How Can Policy Theory Have an Impact on Policy Making?

Abstract

Policymakers and academics often hold different assumptions about the policymaking world based on their different experiences. For example, academics may enjoy enough distance from the policy process to develop a breadth of knowledge and produced generalisable conclusions across government, while practitioners such as civil servants may develop a unique level of in-depth expertise when developing policy for a number of years. In turn, both may learn from each other about how to understand, and seek to influence, the policymaking world. Yet, there is a major barrier to that conversation: both may have a different language (or jargon) to understand it and a meaningful conversation may require considerable translation. The paper explores this topic in four main ways. First, it compares the modern academic-practitioner relationship to that of the post-war past. Second, it considers the legacy of that early period and the extent to which we still use key concepts developed to aid policymaking (such as the policy cycle approach). Third, it explores our ability to translate the language of policy theory, which is often esoteric and often appears divorced from the ‘real world’. Fourth, it considers our ability to engage directly with policymakers to give advice on good policymaking.

Introduction

What is the relationship between the academic and the policy practitioner? Do academics merely study the policy process or do they also have an impact on it? These are always important questions to ask, to the extent that they seem timeless. However, they are also timely in countries, such as the UK, that have begun to link University funding to a particular idea of ‘impact’ in which we demonstrate the effect of academic research on audiences beyond the University (see Flinders’ 2013 introduction to a special issue of Political Studies Review). Although it is difficult, if not almost impossible, to demonstrate a causal link between particular pieces of research and real world outcomes (John, 2013), this does not stop funding bodies asking academics to try.

In this context, the aim of this paper is to identify the ways in which old and new policy theories have been, and can be, used to have an impact on the way that policy practitioners think about policymaking. In other words, it focuses in particular on the role of policy theories as ideas that can be used to guide general behaviour (rather than individual examples of empirically led impact in particular case studies, which is often the focus of the UK’s impact exercise). This is an issue that has been touched on to some extent in different ways. For example, Lasswell (1970) identifies ‘a distinctive outlook’ in US policy science, while Weible et al (2012) discuss how to use policy theory to influence the US policy process. Thom (2013) also discusses the ability to use political theory to influence how people think.
In public policy, we can also identify texts which try to explain why policy theory is less influential now than it perhaps used to be. In that vein, it is tempting to highlight a simple contrast between the good old days in which policy analysts and policymakers worked closely together to solve the world’s problems, and modern days in which there is often a significant distance between the academic and the practitioner. The narrative would suggest that, although they once shared a common language, they now have their own ways to understand and describe the world. Although they once worked closely together, they now share a mutual distrust and maintain professional distance. Although they once believed that they could solve policy problems together, they now do not; academics increasingly point to the intractable (or at least complex) nature of policymaking and policy problems, and practitioners define their own success in less ambitious terms (than solving problems fundamentally). This contrast represents a caricature of the early post-war and modern eras which can easily become romanticised. However, it prompts us to consider if we have moved from a position of optimism about partnership in the early post-war era towards an era in which academics with a policy theory background generally struggle for policy influence and/ or engage rarely with policy practitioners on the subject of ‘good policymaking’ in a way that both can understand (these themes are explored in Radin, 2000 on the US experience on the US and Howard, 2005 on Australia). If so, how do we fill this gap between the academic and the practitioner?

The answer explored in this paper is that we can link this gap to major shifts in the tone of modern public theory since the postwar period, from a focus on policy cycles and ordered stages towards theories that recognise the messy and unpredictable nature of politics and policymaking. The problem may be that this shift in academic thinking may not be reflected in academic policy advice and the models that governments use to organise policymaking (Cairney, 2012c). Despite recognition by scholars (and, in my experience, civil servants) that policymaking does not operate in discrete stages, there is often still a residual attachment to stages based policymaking models in policy training seminars and in government itself (for example, the Scottish Government’s 2009 Review of Policymaking identifies five UK Government models of policymaking, all based on the policy cycles theme). Further, the scholarly identification of messy policymaking, in which it is difficult to link policy outcomes to particular individuals or organisations, is not an argument likely to be embraced in ‘Westminster’ systems where practitioners may feel obliged to uphold the idea of accountability to the public via ministers and Parliament (which, in turn, is based on the idea that power is concentrated at the centre of government). Consequently, part of the explanation for a disconnect between academics and policymakers is that their language has begun to diverge: the relatively straightforward language of cycles and stages (and, in many systems, the language of the ‘Westminster model’) has been maintained in policy circles but rejected in the literature. Further, the new theories and concepts discussed by policy scholars may be more realistic but less amenable to policy advice because they are written, for an academic audience, in a way that may require considerable translation (Flinders, 2013).

To examine these issues, the paper is set out as follows. First, it explores the idea that academic and practitioner conversations were more straightforward in the early postwar period. Second, it considers the legacy of that early period and the extent to which we still use key concepts – such as the policy cycle, the ideal of ‘comprehensive rationality’ and the ‘top-down approach’ to implementation - developed to aid policymaking. Third, it considers the extent to which modern theories and concepts can provide insights to policy practitioners even if they were not always designed to that end. Fourth, it considers briefly the extent to which we can engage with governments to translate and discuss those insights.
Beyond the Era of the Policy Sciences

The way that we study public policy has changed significantly since an initial post-war focus on the ‘policy sciences’. This shift of approach is easy to oversimplify and exaggerate, but we can identify the same basic narrative in a range of studies: the world has changed and so too has the way in which we try to understand it (Cairney, 2012a; 2012b). There are three key elements to this narrative about the early post-war period. First, the policy sciences developed to reflect a belief that: (a) new scientific methods should be applied to policy analysis; (b) policy analysis could be used to better understand and make decisions; and, (c) science and scientists could be called upon to solve society’s problems (Lerner and Lasswell, 1951; Parsons, 1995: 16-28; Radin, 2000). Second, there was less uncertainty about policy analysts’ abilities to understand and solve problems and the ability of policymakers to control the policymaking world in which they operated (Cairney, 2012: 5). Third, policy was driven by a small number of policymakers at the centre who relied on an elite group of policy analysts to produce ‘objective’ ways to gather facts, analyse and solve problems (Radin, 2000: 15; 34; Howard, 2005: 4; note that they were not necessarily political scientists – Lasswell, 1970).

This picture of policy analysis has changed following three main developments. First, our object of study has changed and new approaches have developed to conceptualise that new world (Cairney, 2012a: 42). Modern accounts do not support the simple idea of top-down decision making pursued by a sole central actor (Cairney, 2012b). Rather, they describe action within a complex policy process. We have witnessed what Heclo (1978: 94) describes as an end to the ‘clubby days’ of US politics and Jordan (1981: 96-100) links, in other countries such as the UK, to a shift from corporatism towards a more fragmented system with many more policy participants. A rise in governmental responsibilities not only mobilised more groups but also stretched the government’s resources, producing its increased reliance on outside advice. This rise in activity from multiple sources, combined with the reduced exclusivity of policy analysis, often caused issues which were once ‘quietly managed by a small group of insiders’ to become ‘controversial and politicized’ (Heclo, 1978: 105). Further, our focus has shifted from the idea of one policymaking centre to multiple centres or sources of authority; power has dispersed from a single central actor towards many organisations and sources of authority and influence. The policy environment now seems more complex and potentially unstable, populated by more fragmented governments and many participants with different values, perceptions and preferences (Sabatier, 2007: 3-4).

Second, there is a diminished sense of optimism regarding the government’s ability to solve problems through objective scientific analysis. The status of policy analysis has diminished (John, 1998: 32-3) and policy scientists have to compete with many other actors for policymaker attention. Third, there has perhaps been some movement away from a direct engagement between policy theorists and policymakers (a problem discussed by Guy, 1999; 2003: 642-3 on the US). For example, the language of policy theory is often rather dense or esoteric and it is not easily translatable to policymakers unless they went into politics after a career as a politics lecturer.

Overall, a key difference found in the modern era is that policy scholars are less central to the policy process. Further, while they have developed useful ways to describe and explain a complex policymaking system, many of the concepts have been directed at an academic, not practitioner audience. This lack of access to policymaking, combined with unclear incentives for academics and practitioners to converse, has influenced the ability (and sometimes willingness) of academics to translate their insights to policymakers. One consequence is that
practitioners may still draw on old but relatively simple policymaking concepts that were developed by policy analysts in a more practical policymaking environment.

**What Remains From that Legacy?**

A key legacy from that early period is that some concepts, developed to aid our understanding of policymaking – such as the policy cycle, and the ideal of comprehensive rationality – are often still in good currency. However, we now tend to use them in rather different ways in different venues; concepts that are critiqued in the academic literature may still be employed in the real world. Take, for example, the idea (or ideal-type) of comprehensive rationality in which elected policymakers translate their values into policy in a straightforward manner (this is described in a variety of subtly different ways in the literature). They have a clear, coherent and rank-ordered set of policy preferences which organisations carry out in a ‘logical, reasoned and neutral way’ (John, 1998: 33). There are clear-cut and ordered stages to the process (aims are identified, the means to achieve those aims are produced and one is selected) and analysis of the policymaking context is comprehensive. The policy cycles approach is, to some extent, an offshoot of that idea. The suggestion is that stages can be used to organise policymaking; policymakers should divide the process into a series of stages to ensure policy success: identify policymaker aims, identify policies to achieve those aims, select a policy measure, ensure that the selection is legitimised by the population or its legislature, identify the necessary resources, implement and then evaluate the policy (again, this is described in a variety of ways - Cairney, 2012a: 6).

In other words, the academic idea is simple and the consequent advice to policy practitioners is straightforward. This presents a dual problem. First, the cycles approach may be employed despite its analytical problems (linked partly to the ideal-type of comprehensive rationality). Second, it is difficult to describe a more meaningful analytical model to policymakers (and give advice on how to act) in the same straightforward way.

It is important not to overstate academic and policymaker adherence to what we might now call a naive approach to policy analysis, particularly since early discussions of comprehensive rationality produced Simon’s (1947; 1976: xxviii) concept of ‘bounded rationality’ and Lindblom’s (1959; 1979) identification of incrementalism, both of which still underpin modern policy analysis. Lindblom has helped us move on from the idea that comprehensive rationality and stage-based decision-making are ideals to aspire to, towards the understanding that they are ideal-types used to describe how policymaking really works - by comparing the ideal-type with a very-different reality. Comprehensive rationality is used to explain why policymaking cannot be comprehensively rational, while the cycles approach is now often identified to show us why it is difficult or impossible to separate policymaking into stages (Sabatier, 2007: 7; Cairney, 2012: 6; 41). Overall, we have not moved radically from one position to another; the shift is more subtle and uneven. The examples of implementation studies and the modern use of cycles demonstrate this shift.

The example of implementation perhaps demonstrates a double-shift from past studies. Studies of implementation are based on the simple point that decisions made by policymakers may not be carried out successfully. Instead, we can identify an implementation ‘gap’ which represents the difference between the expectations of policymakers and the actual policy outcome (deLeon, 1999: 314-5; Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 197; Hill and Hupe, 2009: 11; Cairney, 2009). The common aim is to highlight the conditions that have to be met to ensure ‘perfect’ implementation success but the understanding is that, in fact, they explain why policies fail or achieve partial success:
1. The policy’s objectives are clear, consistent and well communicated and understood.
2. The policy will work as intended when implemented.
3. The required resources are committed to the programme.
4. Policy is implemented by skilful and compliant officials.
5. Dependency relationships are minimal.
6. Support from influential groups is maintained.

This list of conditions arguably represents a shift of attitudes, from the idea that policy formulation is central, to the recognition that other stages are not mere formalities. For example, Pressman and Wildavsky (1973; 1979) drew on such factors to explain why the provision of US federal funds, for public works programmes to solve the problem of ‘high unemployment and racial unrest’, did not have the desired effect in Oakland, California (note their famous subtitle ‘How Great Expectations in Washington are Dashed in Oakland’). A further analytical shift was produced by the growth of ‘bottom up’ implementation studies to counter the idea that implementation should be viewed as a success or failure from the top-down (Barrett and Fudge 1981; Hjern and Porter, 1981; Hjern, 1982; Lipsky, 1980; compare with Wildavsky and Majone, 1978, who anticipated this movement well). In other words, the latter studies encouraged a more fundamental shift from the study of policy cycles and stages controlled by the ‘top’ (usually central government) to the study of a much larger number and wider range of organisations which, to some extent, made policy as they carried it out. The debate produced some hopes for a ‘third generation’ of implementation research, and some attempts to ‘synthesise’ top down and bottom up approaches, including the advocacy coalition framework (ACF) (Sabatier, 1986; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible et al, 2009) which represents the most vocal rejection of the usefulness of the ‘stages heuristic’ as a guide to empirical research in public policy.

We should not overstate this shift from the naive past to the sophisticated present, if only because it involves an assumption (which is rarely backed up by the evidence in a meaningful way) that issues of implementation, and the limits to comprehensive rationality or stages, did not occur to generations of ‘public administration’ scholars. More importantly, these ideas have not lost their value as academic and practitioner currency. The academic approach (at least in many textbooks) is to maintain a focus on stages as a way to introduce the discipline and arrange book chapters, with some books (such as Hogwood and Gunn, 1984; Hill; 2005; Wu et al, 2010) more wedded to the stages format than others (such as Cairney, 2012a; John, 2012; Sabatier, 2007).

The practitioner approach is also interesting, since the idea of cycles is still used by many organisations to present (if not organise) their work. For example, the European Commission (2011) maintains a description of the EU policy cycle, while the Scottish Government (2009) and UK departments such as the Cabinet Office (1999) have maintained versions of this idea. The policy cycle is also often used to introduce practitioners to policy analysis – even if it is simply to start a debate before seeking more useful or realistic concepts.

The most prominent modern example is the Australian Policy Handbook (Althaus et al, 2007 is the 4th edition) which contrasts the cycles approach with a narrow focus on institutions and promises to provide ‘a particular sequence practitioners can use to comprehend and implement the policy task’ (2007: xi). The Handbook provoked some debate in the
The debate prompted Althaus et al (2007: xi) to stress that the approach was useful as a starting point for working with civil servants. This argument has some merit and, in my experience, an initial focus on cycles with civil servants prompts them to tell you all the ways in which it gets modern policymaking wrong. In other words, it is clear enough to promote sensible discussion even if it is not presented as a description of what really happens (although there may still be some debate about how well it represents the real world and, more importantly, if it provides useful advice on how to make policy). In an academic world full of some very wacky jargon, can we say the same thing about modern policy theories? For example, could we use the literature on ‘complexity theory’ and ‘complex systems’ (see Cairney, 2012) to foster the same discussions and give useful policymaking advice? Or, to set the bar lower, can we translate modern insights based on studies of the real world – and can we use them as the basis for a meaningful conversation with policy practitioners?

The Role of Modern Policy Theory Insights

Are they used in conversations with policymakers?

The concern I explore is that the academic literature may have gone too far in a particular direction. Quite rightly, it increasingly focuses on the complexity of policymaking and the difference between orderly images of policymaking and the messy and often unpredictable real world. However, this should not come at the expense of the relationship between academics and those people involved in that real world (or even perhaps the ability of graduates of policy courses to apply their knowledge in real settings in the way Wildavsky, 1980 describes, when discussing the origins of the Kennedy School). Part of this concern may be negative, relating to frustration with the concepts I have at my disposal when trying to frame ‘policy training’ discussions with civil servants. The other part may be positive, relating to my admiration for texts, often inspired by their authors’ experiences when teaching practitioners, that try to bridge the divide between theory and practice. However, many of those texts are now decades old (e.g. Hogwood and Gunn, 1984; Brewer and deLeon, 1983) and they were perhaps produced at a key generational crossroads between (a) the decline of the policy scholar as someone who uses his or her knowledge and theories of the policy process to aid policymaking or act as a conduit between scientists and policymakers (Lasswell, 1970), and (b) the rise of the policy scholar as a ‘purer’ scientist more likely to be detached from that process (although articles such as Weible et al, 2012 undermine that simple distinction). Relatively few modern accounts identify the value of an interaction with practitioners as an aid to their thinking (one of the few is McConnell, 2010).

Can they be used in conversations with policymakers?

The following section is an attempt to return to that sort of compromise between relatively pure theory and practical application. It outlines what I describe as (at least some of) the ‘Key Tenets of Public Policy Studies’ (Cairney, 2012b) before the next section considers the extent to which these tenets can provide meaningful advice for policy practitioners:¹

¹ These concepts are also summarised here: http://paulcairney.blogspot.co.uk/2013/06/making-sense-of-policymaking-why-its.html
Bounded Rationality and Punctuated Equilibrium Theory. Policymakers can only pay attention to a small number of the issues for which they are responsible. So, they ignore most and promote a few to the top of their agenda. For every issue to which ministers (and senior civil servants) pay attention, they must ignore (say) 99 others. The tendency to focus on that one issue, producing the most potential for major policymaking instability and policy change, draws our attention away from the 99 issues in which we might expect relative stability and continuity (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; 2009).

Bounded Rationality and Incrementalism. The cognitive ability of policymakers, and their ability to gather information, is limited and so they tend to rely on trial-and-error strategies when developing policy. Policymakers pursue radical policy change rarely. Rather, they attempt to build on past policies because considerable effort has been invested in seeking an agreed position among a wide range of interests (Lindblom, 1959; 1979). Top-down policymaking is often ‘politically expensive’ and a drain on the resources of time-constrained policymakers. Consequently, it does not (or cannot) represent the ‘normal’ policymaking style in most political systems (Richardson et al, 1982: 10).

Policy Succession. The size of the state is such that any ‘new’ policy is likely to be a revision of an old one, often following a degree of policy failure. Policy often represents ‘its own cause’ (Wildavsky, 1980: 62) and apparently new policies are often pursued to address the problems caused by the old (Hogwood and Peters, 1983).

Inheritance Before Choice. Political parties make a difference but they also inherit massive commitments. Most policy decisions are based on legislation which already exists and most public expenditure is devoted to activities that continue by routine. New governments reject some commitments but accept and deliver most (Rose, 1990).

(Multi-level) Governance. There is no single, central decision-maker or decision-making organisation (Rhodes, 1997; Kooiman, 1993). Instead, there are multiple centres of authority and strong central government is increasingly replaced by bargaining government and the type of ‘mutual adjustments’ associated with incrementalism (compare with Marsh, 2008).

Historical Institutionalism and Path Dependence. Events and decisions made in the past contributed to the formation of institutions that influence current practices. Institutions, and the practices they encourage, may remain stable for long periods of time. When commitment to a policy has been established and resources devoted to it, over time it produces ‘increasing returns’ (Pierson, 2000).

Street Level Bureaucracy. Although legislation is made at the ‘top’, it is influenced heavily by the street level bureaucrats who deliver it. Since they are subject to an immense range of (often unclear) requirements laid down by regulations at the top, they are powerless to implement them all successfully. Instead, they establish routines to satisfy a proportion of central government objectives while preserving a sense of professional autonomy necessary to maintain morale. So, radical policy change at the top may translate into routine decision making at the bottom (Lipsky, 1980).

The Advocacy Coalition Framework. Most policy change is minor, not radical. The most frequent policy changes follow attempts by coalitions of actors to adapt to their policy environments and engage in policy learning. Such policy learning takes place though the lens
of deeply held policy beliefs, which effectively place limits on the consideration of new policies. Major changes are less frequent and follow ‘shocks’ to subsystems – prompted by, for example, the election of a new government or major socio-economic change, which affect the status of competing coalitions within subsystems (Weible et al, 2009).

The Role of Ideas. Ideas can undermine policy change if paradigms or monopolies of understanding inhibit new ways of thinking and exclude certain actors, or institutional rules and norms appear to constrain behaviour. Or, ideas can promote change, as viruses that infect systems or policy solutions used to solve problems. Change is most notable during policy failures, punctuations or shocks which produce major transformations in the way that policymakers think and act (Cairney, 2012a: 228-32), but this is a relatively rare occurrence compared to the more routine process in which actors reinterpret rules and follow them selectively (2012a: 81-4).

Multiple Streams Analysis. Radical policy change may happen only when a ‘window of opportunity’ opens and three independent streams come together – problems, policies and politics. In most cases policy does not change radically if a policy problem does not receive enough attention, an adequate idea or solution is not available and/or policymakers are not receptive to the idea (or they lack the motive and opportunity to do something with it) (Kingdon, 1984; 1995; Lieberman, 2002).

The Logic of Subgovernments and Consultation. Regular changes of government do not cause wholesale shifts in policy because most decisions are beyond the reach of ministers. The sheer size of government necessitates breaking policy down into more manageable issues involving a smaller number of knowledgeable participants. Most policy is conducted through small and specialist policy communities which process ‘technical’ issues at a level of government not particularly visible to the public or Parliament, and with minimal ministerial or senior civil service involvement. These arrangements exist because there is a logic to devolving decisions and consulting with certain affected interests. Ministers rely on their officials for information and advice. For specialist issues, those officials rely on specialist organisations. Organisations trade that information/advice (and other resources such as the ability to implement or ‘deliver’ a large group membership) for access to, and influence within, government (Jordan and Maloney, 1997).

How are these Insights Translated? Conservatism with a Small c?

It becomes clear, quite quickly, that many of these tenets help us describe and explain what policymakers do (given the constraints placed on their actions) rather than what they should do. In fact, different policymakers could arrive at radically different conclusions, about what they should do, from these insights. Put in simple binary terms, they may seek to change that policymaking context or they may seek to work within it (or, more sensibly, some combination of both). Put even more simply, we may expect policymakers to choose the former and academics to choose the latter.

Taking the example of the UK, consider the response of a ‘Thatcherite’ or otherwise top-down-minded government to these perceived constraints: remain sceptical about the idea that top-down policymaking is politically expensive; draw up a clear list of policy priorities; reform political and administrative structures, and modes of service delivery, to challenge the idea of multiple centres of authority; reform legislative frameworks governing ‘street level bureaucrats’ or choose new organisations to deliver policy; challenge cosy policy community relationships; and so on. In this context, the immediate value of the literature is that it suggests that top-down interventions produce partial successes (for example, the degree of
implementation of Thatcherite policies varied markedly - Marsh and Rhodes, 1992) or failures (for example, when Thatcher governments contributed to the ‘hollowing out’ of the state – Rhodes, 1997).

The early literature on the UK Labour Government (led by Tony Blair from 1997-2007 and Gordon Brown 2007-10) suggested that that it was more able to recognise these constraints to government and more willing to work within them – but only for a short period. Labour’s first response to the issue of governance was the ‘modernisation’ agenda to address cross-cutting policy issues (such as child poverty, an issue that required cross-departmental cooperation) and to seek policy and policymaking solutions based on trust in other organisations and networks between groups and government (to work within identified constraints). This approach was replaced by a more straightforward top-down style in Labour’s second term of office following frustration with a lack of progress on joined-up government at the centre. Cross-cutting targets coordinated from No. 10 were transferred to the Treasury and more strongly linked with the control of expenditure (Cairney, 2009: 359; Richards and Smith, 2004: 106).

According to much of the academic analysis, the experience of the Thatcher and Blair governments suggests that governments either fail in their attempts to reshape their environment and/ or make decisions that contribute to their lack of central government control2. For example, Bevir and Rhodes (2003: 6) argue that while ‘the British executive can act decisively’ and ‘the centre coordinates and implements policies as intended at least some of the time’, on the whole, ‘to adopt a command operating code builds failure into the design of the policy’ (although compare with Marsh, 2008; 2012). Indeed, not surprisingly, given the tenets of public policy described above, there is strong element of what we might kindly call ‘realism’ and unkindly call ‘conservatism’ in public policy analysis. There is a strong tendency to advise policymakers about how to work within the constraints they identify and warn against thoughtless attempts to change them.3

**Is New Advice So Different?**

This image of policymaking may represent an important contrast to the idea of comprehensive rationality and early representations of policy cycles in which we imagine a policymaker much less constrained by his or her policymaking environment. Such negative conclusions do not represent the only advice that we can take from theses tenets of public policy studies. However, they do reinforce a sense in which the literature increasingly offers a particular kind of conservative/ realistic advice based on concepts such as bounded rationality and the identification of rather limited policymaker power. I say ‘increasingly’ rather than ‘now’ advisedly, because we can trace that shift in direction to a very early stage in post-war policy studies.

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2 According to this narrative, examples include (during the Thatcher era) privatization, contracting-out, the use of quangos to remove delivery functions from local authorities, quasi-markets in the NHS, separated policy and management functions in the civil service (producing service delivery fragmentation, reduced communication between senior and junior levels of government and obscuring accountability) and (during the Blair era) devolving power to UK territories and English regions, granting independence to the Bank of England, extending the influence of the EU through the social chapter, furthering quasi-markets in health, relying more on political advisers than civil servants/ groups involved in implementation, and further fragmenting service delivery with an emphasis on voluntary sector provision of public services (see Cairney, 2009: 359; Rhodes, 1994; 1997; Richards and Smith, 2004).

3 Compare the UK experience with policymaking in Scotland: ‘successive Scottish Governments have appeared to be much more open to this sort of advice (or, at least, they have engaged in behaviour consistent with it)” (Cairney, 2012c: 10).
For example, Lindblom (1979: 518) used a discussion of bounded rationality to recommend that policymakers be realistic about their aims and ideals, pursuing ‘strategic analysis’ as a way to get away from ‘grossly incomplete analysis’ but stopping well short of the ideal of ‘synoptic analysis’. He compared the aim of synoptic analysis to the aim of ‘flying without mechanical assistance’ and described ‘impossible feats of synopsis’ as ‘a bootless, unproductive ideal’ (1979: 518) and as a ‘futile attempt at superhuman comprehensiveness’ (Lindblom, 1959: 88). A better alternative is to accept one’s limitations and seek to ‘employ in an informed and thoughtful way a variety of simplifying stratagems, like skilfully sequenced trial and error’ (1979: 518).

This is a recommendation that still stands up to scrutiny, and conversations with civil servants (in policy training seminars) suggest that it translates well. Indeed, it has an intuitive quality since civil servants will have faced the realisation that their ability to research most possibilities and explanations for policy outcomes is severely limited, and that ability will diminish in an era of austerity and reduced civil service numbers. Our aim in this context may be to go beyond this intuitive conclusion to explore which short cuts (or heuristics or ‘rules of thumb’) they employ and the extent to which they seek (or should seek) to modify their routines. In other words, we want to know the ‘standard operating procedures’ of government departments: where are they most likely to seek information and which groups or individuals are they most likely to consult on a regular basis or speak to first when they need advice? This is an area that is difficult to explore, since it requires people to reflect, in a meaningful way, on their ways of working. If they take for granted these ways of working, they may be very difficult to describe (perhaps showing us the benefit of observational research) and practitioners may be reluctant to describe them if there is the potential to expose forms of behaviour that may be interpreted differently by outsiders (or simply if it is difficult to describe their routines without straying into the privileged arena of interaction with, and advice to, ministers). However, this is still a key area of research, since reduced resources (associated with economic austerity) will oblige civil servants to change their research and consultation practices – involving either a simple reduction in effort consistent with staffing cuts, or new ways to gather information to deal with a new situation.

A second (closely related) aspect of Lindblom’s work that stands the test of time is the idea of incrementalism as a trial and error strategy:

*Making policy is at best a very rough process. Neither social scientists, nor politicians, nor public administrators yet know enough about the social world to avoid repeated error in predicting the consequences of policy moves. A wise policy-maker consequently expects that his policies will achieve only part of what he hopes and at the same time will produce unanticipated consequences he would have preferred to avoid. If he proceeds through a succession of incremental changes, he avoids serious lasting mistakes* (Lindblom, 1959: 86).

This is an argument that has come full circle in recent years following the increasing attention to ‘complexity theory’ in policy studies (Cairney, 2012d); the recommendations associated with complexity theory are remarkably similar. In a broad sense, complexity theory seeks to explain policy-related behaviour and outcomes in terms of the ‘whole’ policymaking system rather than the ‘sum of its parts’. Further, it identifies in policymaking systems the same kinds of dynamics that we may find when we study a wide range of systems in nature (for example, it is used to analyse weather patterns, the behaviour of insects and emergent thoughts in the brain). For example, it identifies: ‘non-linear dynamics’ when some forms of action are amplified and others dampened (by positive and negative feedback provided by complex systems); ‘sensitivity to initial conditions’ or the cumulative effect of early events;
‘emergence’ (when systems appear to behave independently or defy central control); and, ‘strange attractors’ or regularities of behaviour despite the unpredictability of complex systems (see Blackman, 2001; Bovaird, 2008: 320; Cairney, 2012a: 124-5; Geyer and Rihani, 2010; Geyer, 2012; Kernick, 2006; Little, 2012; Mitchell, 2009: x; Mitleton-Kelly, 2003: 25–6; Teisman and Klijn, 2008).

Complexity theory is associated with bold claims about its ability to change how we view science (and the object of scientific research) and form meaningful interdisciplinary research (Cairney, 2012d). However, for our purposes, its relevance relates to the impression it gives about the unpredictability of large political systems and, perhaps, the apparent inability of policymakers to exert control or for their policies to have the desired effect. Consequently, the policy advice that generally derives from complexity theory - learn from experience, use trial and error, adapt to your environment - is also quite similar to the advice provided by Lindblom (1959: 86; Cairney, 2012a: 128; Quirk, 2007: 369; compare with Little, 2012: 7-8).

In general, complexity theory seems to represent a rejection of top-down control, perhaps in a way that is also reminiscent of a focus on ‘bottom-up’ policymaking which informs contemporary discussions of governance (Cairney, 2012a: 37-8). For example, Geyer and Rihani (2010: 7; 32-4) recommend that ‘soft management methods ... replace the outwardly forceful but practically blunt traditional hierarchical hard management methods’. This may involve giving implementing organisations more freedom to learn from their experience and adapt to their environment (Sanderson, 2009: 708; Haynes, 2008: 326). We can also identify proposals to address the inevitability that policies will produce unintended consequences (and be subject to the unintended consequences of action elsewhere). Sanderson (2009: 706) suggests that the implication of complexity is that we do not know exactly how any policy measure will make a difference. Therefore, policymakers should be careful when making an intervention. This suggests a greater use of “trial and error’ policy making” and learning from pilot projects (2009: 707; see also Sanderson, 2006: 118: ‘knowledge of a system’s behaviour in the past will provide little guide to likely future behaviour’). Little (2012: 16) suggests that we go further, to accept the inevitability of a degree of error when we design policies, so that we can encourage ways to adapt quickly (rather than merely use the language of failure in retrospect to justify abandoning a policy). Geyer (2012: 32) suggests that we go further still, by fundamentally challenging the way that governments (such as the UK) have tried to measure and control policy outcomes, and promoting alternatives (such as the ‘complexity cascade’).

Overall, this focus on complexity may represent a long term trend away from the idea of: (a) a single policymaker at the centre of government, able to make important changes to the world with the aid of science and policy analysis; to (b) a range of policymakers in multiple venues seeking to adapt to, and influence, their policy environments using limited information. It may represent a more realistic vision of policy analysis, but it may also (at least in the wrong hands) be a tougher sell to policymakers and practitioners.

**Policy Advice to Practitioners: Can We Learn from Think Tanks? Do We Have Something to Offer?**

An additional problem is that this sort of advice may find a wide audience in the academic world, but not necessarily much attention from practitioners if couched in an esoteric language that takes too long to learn without the promise of a return from such an investment. For example, the broad recommendations developed in the complexity theory literature may be too abstract (encourage systemic emergence; encourage co-evolution with the social
ecosystem; shift from strategic planning to strategic management), while even the more specific points (support the production of new ideas and ways of working in complex systems; encourage ‘subsystems’ within organisations to communicate with each other; give delivery organisations the freedom to manage) may seem meaningless or banal to public managers – particularly when compared to a policy cycles approach broken down into discrete stages. Room (2011) makes one of the most notable academic attempts to provide a new ‘toolkit’ for ‘agile’ policymakers, arguing that existing approaches are based on a too-simple understanding of the policy environment. Yet, the instructions are still often vague, including ‘map the landscape’ (‘is it stable or turbulent?’) and ‘model the struggle’ (‘what would drive the race in a different direction’).

The best hope for complexity research, and public policy theory more generally, may be to develop such ‘toolkits’ in cooperation with policymakers, since that interaction can produce new ideas and ways of thinking. The Institute for Government (Hallsworth and Rutter, 2011: 30) recommends: ‘the development of policy skills ... needs to be embedded into practice .. [governments need] to ensure that there are continual efforts to develop analytic skills so policy makers can be competent consumers of research, or are able to conduct an organisational analysis, or understand concepts from complexity science like emergence and feedback loops’. Hallsworth and Rutter’s (2011: 18) recommendations appear grounded in their regular discussions with practitioners, arguing for example that ‘greater awareness of complexity will encourage more informal, inquiring attempts to understand how the policy is being realised – rather than simple performance monitoring’. The report is part of a small series which draws on academic analysis and interactions with practitioners to make recommendations on policymaking (see also Hallsworth, 2011; Hallsworth and Rutter, 2011).

Yet, it also recognises that practitioners are unlikely to pick up on these recommendations simply because they are written, published and launched (even if the IFG has a geographical advantage – using a building in central London within walking distance of most UK government buildings - and budget that few Universities share). Rather, the trick is to maintain an academic-practitioner link, to allow both to exchange ideas on a regular basis. Regular discussions may not necessarily help develop detailed or universal ‘toolkits’. Rather, the interaction may produce new ideas and ways of thinking – perhaps using the literature’s insights as the way to begin a conversation; to turn abstract concepts into meaningful conclusions. This is largely my experience of ‘policy training’ seminars with civil servants in the Scottish Government – it is the discussions, beginning with analysis of cycles and exploring recent alternatives, that make the difference more than the reading materials.

A good example in this regard is the insight from multiple streams analysis (and the garbage can model before it) that solutions often exist before problems are identified. In other words, a policy solution may have been in circulation for years (going through a process of ‘softening’ to make it adaptable to existing institutions and other circumstances) before being adopted. Indeed, that process may be necessary because it may be impossible to produce a workable solution to policy problems in the short window of opportunity provided by lurches of attention to problems. Yet, while practitioners may recognise that process, the insight is difficult to translate into written policy advice – surely we shouldn’t recommend that civil servants develop solutions to problems that might arise in the future? And even if we did, who would devote the resources to such a speculative venture? The same might be said for the process of policy transfer to produce new ideas. The experience of other countries may be relevant, but it will always take time to identify relevant country experience and consider the extent to which its success can be transferred. Again, this may not be possible in the timeframe provided by lurches of attention to policy issues. Such examples highlight a
difficult balance between long term policy research and short term government responsiveness. We may not be able to produce a toolkit to address the disconnect, but a broad understanding of the issues may help build the confidence of practitioners to address them – particularly when they learn from the literature that the issues they face are often universal, rather than a consequence of the make-up of a particular political system.

**Conclusion**

The paper constructs a simple, stylised narrative of the post-war past to consider the extent to which the gap between the language of practitioners and policy theorists has widened. To help explain the gap it highlights three main changes in: our object of study (a far cry from the ‘clubby’ and uncomplicated days); the reliance by practitioners on policy analysts; and, the tendency for academics to use esoteric language to describe policy processes. It suggests that academics with a policy theory background can often struggle to engage with policy practitioners on the subject of ‘good policymaking’ (in a way that both can understand).

In that context, the aim of the paper is to consider the ways in which we can produce a series of tenets of public policy studies and use them to provide advice to policymakers. If so, a potential problem is that the insights from policy studies can produce very different lessons. For example, while academics may use them to warn policymakers about ignoring the constraints in which they operate (relating to cognitive abilities, time, inherited commitments, multi-level governance, and complex systems), governments may be tempted to use them to guide their attempts to ‘do better’ next time and seek to change their policymaking context. The paper briefly outlines the problematic outcomes from ‘Thatcherite’ attempts to do just that (and briefly encouraging readers to compare the UK and Scottish experiences). Perhaps more interesting is the subsequent Labour term of office, since they sought initially to work within their policymaking constraints before becoming frustrated and returning to a more top-down approach and trying to change their policymaking context. One key lesson from policy studies is that policymaking is, to a considerable degree, outwith the control of policymakers – but there may be few people in elected government willing to learn it or to seek ways to adapt accordingly.

The unelected government audience (such as civil servants) may be more receptive to academic advice, as long as discussions are conducted in an environment conducive to the exchange of ideas. In particular, I have had generally good experiences when engaged with civil servants and other practitioners in ‘Chatham house’ style seminars or dedicated policy training seminars. The fruitful exchange of ideas, and the ability to learn from each other, is possible in that sort of environment. However, like other people in other areas (such as representatives of interest groups or local authorities) I have found that practitioners are relatively guarded when ‘on duty’ and more likely to refer to a ‘Westminster’ narrative of the policy system and their place within it. If this is a representative experience, we may have to settle for a very long term type of influence in which we engage in a rather broad way with civil servants in non-threatening atmospheres and accept our status as outsiders in the day-to-day life of policymaking.

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