frameworks . . . and has not hesitated to lean on the work of others” (citing the PET, ACF, and pivotal work by E. E. Schattschneider).

However, theoretical consolidation is in its infancy and may yet be subject to tantrums and teething troubles. At the very least, the leaders of each theory may

need to reflect on the extent to which they can accept the insights of others and whether those insights counter the key assumptions of their own theories. For example, the NPF's adoption of ACF insights might produce the assumption that the use of policy narratives is structured by the beliefs systems of each coalition. This is a different image from marketing, in which people will go to great lengths to tell misleading stories to persuade audiences. Stories are bounded not only by the coalition's perception of the audience but also by how far it is willing to go before presenting stories it does not believe (a focus of Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2011). Similarly, the ACF's acceptance of NPF insights may alter the ACF's direction by challenging its authors to consider whether coalitions are formed and driven by beliefs or tactical convenience (an issue that prompted Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, in 1993, to express different views).

This has a knock-on effect regarding our ability to synthesize the empirical results of each theoretical project into a single or consistent message about the policy process. This aim has only just begun within each theory, with recent years seeing the rise of systematic reviews of theories (and larger special issues, primarily in the *Policy Studies Journal*), producing qualified optimism about the coherence of the empirical message arising from studies under the same theoretical umbrella.

The first approach of producing distinct insights overcomes some of these issues because we do not need to blur our lens to produce insights common to all theories. However, it is still problematic because it is based on the assumption that these insights reinforce each other, not that they might be contradictory. Yet, if we return to the tools analogy, one person may be hammering in nails while the other takes them out with a crowbar (theories contradict each other). Or different trades may be working off different plans (an attempt to combine insights causes confusion and alters the initial message of a theory). In that sense, the phrase "key tenets" is misleading if we take it to refer to the accumulation of knowledge that is commonly understood.

### **Competition: Which Theories Are Worthiest of Our Resources?**

From this discussion, it is tempting to conclude that the solution to these problems, as an alternative to consolidating many theories, is to encourage a small number of already well-established frameworks to produce theories that are internally consistent and well respected because they explain a large part of the policy process and have impressive empirical backing. Given the problems we have with combining theories, a single framework encompassing all policy process elements—such as the ACF—may have the advantage over a combination of theories with potentially contradictory elements. It also makes practical sense because framework and theory development and application are labor-intensive—specialization and training are needed to understand and apply

theories, and theories may need a critical mass of people to generate a sufficient body of work. To a large extent, this approach is pursued implicitly and explicitly in the profession. That is, peer review allows some work to be published and rejects some, and the authors of major books on policy theories decide which frameworks and theories to include and which to ignore or dismiss.

If we accept that framework and theory development is, to some extent, a competition, then we need rules to decide who wins and who loses. Some argue that scientific progress is made by putting theories or hypotheses up against one another. The *Policy Studies Journal* “shoot-out” (Eller and Krutz 2009) and previous editions of this book (Sabatier 1999, 2007b) have approached this task by adopting some scientific principles—including the need for theories to produce empirically falsifiable hypotheses and to be subject to empirical testing and revision—to adjudicate. However, Cairney (2013a, 10–13) identifies the inability of such principles to help us reject and accept theories unequivocally. This is because major frameworks do not subject their “hard core” to testing and revision, many theories are used without scholars testing any of their hypotheses, and the complex nature of policymaking and policy change is not conducive to the production of falsifiable hypotheses. Further, as we have seen recently with the MSA, extensive empirical applications may come in waves of activity, and, as with the NPF, a theory may be seen as promising even when subject to a relatively small amount of testing.

Competition among theories is also misleading because many of our theories tend to operate in different fields. They focus on different things and use approaches with different aims and rules for evaluation. For example, some seek parsimonious explanations to explain a small part of many cases, whereas others seek comprehensive explanations of a small number of cases. In that context, it is legitimate to simply produce criteria to make theories more comparable than to adjudicate between them.

## CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON OUR CRITERIA

The theories, frameworks, and models presented in this volume are indicative of the depth and vibrancy of the field. The literature is growing, and there are many significant overlaps between theories that aid the study of the policy process. Yet, taking that overlap and establishing theoretical convergence is difficult and may not always be an appropriate goal. Theories and frameworks have different scopes, assumptions, and starting points. When they overlap, particularly in their assumptions and scopes, and when their theoretical explanations are complementary, it may be appropriate to combine insights. Other times, theories overlap in terms of scope—say, in their focus on explaining policy change—but their explanations may be more contradictory than complementary. In such cases, testing the expectations of competing theories against one

another may lead to theoretical advancements and insights. At the same time, policy process scholars need to be cautious and recognize that the differences between theories may prevent effective convergence or even direct comparison. Yet that does not mean that scholars cannot use these theories as tools to answer questions appropriate to their scopes and assumptions.

How we evaluated the theories allows us to see some of the differences, similarities, strengths, and weaknesses across the different theories, which we hope can help guide researchers and students who want to apply, test, or perhaps even attempt to integrate some of them. Our criteria allowed for comparison across some key scientific principles (e.g., elements of a theory); they also helped us evaluate the development of research programs and understand the breadth or coverage of the theories, frameworks, and models in terms of how they incorporate or address some critical elements of the policy process.

In applying the criteria we selected, our goal was not to identify the best theory or framework. Moreover, these criteria would be limited in their ability to do so, if that were one's goal. One reason is the difficulty of meeting all of the criteria or the indicators we selected simultaneously; meeting one criterion may impose trade-offs on another. For example, in our criteria for research program development we explored (1) whether the theories use multiple methods, and (2) whether they have developed shared research protocols and methods. Establishing standardized approaches to data collection and analysis within a research program, using well-developed and replicable instruments, takes time and energy. Such investments could therefore make it challenging to engage in a diversity of methods, at least initially.

Additionally, the criteria we selected by no means encompass the full range of possible evaluative or comparative criteria for theories. We did not explore the quality of the explanatory or causal arguments made by the theories and models, such as their generalizability, coherence, parsimony, relevance, or precision (e.g., Gerring 2012). Also, Schlager (1999, 2007) organized her evaluation of the theories in the previous two volumes of this book to highlight comparisons across theories, frameworks, and models more directly, which was valuable for identifying differences in research programs and scientific advancements. In terms of the policy process elements, we did not compare how the theories address key outcomes of the policy process, such as policy change or collective action, as examined by Schlager.

In sum, we encourage scholars to be open to multiple and alternative criteria in their comparisons and evaluations of theories, frameworks, and models of the policy process and to make their criteria transparent. We see this as fitting with the call to explain methods, define concepts clearly, and clearly set out the causal processes, which is the conventional wisdom used to warn scholars against obfuscation, confirmation bias, and a generally defensive approach to their results. In this context we introduced a range of criteria—not to adjudicate

between theories and solve unequivocally the problem of which are worthiest of our resources but to generate some level of agreement within the discipline about which frameworks and theories are clear enough to be proven wrong and which show a sufficient amount of payoff from the investment of scholars.

## NOTES

1. For brevity, we use the following acronyms: MSA for Multiple Streams Analysis, PET for Punctuated Equilibrium Theory, SCF for Social Construction (of Target Populations) Framework, PFT for Policy Feedback Theory, ACF for Advocacy Coalition Framework, NPF for Narrative Policy Framework, IAD for Institutional Analysis and Development Framework, and DOI for Diffusion of Innovations models.

2. Although there is some scope for confusion, since they describe subsystems as systems—effectively moving the ACF flow diagram’s external processes into one subsystem box—or they describe regimes as collections of interlocked subsystems without fully explaining their reasoning.

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