

Paul Cairney, Professor of Politics and Public Policy, University of Stirling
p.a.cairney@stir.ac.uk

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The Psychology of Policymaking: Beyond a Focus on Bounded Rationality

Abstract. The theoretical study of policymaking relies heavily on Simon's (1976) concept of 'bounded rationality'. Yet, bounded rationality on its own is effectively a truism - people are not comprehensively rational - and we are asking it to do a lot while describing so little. It is also a term that has not been studied significantly for decades. The psychology literature has moved on to more nuanced and empirical studies of how and why people make decisions in the absence of perfect information and certainty, and the presence of ambiguity. This paper explores some key concepts - such as 'thinking fast and slow', 'social intuitionism' and 'fluency' - which could better inform policymaking studies by outlining in a more detailed way how people create heuristics and shortcuts to make decisions. It considers the implications of these ideas to established theories of public policy.

Introduction

Psychology is at the heart of policymaking. In most cases, it is at the heart of policy theory explanation: we break down a complex policymaking process into a set of key decisions by actors, and ascribe action to entities with the ability to choose how they act. Normally, this can include people or organisations. The basis for organisational action is not always well specified, but the implicit assumption may be that they possess some ability to deliberate in a comparable way to people. This may be straightforward when we treat actors as deliberative and goal-oriented, but trickier when we trace action to non-rational or emotional origins. In that sense, policymaking psychology may generally focus on the role of individuals. Our aim is to identify their thought processes and chart how they interpret rules and adapt to their environment when working with others within organisations, groups and coalitions.

To know why people make decisions in such situations, we need to know how they think before they act. We need to know how they process and interpret information, using a combination of analytical techniques and emotional responses. We need to know how they align the information they receive with their enduring beliefs about how the world works (and should work). Or, when we realise that we don't have this information and we often have no prospect of getting it, we need to decide what to do; how to attribute a decision-making process to actors rather than study their brains directly.

Yet, the *literature* on psychology does not seem to be at the heart of the policy theory literature (Lewis, 2013). Psychological insights are used more to influence policy than policy theory ('nudge' is a good example - Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). There is not much work which combines the two disciplinary approaches in a meaningful way. In psychology, some people make big claims about how policymakers might think and behave, based on small experiments in non-political environments. The experiments do not relate directly to

policymaking. In policy theory, most studies seem to operate by identifying bounded rationality then dipping in to psychology, often in a rather superficial way. Studies based on bounded rationality have underpinned some important work, which highlight the important point that people make decisions in a small amount of time despite high uncertainty (based on limited information) and ambiguity (there are many ways to interpret and seek to solve a problem). Yet, for decades, we have not paid enough attention to advances in psychological research which, for example, examined the role of ‘gut’ and emotion in decision-making.

So how might the incorporation of research in psychology aid our understanding of policymaking? Identifying relevant insights involves a two-step process. The first is to consider how psychology (broadly defined) is currently conceptualised in established policy theories. This is a crucial step, to make sure that (a) we are not simply encouraging ‘new’ terms or approaches without establishing their novelty, and (b) we know how the specific role of elite policymaker action fits into a more complete explanation of policy process activity. In other words, part of the reason that policy theories use conceptual short cuts – such as bounded rationality - in one area is that they focus on concepts and action in many areas. The paper focuses on approaches which seek to go beyond simple discussions of bounded rationality to conceptualise a mix of motivations for action. This includes approaches which seek to incorporate emotional elements of policymaking, including social construction theory and narrative policy frameworks. The second is to consider how new insights, such as ‘social intuitionism’ and ‘fluency’, based on psychological experiments outside the policy process, might be incorporated into current policy theory. In each case, our aim is to produce studies which explain behaviour based on some combination of strategic, calculative or goal-related activity and emotion-driven activity. Both elements can be used to explain policy actions, but potentially in very different ways, at least if emotion or ‘gut feeling’ is identified as a way to explain ‘irrational’ or non-goal-oriented behaviour.¹

Current Approaches: A Model of the Individual Meets the Context for Action

The aim of this section is to highlight how issues of bounded rationality and related concepts are conceptualised, in a range of ways, throughout the policy theory literature, focusing on approaches outlined in Sabatier and Weible (2014), Cairney and Heikkila (2014) and Cairney (2012a).² Broadly speaking, these theories perform two relevant functions. From the outset,

¹ Irrationality is a difficult concept to pin down and define, and impossible to separate from subjective (and often external and judgemental) evaluations of behaviour. It could refer broadly to the insufficient use of reason when making decisions – a process that could be linked to cognitive deficiencies, either permanent or temporary, and linked to a wide range of potential alleged causes, such as drug taking or intoxication, a temporary reaction to unfamiliar and extreme, mental incapacity, and/ or heightened emotions. In this paper, the focus is on the latter, but the use of emotions to inform decisions is difficult to describe simply as ‘irrational’ unless you are an evil male character, trying to undermine your wife, in a TV soap opera. Another definition of rationality relates to the identification of one’s preferences and the tendency to pursue them in a particular way. We might say that someone is acting irrationally if they engage in activity ‘against their long term interests given their initial preferences’ (John, 2012: 100). Or, policy design may be ‘irrational’ if ‘driven by situational logics and opportunism rather than careful deliberation and assessment’ (Howlett and Lejano, 2013: 360). Yet, Frank (1998) argues that emotionally-driven behaviour can often aid rationality (in the sense of producing outcomes consistent with one’s self-interest).

² Some of this section appears in my PSA paper on [evidence-based policy making](#) . Note the potential links. For example, Lewis (2013: 23) argues that system 1 thinking and moral judgement precedes policy analysis.

they provide a ‘model of the individual’ (Schlager, 2007). Almost all theories adopt a broad focus on bounded rationality, which could be little more than a truism: people do not have the time, resources and cognitive ability to consider all information, all possibilities, all solutions, or anticipate all consequences of their actions. Consequently, they use informational shortcuts or heuristics to produce what they may perceive to be good-enough decisions (Simon, 1976: xxviii). Some may focus primarily on the goal-oriented strategies of actors within that context, while others place more emphasis on the use of emotional heuristics.

Then, they conceptualise the relationship between five key elements of the policy process (expressed in slightly different ways in the literature – John, 2003; Cairney, 2012a; Cairney and Heikkila, 2014). First, theories identify a wide range of actors making choices. Actors can be individuals or collectives, and collectives can range from private companies to interest groups to governments bodies (Weible, 2014). A feature of the modern literature is to reflect on a broad shift from centralized and exclusive policymaking towards a more fragmented multi-level system with a large number of participants (Jordan, 1981: 96-100). Issues which were once ‘quietly managed by a small group of insiders’ have become ‘controversial and politicized’ (Hecl, 1978: 94–7).

Second, they identify ‘institutions’, as the rules, norms, practices and relationships that influence individual and collective behaviour. Rules can be formal and widely understood, such as when enshrined in law or a constitution, or informal and only understood in particular organisations. Institutions at one level (e.g. constitutional) can shape activity at another (e.g. legislation or regulation), establishing the venues where decisions are made, and the rules that allow particular types of actors or ideas to enter the policy process (Ostrom et al 2014).

Third, most theories focus on the role of policy networks or subsystems, as the relationships between actors responsible for policy decisions and the ‘pressure participants’ (Jordan et al, 2004) such as interest groups, or other types or levels of government, with which they consult and negotiate. To some extent, the development of subsystems follows government attempts to deal with complexity. To address the sheer size of their responsibilities, governments divide them into broad sectors and more specialist subsectors. Senior policymakers delegate responsibility for policy making to bureaucrats, who seek information and advice from groups. Groups exchange information for access to, and potential influence within, government. Some subsectors may be more exclusive than others; bureaucracies may have operating procedures that favour particular sources of evidence and some participants over others (Cairney, 2012a: 178).

Fourth, they identify the role of ideas - a broad term to describe ways of thinking, and the extent to which they are shared within groups, organisations, networks and political systems. It can refer to two intertwined processes. Shared ideas (knowledge, world views, language) appear to structure political activity when they are almost taken for granted or rarely questioned – as core beliefs, paradigms, hegemony, and monopolies of understanding (Cairney and Heikkila, 2014). Or, persuasion can be used to prompt actors to rethink their beliefs – such as when a proposed new solution challenges the way that a problem is framed or understood, and therefore how much attention it receives and how it is solved.

Fifth, they conceptualise the role of context and events. Context is a broad category to describe the extent to which a policymaker's environment is in her control or how it influences her decisions. It can refer to the often-changing policy conditions that policymakers take into account when identifying problems, such as a political system's geography, demographic profile, economy, mass attitudes and behaviour (Cairney and Heikkila, 2014). It can also refer to a sense of policymaker 'inheritance' - of laws, rules, and programs - when they enter office (Rose, 1990). Events can be routine and anticipated, such as elections which 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 change (Weible 2014).

Current Approaches: A Mix of Approaches

In other words, policy theory may be used to conceptualise the importance of psychological processes within a large and messy policy process. This allows policy theories to deal with the role of psychology in different ways. For example, some may 'zoom in' to focus on the point of view of key policymakers. We may seek to 'get into the heads' of policymakers, to use qualitative methods to explore how and why they make particular choices. Other accounts may 'zoom out' to situate such action within a complex policymaking system over which policymakers have limited control (Cairney 2012b: 124-5; Geyer and Rihani, 2010). We could study how individuals adapt to their policy environments or model systems and consider the rules of interaction between large numbers of individuals representing 'nodes' in a network.

The latter may involve ascribing the same basic thought processes to a large number of actors, examining that process at a relatively abstract level. This is the necessary consequence of trying to account for the effects of a very large number of actors, and to take into account the role of a policymaking environment, only some of which is in the control of policymakers. More generally, a messy policy process prompts us to make trade-offs between depth and breadth of analytical coverage and explanation. Depth may help explain one or several cases relatively convincingly, but be difficult to operationalise, while breadth may help an explanation travel further, explaining a smaller but still-important part of multiple cases.

Bounded rationality and advocacy coalitions

The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) identifies three relevant biases of judgement. The first comes from a sense - albeit one that we shouldn't exaggerate - of preconceived ideas, which may undermine or influence strategic calculation when people engage in politics. Boundedly rational individuals 'simplify the world through their belief systems' and the ACF focuses on actors engaging in politics to translate their beliefs into action (Jenkins Smith et al 2014; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). There are three main types. 'Core' are fundamental and, like a religious conversion, unlikely to change in the studied time period ('a decade or more') but also too broad to guide detailed action - such as one's views on human nature. 'Policy core' are more specific, such as the proper balance between government and market,

but still unlikely to change. ‘Secondary Aspects’ relate to the implementation of policy. They are the most likely to change, as people learn about the effects of, say, regulations versus economic incentives. A large number, and wide range, of actors with similar beliefs become part of the same ‘advocacy coalition’ – a metaphor to describe a ‘non-trivial degree of coordinated activity’ (Sabatier, 1988: 139).

The second relates to ‘prospect theory’ and the idea that ‘people remember losses more readily than gains’ (Jenkins-Smith et al, 2014), which prompts them to interpret the same information differently when it is described differently – suggesting that one’s actions are based not simply on interests or beliefs (Quattrone and Tversky 1988: 735). Both factors contribute to a third motivation for coordination within a coalition – based significantly on opposition to the beliefs and policies of competing coalitions. The ACF suggests that coalitions may compete fiercely with others to interpret evidence and gain the favour of key policymakers, particularly when they romanticise their own cause and ‘demonize’ their opponents, or misperceive their opponent’s beliefs and question their legitimacy. Sabatier et al (1987: 451) identify the ‘devil shift’: ‘at least in relatively high conflict situations, political elites tend to see their opponents as "devils," i.e., as being more powerful and more "evil" than they actually are’.

In that context, the ACF’s focus is on: (a) how coalitions interpret and respond to events; and (b) policy learning, and the revision of secondary aspects of coalition beliefs. Both processes take place through the lens of deeply held beliefs, producing different interpretations of facts in different coalitions. In some cases, there are commonly accepted ways to measure policy performance. In others, it is a battle of ideas where coalitions ‘exaggerate the influence and maliciousness of opponents’ (Weible, 2007: 99).

Bounded rationality, emotions and framing strategies

Another approach is to consider how to conceptualise the interplay between bounded rationality, uncertainty and ambiguity (Zahariadis, 2014). One general outcome of bounded rationality could be that individuals pay attention to one issue or policy image at a time (serial processing, compared to governments or organisations who can ‘parallel process’). Another is that people may take certain ways of thinking for granted, often for long periods. They represent ‘paradigms’ which can help explain minimal policy change for long periods - policymakers establish a language and set of policy assumptions that endure for long periods, often because people are paying attention to other issues. Or, ‘monopolies of understanding’ (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 7) are used more explicitly to exclude the policy participants most likely to challenge that way of thinking (Cairney, 2012a: 230; Hall, 1993).

At the same time, ambiguity suggests that people could maintain multiple, and potentially contradictory, images of a policy problem. Further, it may take a very small change in policy conditions, or a small injection of new information or a new idea, to help produce a major shift of attention to another image (Baumgartner et al, 2014). A combination of bounded rationality and ambiguity produces the potential for actor attention to lurch dramatically from one policy problem or image to another.

Framing strategies and emotions: multiple streams, punctuated equilibrium, social construction and narratives

These issues are explored several ways, with some focusing primarily on the strategies pursued by actors to frame problems in very different ways, and others focusing on the combination of emotional and goal-driven behaviour among key policymakers.

Multiple streams analysis (MSA) focuses on how understandings of policy problems and solutions can be manipulated within political systems. Kingdon's (1984; see also Zahariadis 2014) focus is on the interaction between two factors: the promotion of policy solutions, that could draw attention and catch-on very quickly when attention lurches from one issue to another, and the established set of beliefs in a policy community that could slow its progress. Policymaker attention may lurch quickly to a problem, but a feasible solution (i.e. acceptable to enough people in the community) takes much longer to produce. The production of an acceptable solution may take years or even decades to become accepted within a policy community, and it may be longer before policymakers have the motive and opportunity to adopt it.

Punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; 2009; Baumgartner et al, 2014) has a similar focus on the interaction between: a 'monopoly of understandings' underpinning established subsystem relationships; and a new solution that could (a) prompt endogenous change when the attention of actors shifts and issues are reframed, or (b) 'catch fire' following successful 'venue shopping' (groups challenge a monopoly in one venue - such as the executive at a particular level - by seeking an audience in another - such as a legislature, court, or other type or level of government). 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 interaction between institutions, such as venues with different rules, or between the subsystem and 'macropolitical' system. The latter is unpredictable - lurches of macropolitical attention can destabilise subsystems, but most subsystems can remain unaffected for long periods.

Social construction theory (SCT) (Schneider et al, 2014) has a similar focus on agenda setting - framing, assigning values, using emotional characterizations of people and problems - to explain how policies are designed in relation to 'target' groups and populations. The 'good' groups become entitled to rewards and the 'bad' groups are portrayed as deserving of burdens or punishments. These distributions of benefits and punishments have a cumulative effect. For example, a sequence of policies based on a particular framing of target populations may produce 'hegemony', when the public, media and/ or policymakers take for granted, and rarely question, that framing. The distribution of benefits signals to target populations (and the public) how they are described and will be treated. For example, senior citizens may be favoured by spending programmes and given great incentives to engage regularly in politics, and both factors reinforce each other. Social constructions are difficult to overcome. Some groups can become more or less powerful and categorised 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).

The narrative policy framework (NPF) examines the role of narratives as stylised accounts of the origins, aims and likely impact of policies (McBeth et al, 2014). Narratives are used strategically to reinforce or oppose policy measures. Each narrative has a setting, characters, plot and moral. They can be compared to marketing, as persuasion based more on appealing to an audience’s beliefs (or exploiting their thought processes) than the evidence. 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 seem plausible, confirm their biases, exploit their emotions, and/ or come from a source they trust.

We may use these four theories to explore how often-exceptional people pursue *goal-oriented framing strategies*: the policy entrepreneurs who exploit the vagaries of policymaking systems; the policy monopolists who frame issues as ‘solved’ or ‘technical’ to minimise external interest; the venue shoppers who exploit potential lurches of attention; and, generally, the actors who use persuasion to exploit ambiguity to win framing contests. Such actors recognise that framing strategies involve ‘a mixture of empirical information and emotive appeals’ (True et al., 2007: 161).

Social construction goes an important step further, to identify a crucial emotional element to action: policymakers make quick, biased, emotional judgements, then back up their actions with selective facts to ‘institutionalize’ their understanding of a policy problem and its solution: ‘Likes and dislikes are not the result of individual or collective reason and deliberation but mainly the product of emotion and heuristics ... judgments begin with emotional reactions ... and reason is used mainly to justify initial emotion responses’ (Schneider and Ingram, 2014, drawing directly from psychologists such as Haidt, 2001³; 2012). Policy designs based on emotional-driven thinking often become hegemonic because they are ‘automatic rather than thought through’; as a ‘decision heuristic’, an emotional assignment of ‘deservingness’ is ‘easy to use and recall and hard to change’.

The NPF goes one further step, to combine a discussion of emotion (‘affect’) with the description of ‘homo narrans’, or humans as storytellers (in stated contrast to homo economicus, or humans as rational beings): ‘Narrative is assumed to play a central role in how individuals process information, communicate, and reason’ (McBeth et al, 2014). It focuses on perception and the social construction of problems to ‘create different policy realities’. As a model of the individual, homo narrans is based on nine supporting propositions: people are boundedly rational; they rely on shortcuts to process information; ‘emotions precede reason’; the majority of cognition is handled by fast perception, over slow

³ Haidt (2001: 814) draws on the idea of intuitionism (people grasp moral truths as a form of perception, not reflection) to suggest that ‘moral reasoning is usually an ex post facto process used to influence the intuitions (and hence judgements) of other people’; one has an instant gut response to certain issues and ‘when faced with a social demand for a verbal justification, one becomes a lawyer trying to build a case rather than a judge searching for the truth’. Lewis (2013: 13-15) suggests that Stone (1989) provides a similar account of ‘causal stories’ in policymaking, often to quickly assign blame to one group even though cause is multifaceted. This approach is developed by the NPF.

reasoning; people have an ‘affective’ reaction to concepts before they consciously appraise them (‘hot cognition’⁴); people exhibit confirmation and disconfirmation bias; they seek sources of information ‘congruent with what they already believe’ (‘selective exposure’); these processes are used by people to protect or reinforce their identity (‘identity protective cognition’); and, they look to their peers, family or other networks ‘to help them make sense of the world’. In that context, people ‘tell and remember stories’ to make sense of the world and their place within it, to organize their ‘thoughts, memories, affect, and other cognitions’, and to communicate them within networks (McBeth et al, 2014).

New insights applied to established approaches

If we want to explore theories based extensively on the conceptualisation of multiple psychological processes, the NPF could be adopted as a replacement for others. Or, we can identify key insights from psychological research and consider how they relate to well-established policy theories. The latter is generally my preference (and that of the NPF’s authors) because the psychology of policymakers is only one part of the explanation of outcomes in complex policy systems. Two examples provide an indication of the possibilities, with ‘social intuitionism’ focusing on the balance between automatic versus reasoned thinking, and ‘fluency’ on the relationship between preferences/ beliefs and our ability to process information.⁵

Social Intuitionism

Lewis’ (2013: 1) description of ‘social intuitionism’ suggests that ‘in human decision making and moral judgment, the use of reason and rationality are subordinated to rapid, gut-level, emotion-laden cognition, and that people rely heavily on heuristics and narratives that often carry certain inherent biases’.⁶ For example, Kahneman (2012: 20) describes two types of thinking: ‘*System 1* operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control. *System 2* allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations ... often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice and concentration’ (‘thinking fast and slow’; compare with Haidt (2001: 818) on ‘intuitive system’ and ‘reasoning system’).

⁴ Lodge and Taber (2005: 456): People develop positive or negative feelings about things they have thought about in the past – ‘political leaders, groups, issues, symbols, and ideas’ - and this feeling ‘comes automatically and inescapably to mind upon presentation of the associated object’. ‘Feelings become information. Affect imbues the judgment process from start to finish - from the encoding of information, its retrieval and comprehension, to its expression as a preference or choice’. If so, people become ‘biased reasoners’, unable to assess information in an ‘evenhanded way’ or to ‘break free of their prior sentiments when evaluating arguments on political issues, even when they are motivated to be impartial’.

⁵ Another relevant concept is trust, which has long been a focal point of policy theory (particularly when related to group-government relations in sub-systems), features in psychological studies of risk assessment (Slovic, 1999), and recent studies of neural signals (Wardle et al, 2013).

⁶ Lewis (2013: 4) also talks about the links to evolution, with fast thinking associated with the need for rapid fight or flight decisions in hunter-gatherer times. This presents us with a potential source of major confusion, since evolutionary theory in public policy may regard very different processes when used in MSA, PET and complexity theory (Cairney, 2013).

Lewis (2013: 4; 7) argues that ‘fast’ thinking is ‘typically where the action is’ because people tend to conserve ‘our limited amount of attention and cognitive processing capabilities for the few activities we currently view as most essential’ and rely on ‘autopilot’ whenever emotions are heightened. The main effect is a series of biases related to cognitive shortcuts which develop over time as people learn from experience, including: the ‘availability heuristic’, when people relate the size, frequency or probability of a problem to how easy it is to remember or imagine; the ‘representativeness heuristic’, when people overestimate the probability of vivid events; ‘prospect theory’, when ‘losses tend to pain us more than gains please us’; framing effects based on emotional and moral judgements over well thought out preferences; confirmation bias; optimism bias, or unrealistic expectations about our aims working out well when we commit to them; status quo bias; a tendency to use exemplars of social groups to represent general experience; and a ‘need for coherence’ and to establish patterns and causal relationships when they may not exist (2013: 7). Drawing on Haidt (2007; 2012), Lewis (2013: 9-10) discusses the equivalent of fast thinking when making moral judgements (footnote 2). People draw quickly (albeit in different ways) on ‘moral foundations’ related to caring for the vulnerable, punishing cheating, rewarding loyalty, respecting authority, and protecting families and other social groups.

Lewis (2013: 1) provides two important reasons to consider the relevance of intuitionism to policy theory: it is a well-developed approach backed by considerable empirical research; and, it is consistent, in some way, with the policy theories described above. For example, passion/ intuition could help explain why core beliefs seem impervious to persuasion and change in the ACF (2013: 13). Work by neuropsychologists such as Fiske (2011) produce categories – ‘pride, envy, pity, or disgust’ – which match those used in SCT (2013: 16; Scheider et al, 2014). With regard to MSA, the suggestion that intuition precedes reason may help explain the motivation of policymakers to select particular solutions when their attention lurches to problems (2013: 19). We might link the endogenous change found in PET-style subsystems to new weights which people apply to moral intuition, while noting that if people generally engage in system 1 thinking they are rarely open to persuasion (2013: 21-2).

Processing Fluency

People's decisions are influenced by their familiarity with things; with the ease in which they process information (Alter and Oppenheimer, 2009). For example, they may pay more attention to an issue or statement if they already possess some knowledge of it and find it easy to understand or recall. They may pay attention to people when their faces seem familiar and find fewer faults with systems they comprehend (2009: 221-2). They may place more value on things they find familiar, such as their domestic currency, items that they own compared to items they would have to buy, or the stocks of companies with more pronounceable names - even if they are otherwise identical (Alter and Oppenheimer, 2008a: 990). Fluency can take several forms (conceptual, perceptual, linguistic) and it can be influenced in several ways (‘semantic priming’, ‘visual clarity’ and ‘phonological simplicity’) (see Alter and Oppenheimer, 2009: 220; and its conceptual roots in the ‘availability heuristic’ – Tversky and Kahneman, 1973; Schwartz et al, 1991; Schwartz, 2004).

So, we have bounded rationality telling us that people will use short cuts to information, combined with processing fluency to describe particular short cuts. We may also be interested in how those thought processes can be manipulated, to attract attention and potential agreement from others, including: the manipulation of fonts, colours and duration of texts and images; the repeated use of text or images, or the simplification of messages, or provision of priming messages, to influence their recall and ease of information processing; and the provision of more or fewer choices (with more or less difference between them) to aid or hinder decision making (Alter and Oppenheimer, 2009: 227). Recent studies of fluency also focus on its influence on judgement, linking (a) stimuli to produce greater psychological distance/ detachment from a concept to (b) the likelihood that someone will perceive something directly or in the abstract (Alter and Oppenheimer, 2008: 166). They use the example of a visit to the dentist ('good oral hygiene' versus having your teeth drilled), in which we might encourage abstract over concrete thought – but we could produce policymaking equivalents, such as National Health Service modernisation versus closing down a local hospital.

How might these ideas influence policy theories? When we examine ambiguity and persuasion, we are interested in why some policy images and potential solutions seem to generate more attention or agreement than others, perhaps because they are already familiar or can be linked to things which are familiar, or perhaps because they seem more or less concrete. If fluency 'implies truth, liking, and confidence' (Alter and Oppenheimer, 2009: 229), persuasion strategies may be effective not only because they relate to people's beliefs or interests, but also because they can be processed more easily or linked more effectively to those interests (this is a focus of the nascent NPF agenda). Fluency would also provide a useful supplement to 'focusing event' explanations focused on external conditions. It would help explain why policymakers would pay attention to particular events, of which they are already familiar or perceive to be closer to home, at the expense of others. Or, when we examine advocacy coalition behaviour, fluency may help explain how and why people join, form or stay in coalitions, and how people operationalise the core aspects of their belief systems. Yet, it will take time to translate broad possibilities into concrete research designs.

Issues to Address When We Combine Disciplinary Insights

1. Assumptions or Hypotheses? How do These Theories Use Psychology in Explanation?

The question of how policymakers understand and frame problems is important, but only one piece of a bigger jigsaw which involves the socioeconomic context, the groups that policymakers consult regularly, and the system of rules in which they operate. Consequently, policy theories have the same two basic options when they incorporate psychological insights:

1. *To produce hypotheses to test these propositions directly at the micro level.* For example, Sabatier et al (1987) have tried to test the 'devil shift'. Testing the NPF's propositions is also possible, but seems less straightforward, because it provides such

a wide range of explanations for human behaviour (albeit based on well-established and ongoing psychological research agendas).

2. *To treat these propositions as assumptions*, allowing them to build larger ('meso' or 'macro' level) models or theories that produce other hypotheses. Essentially, we ask what would happen if these assumptions were true when we know that they are not (they are too abstract to be realistic, or there is limited evidence). This could be a division of labour issue – letting someone else test the assumptions allows us to focus on the bigger picture. Or, we have to make simple assumptions about human behaviour to theorise social systems and focus on the influence of the system or environment in which people make decisions (Jones, 2001: x).

For example, the use of assumption allows the ACF to theorise other parts of coalition activity within subsystems, including the stability of coalitions, levels of consensus within them, and the extent to which different groups or government agencies express their beliefs in public debate – Jenkins-Smith et al, 2014). Its authors use a 'Lakatosian' approach to protect some aspects of the ACF from falsification, allowing them to focus their empirical activities elsewhere (Cairney, 2012a: 219). MSA may be used to track the role of policy entrepreneurs exploiting windows of opportunity. PET can refer to bounded rationality and ambiguity as a way to help explain patterns of general stability and continuity punctuated by instability and change – reflected in leptokurtic patterns of budget and legislative distributions. SCT can refer to emotion-driven policymaking to explore its enduring and cumulative effect in a large collection of case studies (Pierce et al, 2014 examine 111 applications). NPF can be used to explore, for example, how people respond (in surveys, experiments, interviews and focus groups) to certain properties of narrative strategies, such as the heroes and villains, based on a combination of their existing beliefs and the impact of the story (McBeth et al, 2014).

2. Integrating disciplines: complementary or contradictory insights?

We need to be aware of the potential pitfalls of interdisciplinary work, when disciplines have different starting points, perspectives and methods. These contradictions of approach are present *within* disciplines, but we often know more about them because they are well rehearsed in disciplinary journals and conferences. When we combine the insights of people who publish in journals which are reviewed in different ways, and attend conferences with a separate group of peers, it takes longer to identify contradictions. However, two initial issues spring to mind.

First, do explanations of behaviour based on rationality (bounded or not) contradict or complement those based on emotion and intuition? As described above, most established policy theories seek to combine those insights, and treat them as complementary, generally by arguing that boundedly rational individuals use emotional or related heuristics as one of several analytical shortcuts. This emphasis is relatively strong in the SCT, NPF and ACF descriptions. Yet, Lewis (2013: 5) often describes social intuitionism as an explanation that contradicts or replaces a focus on goal-oriented bounded rationality.⁷ We are replacing, rather

⁷ But not the same type of fundamental challenge provided by the 'post positivism' associated with Fischer (2003) and which underpins the NPF (Lewis, 2013: 3).

than simply amending, explanations based on reason and goal orientation, with a focus on the links between reason and emotion (Lewis, 2013: 3 suggests that Jones (2001) only offers a 'mild to moderate corrective to rational choice). 'Fast thinking' is close to an 'unthinking' form of behaviour, tied to automatic, often-instinctual, emotional judgements made in the absence of goal-oriented reasoning.

It is difficult to know how to resolve these different interpretations. It is also difficult to know how 'fast' thinking relates to situations in which people don't simply make quick judgements. For example, they form part of a larger organisation or system in which it is standard practice to collect information and take time to make collective decisions. There is a significant difference between the 'thought processes' of individuals and groups or organisations. We often talk about 'rational' processes in terms of the rules that organisations develop to provide cognitive and decision-making short cuts. Would these rules (or their interpretation) be as subject to psychological explanations?

Perhaps SCT addresses this problem, suggesting that policymakers use standard organisational processes simply to legitimise decisions they have made while in fast thinking mode. We might contrast this with MSA's focus on the slow form of evolution, in which attention lurches dramatically to problems, but potential solutions can take years or decades to become accepted in policy communities. Policymakers may make quick judgements on problems and solutions, but face longer term opposition to their proposed solutions. In this case, it is more difficult to identify the ability for actors to 'institutionalise' system 1 decisions.

At the heart of such discussions is a fundamental difficulty in knowing the mix of system 1 and 2 thinking in public policy, and working out how we could measure it, directly or indirectly. For example, Lewis (2013: 12) simply says that elected politicians are *probably the most likely* to engage in this type of behaviour. Even if true, this would not account for the majority of action within policymaking systems. From established studies such as PET, it is possible to maintain a counter view: macropolitical attention involving elected politicians may lurch from issue to issue, and cause potential punctuations and periods of fast thinking, but most subsystems remain unaffected and relatively insulated. Much depends on how well we can equate organisational action with individual thinking: if people tend towards hyperincrementalism - they don't consider many options beyond their preferred choice (Lewis, 2013: 22) - can we attribute the same behaviour to the organisations in which they operate?

Second, we should consider how each discipline (or subdiscipline) addresses the methodological trade-off between: (a) in-depth case studies which help explain particular instances in a particularly convincing way; and, (b) broader, more abstract, hypotheses that may explain a smaller but still-important part of many more cases. A discussion of psychology is currently an excellent way into such discussions, since it picks up on historical debates regarding the value of abstract rational choice theory, designed to present parsimonious theoretical or testable insights, but highly criticised as 'unrealistic', versus studies of potentially more realistic and detailed psychological motivations which provide

more realistic insights which are applicable to an indeterminate number or type of people. Haidt's (2014) statement - 'In the social sciences, the overzealous pursuit of parsimony has been a disaster ... there are almost no equations in psychology' – gives a flavor of the potential for one disciplinary perspective to make assumptions about, and distance itself from, another.

Much depends on our academic goals. If our goal is to produce a theory that travels across countries, time periods and policy issues, it needs to be abstract enough to focus on the essential elements of policymaking and to establish, in a relatively parsimonious way, the logical relationship between each element. If our goal is to explain specific real-world policy outcomes, resulting from the interactions between policymakers and other actors, within particular political systems and environments, we can produce richer and less parsimonious explanation.

Even so, we still need to think about which methods will do the job. For example, much psychological research is experimental, and based on the thought processes and decisions of people far removed from the policy process. They help give us insights into the human mind in a particular setting, but not in the setting we seek to study. Their insights are designed to be generalizable, but do not tell us if they can be extrapolated to political systems which contain unusual decision-making processes and subject individuals to constraints (regarding, for example, the high stakes nature of their real-world decisions) and ways of thinking that are difficult to replicate.

3. The normative dimension: are emotional decisions bad decisions?

We often use bounded rationality simply to explain what happens when the policymaking process cannot be 'optimal', in the sense that it is based on complete information and a perfect ability to process it. Does a shift to psychology sharpen the focus on sub-optimality and the potential to make the wrong decisions? This is partly the focus of Alter and Oppenheimer (2008) when they argue that policymakers spend disproportionate amounts of money on risks with which they are familiar, at the expense of spending money on things with more negative effects, producing a 'dramatic misallocation of funds'. They draw on Sunstein (2002), who suggests that emotional bases for attention to environmental problems from the 1970s prompted many regulations to be disproportionate to the risk involved. Further, Slovic's work suggest that people's feelings towards risk may even be influenced by the way in which it is described, for example as a percentage versus a 1 in X probability (Slovic, P. 2010: xxii).

Haidt (2001: 815) argues that a focus on psychology can be used to improve policymaking: the identification of the 'intuitive basis of moral judgment' can be used to help policymakers 'avoid mistakes' or allow people to develop 'programs' or an 'environment' to 'improve the quality of moral judgment and behavior'. Similarly, Alter and Oppenheimer (2009: 232) worry about medical and legal judgements swayed by fluid diagnoses and stories. These studies compare with arguments focusing on the positive role of emotions of decision-making, either individually (see Constantinescu, 2012, drawing on Frank, 1988 and Elster,

2000 on the decisions of judges) or as part of social groups, with emotional responses providing useful information in the form of social cues (Van Kleef et al, 2010).

Policy theory does not shy away from these issues. For example, Schneider and Ingram (2014) argue that the outcomes of social construction are often dysfunctional and not based on a well-reasoned, goal-oriented strategy: ‘Studies have shown that rules, tools, rationales and implementation structures inspired by social constructions send dysfunctional messages and poor choices may hamper the effectiveness of policy’. However, part of the value of policy theory is to show that policy results from the interaction of large numbers of people and institutions. So, the poor actions of one policymaker would not be the issue; we need to know more about the cumulative effect of individual emotional decision making in collective decision-making – not only in discrete organisations, but also networks and systems.

Conclusion

The paper brings together a discussion of two things: the use of psychological concepts in established policy theories, and the potential to add further concepts to the mix. In each case, our aim is to take simple propositions regarding individual thought processes and behaviour, and use them to inform more complicated policy theories which seek to describe and explain complex policymaking systems.

To some extent, we can produce a coherent narrative about the importance of psychological insights, and particularly those which highlight the emotional and biased heuristics, which ‘precede reason’, that people use as shortcuts to information. The list is long, from: a disproportionate response to potential losses, and the overestimation of something’s value based on how memorable it is; to confirmation, status quo and optimism biases; attention to issues based on how easy the information is to process; and, a tendency to seek social cues from one’s peers. These ideas can be used to inform policy theories in a range of ways, from an established focus on advocacy coalition dynamics, the use of framing strategies and persuasion to exploit uncertainty and ambiguity, and the positive or negative portrayal of people or social groups - to potentially new foci on these processes based on a greater appreciation of concepts such as social intuitionism.

Yet, there are several unresolved issues regarding the links between emotional and ‘rational’ explanations (are they complementary or contradictory?), and our ability to add more depth to the study of individuals when we seek to theorise the interaction between huge numbers of them. The addition of psychological insights provides the potential to add value to, and complicate, policy theory and research.

There is also a more fundamental problem with dipping into psychological insights. Each discipline has its own concepts, experience and way of communicating, and it takes considerable study and training to become conversant in another discipline’s methods and approaches. So, we should be careful when we seek to understand and import these insights. Some of these problems could be overcome by meaningful interdisciplinary cooperation. Yet, we would still face two basic problems: the policy theorists could think of potential ways to apply these insights, but in a rather general way, less grounded to existing approaches; and

the psychologist could propose the theoretical extension of these concepts without knowing if policymaking scenarios were comparable with existing experimental results, in areas unfamiliar to psychologists because they are rarely tested.

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