

SPECIAL ISSUE • Practical lessons from policy theories

article

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We challenge policy theory scholars to change the way we produce and communicate research: translate our research to a wider audience to gauge the quality of our findings. Explain state of the art knowledge to others to aid communication among ourselves. If we succeed, we can proceed with confidence. If not, we should reconsider the state of our field. Our aim is to show leadership by subjecting ourselves to this challenge. We introduce a special issue that represents the state of knowledge in eight theories and combine their insights to produce theoretical tenets across the field of policy processes.

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Introduction: toward better translations of policy process theories

In this special issue, we challenge policy theory scholars to change the way we produce and communicate research: translate our findings to a wider audience to gauge the clarity and quality of our findings. Policy theories have generated widespread knowledge of the policy process, but the field is vast and uncoordinated, and too many scholars hide behind a veil of jargon and obfuscation. Some of the most *visible* outcomes – such as limited relevance to practitioners, and anxiety and confusion among students or early career researchers with a limited grasp of a complex field – reflects a *less visible but more worrying* academic problem: we often assume, rather than demonstrate, that policy process research contains insights that add cumulative and comparable knowledge to the field.

Yet, if we do not take the time to check if we understand the state of the art, and can share a common understanding with our peers, how can we state that we are accumulating knowledge collectively rather than producing work of limited relevance

beyond our own narrow individual concerns? Is there genuinely a cohesive, advancing, field of policy theories or are we each producing our own theories and assuming they are useful to others? We need to ask these searching questions more often and place them front and centre of academic debate. A special issue of *Policy & Politics* is the perfect forum in which to do so.

Some thematic reviews already try to compare insights across many theories (Heikkila and Cairney, 2017) but they only scratch the surface and provide limited assurance about a coherent policy process research agenda. We need more work from theory-specific experts to explain their theories and empirical knowledge clearly enough to help others gauge progress and compare it to progress among other approaches. To aid clarity and communication across the entire field of public policy theory, we need theoretical specialists to explain state of the art knowledge to their peers. To do so, we need to replace the jargon with more accessible language to see if it still makes sense. If we succeed, we can proceed with confidence. If not, we should ask ourselves uncomfortable questions about the state of our field or, at least, key approaches.

In this new context, a process of ‘translation’ no longer has a single purpose, to describe the value of scholarship to a wider audience (Flinders, 2013). Rather, a fundamentally important additional purpose, and the focus of the special issue, is to help policy scholars communicate clearly with each other to improve their knowledge and insights. Sometimes, we need to lift our heads up from the detail, take stock and explain our project to a wider audience *and our academic peers* to see if the conceptual logic still holds and the empirical analysis is rewarding (Ayres and Marsh, 2013). Such efforts are an effective way to be clear enough to invite critical analysis, rather than relying on jargon which can obfuscate as much as explain.

Our aim is to show leadership by first subjecting ourselves to this challenge. We produce eight ways to synthesise and communicate state of the art knowledge in eight intellectually distinct fields, each with their own reference points and key foundational texts. In this introduction, we describe what to expect from such contributions, and the three main ways to compare and combine their insights to produce theoretical tenets that are important across the entire field of policy process research.

What to expect? We argue that this new agenda requires new ways to write some of our scholarly articles. The format should be flexible, to allow authors to experiment with different ways to communicate. The judgement of a theoretical contribution should change, from the need to provide new empirical material in each article (the traditional judgement) to the value of demonstrating why we should think a particular way about a theory or approach. The latter is too easy to dismiss as a review essay, in which we have heard the arguments before. Yet, almost no scholar can make this claim with confidence, because the field is too vast, and there are too many approaches in play, to understand more than a few in sufficient depth. Consequently, scholars with the ability to *synthesise* knowledge make the largest contribution to our field. In comparison, articles which contain theoretical discussion *and* new data cannot do both justice in 8000 words, and there is too much incentive to over-claim or inflate a new theoretical insight based on a narrow empirical finding.

How to communicate, compare and combine insights? For practitioners, the contexts and choices in policy processes are too complex to provide recommendations that apply to all situations (Cairney and Weible, 2017). However, for scholars, we can produce frameworks, theoretical insights and a conceptual language that helps

structure the analysis of all such situations. For example, this special issue identifies lessons from policy theories for persuasion and learning, political participation and collective action, and structuring governments and designing public policies.

To that end, we first explain briefly why it has taken so long for many policy theorists to embrace the agenda we have described. Then, we plot a route for this new agenda, identifying what we know from the special collection and what we still need to know from the field of public policy research.

The principal audience of this special issue are all policy scholars interested in theoretical clarity, knowledge synthesis, *and* the practical meaning of the theories that populate the field. Further, since we argue that theoretical clarity comes from explaining concepts to a wider audience, we expect the issue to appeal to many practitioners (hitherto frustrated with academic jargon), especially since many students reading this special issue will become policy actors. Of course, no single collection of articles can bridge the gap between theory and practice, but it can serve as a landmark in bringing attention to this important issue, initiating the process of translation, and serving as a guide for similar scholarship in the future.

Policy process research has mostly continued in its theory-focused tradition

Policy process research can be defined as the study of the patterns of interactions surrounding public policy over time, often focusing the nature of political systems, policy subsystems within larger political systems, and authoritative decision-making venues. To make sense of the complexity of policy contexts and human choices, scholars have developed theories to help specify the scope of research and establish common vocabularies via abstract concepts and foundational assumptions about causal relationships. For policy scholars, theories serve as the medium within which knowledge is built, stored and advanced. However, in their quest for better theories, policy scholars have often treated their peers as their sole audience, with little incentive to think about their usefulness to wider audiences or practical implications. We have theories deep in knowledge but we are unclear about how to communicate or use it.

Most of the strains between theoretical and practical orientations are in the past

Since the founding of the field (Lasswell, 1956), policy process research has featured rifts between the value of doing theory-based research versus applied research (Ranney, 1968; Sabatier, 1992). Some of these discussions continue, with some scholars criticising the lack of discussion of more democratic and normative ideals into policy process theories (deLeon, 1997; Ingram et al, 2016). Yet, the field is shifting, with a number of scholars bringing practical relevance to the field of policy processes (Weible et al, 2012; Cairney, 2015; 2016; Shipan and Volden, 2012). Compared to the past, most contemporary policy scholars recognise the value of doing applied *and* theory-based research, even if they choose to do one or the other (Cairney and Weible, 2017). Of course, some tensions and dilemmas remain. For example, some policy scholars struggle to strike the right balance under an incentive structure in their academic units that rewards basic over applied science in promotion or tenure decisions. Nonetheless, there are fewer calls to maintain a theory and practice divide,

particularly in countries – like the UK – in which there are now more incentives to demonstrate wider audience ‘impact’.

Our ability to describe practical relevance from policy process theories remains elusive

Given the theoretical tradition of the field, policy process scholars have struggled to develop strategies for translating their science into practice. This is not from a lack of effort (deLeon and Weible, 2010). For example, some strategies have been oversubscribed, including writing policy implications in the conclusion of articles published in academic journals. Some scholars also participate directly in the policy process and/or develop normative theories which combine descriptive and prescriptive analysis. Social Construction and Policy Design is a key example, in which it identifies ‘degenerative politics’ and describes how it undermines a democratic governing system (Schneider and Ingram, 1997). In contrast, the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) is more of an empirical-based theory because it does not explicitly make claims that a certain type of politics is good or bad for a governing system (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Each of these strategies can be useful but face limitations. For instance, most articles in academic journals are unavailable to policy actors, normative-based theories are often just as inaccessible as empirical-based theories to people outside the field, and direct advocacy is not for everyone. For example, it is debatable whether Social Construction and Policy Design with a normative orientation is more or less accessible to new students than the Multiple Streams Framework without a normative orientation. Less debatable are the benefits that students (without longer term academic aspirations) could receive and use in the real world if practical insights were gleaned from both.

Other strategies for bridging the theory–practice divide are undervalued, overlooked, or misguided. For example, policy process scholars often imagine their research affecting the thoughts and actions of current policymakers when in fact their largest audience is not just ‘policymakers’ but rather a broader set of policy actors involved in the policy process (Cairney and Weible, 2017). Moreover, the argument that our work as published in academic journals actually reach this broader set of policy actors has not been substantiated, and we would not make journal articles accessible simply by removing the paywall (deLeon and Weible, 2010). Our argument is not that policy recommendations found in the conclusions of journal articles are ineffectual, but that we should not rely upon them as our main strategy for outreach.

Additionally, many scholars often expect their research to produce precise prescriptions about how to improve specific instances of policymaking. However, relatively abstract policy theories will rarely provide concrete advice of how to act and what to do in all given contexts. There are too many variables in play to make this happen. The complexity of policy processes, its continuously changing nature, and its diversity across contexts, prevent precise prediction for policy actors seeking influence or policy change. Further, policy actors pursue different goals. Some might be motivated to produce change or to stop change. Each of these policy actors need a different set of strategies to increase the likelihood of being effective. Our role may be to help them make sense of policy theories so that they think more critically about how they make their choices and how they make sense of their complex context (Cairney and Weible, 2017).

Summarising the contributions from the articles in this special issue

Even if policy process research embraces more applied science today than in the past, scholars still struggle to make theoretical work relevant. Effective translation requires full article length treatment. Translation into practical lessons, such as for policy analysis and engagement in the policy process, should not be tacked on to published research. Rather, to do it justice we need to incorporate practical lessons into state of the art research. Therefore, to take this agenda forward, this special issue consists of eight articles that each focus on making scholarly and practical sense of a different theoretical terrain:

Three habits of successful policy entrepreneurs

Cairney (2018) argues that we need one coherent story of Multiple Streams Analysis (MSA) to bring together a vibrant and diverse but uncoordinated field. At the heart of this story are the policy entrepreneurs who understand how to be effective in policymaking: influence how people understand policy problems, prepare a technically and politically feasible solution, and pounce on the temporary motivation and ability of policymakers to select it. State of the art MSA research suggests that, although we still describe this process in the same way, the role of the entrepreneur has changed markedly since Kingdon's (1984) foundational study.

MSA informs current debates on 'evidence-based policymaking' in which too many commentators strive for 'rational' policymaking, which privileges scientific evidence, in a process akin to a policy cycle. Yet, policymakers are more likely to be driven by 'irrationality' in a far messier policy process. The key messages for policy actors are simple: focus on exercising power to reduce ambiguity, rather than bombarding policymakers with evidence to reduce uncertainty, and exploit 'windows of opportunity' to act, rather than expecting one stage of policymaking to lead inevitably to another.

Narratives as tools for influencing policy change

Crow and Jones (2018) synthesise insights from the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF). They show how policy actors influence the ways in which policymakers understand and seek to solve policy problems. Again, this process is not driven primarily by a universal acceptance of the evidence (the 'knowledge fallacy'). Nor can actors rely on a universal form of human empathy in which all people care about the same things (the 'empathy fallacy'). Rather, policy influence through persuasion comes from telling an effective story built on acknowledging the storyteller's biases and exploiting the audience's biases. Crow and Jones (2018) argue that other interpretive scholars analyse narrative without drawing practical lessons; they do not tell us which stories work. In contrast, by using scientific methods to analyse the relative success of persuasion strategies, the NPF provides a template for understanding, analysing, and writing effective narratives. Put most simply, a good story requires four elements: the setting, hero and villain characters, a plot outlining their motives, and a clear moral which represents the policy solution.

Using cultural theory to navigate the policy process

Simmons (2018) focuses on how policymakers develop effective policymaking strategies when they are so limited by bounded rationality. They combine rational and irrational informational shortcuts to act quickly and make adequate decisions despite high uncertainty. One can criticise their reliance on ‘cognitive frailties’, and perhaps design institutions to limit their autonomous powers, or praise their remarkable ability to develop heuristics, and work with them to refine such techniques. Simmons synthesises key insights from cultural theory (CT), and presents one of many possible CT stories, to identify the value of a policymaker’s ‘internal compass’ (based on a valuable combination of rational and irrational cognitive processes) combined with a ‘map’ of the ‘policymaking terrain’ (the organisations, rules, and other sources of sources of direction and learning in a policymaking system). In doing so, Simmons helps bring much needed clarity to the study of CT, which has produced a diverse and potentially unwieldy literature, and identifies ways to help policymakers think about and ask the right questions as they navigate their policymaking environment.

The lessons of policy learning

Dunlop and Radaelli (2018) provide the same service for scholars of policy learning. Learning has been a staple of policy scholarships for decades, but remains one of the most elusive concepts in the study of policy processes. Too many scholars have responded by generating taxonomies, concepts, and methods which describe how to organise analysis without showing the intellectual and practical payoffs. Dunlop and Radaelli provide new direction to policy learning studies by framing the literature in terms of its implications for policymakers, citizens and societies. They do so with reference to three key messages. First, although we may associate learning with positive change, it can actually be detrimental to politics and society. Learning is often the by-product of bargaining and the effort to secure compliance with the law, rather than the intended product of research to improve public policy. Second, we can develop categories to show how to help or hinder certain kinds of learning. For example, skepticism of science and low policy capacity mar the work of experts in governmental bodies, and incommensurable beliefs undermine deliberative forms of learning. Third, unless we design learning processes well, it is too easy for policymakers to learn the wrong lessons. In that context, learning scholarship helps us conceptualise the policy process *and* improve the process of learning within government.

Practical prescriptions for governing fragmented governments

Swann and Kim (2018) consolidate and take forward the Institutional Collection Action (ICA) literature to describe the problems that arise when public policy problems cannot be addressed effectively by a single, solitary government. Instead, many semi-autonomous organisations have to learn how to collaborate most effectively – across different scales of governance and institutional contexts – to reduce policymaking fragmentation. The main challenge is dealing with threats to collective action. Swann and Kim identify five main solutions for reducing collaborative risk and uncertainty: employ networking strategies that incorporate frequent, face-to-face interactions; design collaborative arrangements around service characteristics; partner

with organisations with similar goals and values; increase inclusivity in collaboratives; and develop collaborative capacity incrementally.

Drawing practical lessons from punctuated equilibrium theory

Koski and Workman synthesise lessons from Punctuated Equilibrium Theory, which has become one of the most active research programmes in political science. One consequence of such conceptual and comparative expansion is diversity of scholarship under a single banner, and the need to step back to consider the meaning of key terms and relative benefits of many approaches. They focus primarily on conceptual advances in PET research on information processing, which builds scholarly and practical lessons on one key insight: policymakers and governments face an oversupply of information and the need to produce effective rules to maximise the use of the highest quality information. Koski and Workman orientate their recommendations around finding the right balance between centralisation, which creates bottlenecks, and decentralisation, which leads to fragmentation. They signal to scholars the key findings from PET by focusing on possible solutions to those findings: design institutions to be information seeking (not merely attending to problems); encourage central units to listen to signals from multiple delegated units (rather than minimising dissent or ignoring outside experts); and, encourage issue bundling to challenge a tendency for issues to be tied up by narrow problem definitions.

Policy design and the added-value of the institutional analysis development framework

Heikkila and Andersson (2018) address collective action in the design of substantive public policy. Their article summarises key lessons generated by the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework. First, people are capable of – and often the best at – solving collective problems from the bottom-up, both outside and within government settings. Therefore, excluding these groups from the design stage leads to weakened legitimacy resulting in less compliance. Second, people have a natural tendency to engage in reactionary and emotional reasoning when they are passionate about an issue. Therefore, design frameworks to guard against the tendency toward biased analyses. A good framework provides a toolkit for identifying the factors that policymakers and stakeholders should consider when developing policies. Third, there are no silver bullets to policy designs and it is important to design contextually appropriate policy interventions. These types of recommendations may seem intuitive, which actually boosts the academic and practical value of IAD research. IAD studies show time and again that people ignore such solutions, prompting us to restate more vigorously the need to resist the temptation to rush policy analysis and design, and to document the unintended consequences of ignoring IAD advice.

Why advocacy coalitions matter and practical insights about them

Weible and Ingold (2018) focus less on public policy and governance and more on the political behaviour of those seeking influence in the policy process. One of the challenges in making sense of the literature on political behaviour is the varied ways in which we describe different forms of political associations. Basing their argument on

the Advocacy Coalition Framework, Weible and Ingold respond to this challenge by comparing and contrasting advocacy coalitions with coalitions of convenience, interest groups, social movements, political parties, and epistemic communities. In contrast to these other terms, advocacy coalitions refer to informal political association where policy actors work together over extended periods of time toward similar policy goals.

Yet, knowing that coalitions exist is not the same as knowing how to get involved in them or how to form and maintain them. Weible and Ingold tackle these more practical challenges by offering ways to get involved in coalitions (auxiliary and principal members, brokers, and entrepreneurs), the forces that contribute to coalition formation and maintenance (different types of threats to beliefs), and the different approaches to identify coalitions (who are in key positions, who has decision authority, who has influential reputations, and who might be mobilised?). No single political strategy will work all the time, so Weible and Ingold provide a structured way to think about coalitions in this complexity given our bounded abilities to comprehend the world and capacities to act in it.

Wider contributions from this special issue

The challenge today is not whether policy theories should make their work relevant but how it should be done. This special issue does not overcome this challenge but it does provide a number of contributions about how to make our policy theories more relevant. We organise these contributions into three categories for new and experienced policy process scholars interested in translating practical lessons from policy theories.

Contribution 1: Clearer summaries of policy theories

The most underestimated contribution of the articles in this special issue are summaries of the state of the art developments of different theories. The contribution is for both experienced scholars, seeking to learn what each theory now represents (since many have changed dramatically since their first exposition) *and* new students. For example, this contribution is most evident in the articles that summarise aspects of two of the more complicated and dynamic policy process theories: Punctuated Equilibrium Theory (Koski and Workman, 2018) and Institutional Analysis and Development Framework (Heikkila and Andersson, 2018). Both of these approaches have become so complicated – partly as a function of their theoretical and empirical expansion – that a single article can no longer describe all of their nuances. The articles do not try to capture the two theoretical perspectives in totality. Rather, they show how key components of each perspective can be useful to specialist and non-specialist audiences.

Contribution 2: Synthesised lessons from this special issue

The articles in this special issue offer a number of practical insights that sometimes overlap in dealing with various themes of the policy process. We synthesise some of these lessons in Tables 1–3. Table 1 focuses more on the cognitive aspects of the policy processes by focusing on strategies related to persuasion and learning. Among the lessons are recognising cognitive blinders, telling good stories and seeking and

developing the right opportunities for learning. Table 2 identifies lessons regarding behavioural engagement via political participation and collective action. In most government settings, policy actors build alliances to make or influence policy. Such coalitions can come in many forms that link citizens (including organised groups and associations) and governments, or link governments to governments. Table 3 shows how policy theories can also offer lessons on structuring government and designing public policy. Some lessons are procedural, focusing on shaping the behaviour of government, and others are substantive, focusing on shaping non-government entities.

Tables 1–3 offer many insights are so foundational that policy scholars might take them for granted, even though they may be new to a different audience. For example, Crow and Jones’ article emphasises the commonly held assumption that more evidence is key to persuasion when telling a better story might be a better strategy (Crow and Jones, 2008). Policy theories also offer a different lens for influencing public policy than what is commonly found in political science, which often assumes that only elections and political parties matter in influencing government and politicians (instead, most policymaking takes place in many levels and types of government through the influence of coalitions); policies are mainly made through top-down decision processes (instead, self-governance via bottom-up approaches are possible); and policymaking should and can be ‘scientific’, focusing on objective facts and what works (instead, stories matter).

Table 1: Synthesised lessons for persuasion and learning

Persuasion
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Know your values and beliefs, yet be cautious of your cognitive and cultural blinders 2. Avoid relying too much only on evidence and analyses, instead combine evidence with framing strategies and storytelling 3. Structure your stories into a full narrative that includes setting the stage, establishing a plot, casting characters (heroes, victims, villains), and specify a moral
Learning
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognise policy actors constantly learn about problems and solutions and that learning is relational; it happens between policy actors and experts, through deep social reflection among policy actors, through exchange and bargaining policy actors’ relationships, and through hierarchical, top-down settings 2. Recognise that learning opportunities can be serendipitous but can be triggered by both societal and individual factors, such as cultural values that both filter and foster learning 3. Remember policy actors can learn the wrong lessons and might not always signify progress

Table 2: Synthesising lessons for political participation and collection action

Political participation linking citizens and governments
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Self-governing from the bottom-up can be effective in making policies, both outside and within government settings, but it requires norms of reciprocity, trust, experience and adequate information 2. Build and maintain advocacy coalitions to influence public policy 3. Become involved in advocacy coalitions as a regular or intermittent participant, as brokers negotiating agreements between coalitions, or as policy entrepreneurs championing ideas
Collection action linking governments
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Foster collaboration between governments to solve shared problems by building networks that involve frequent and strong ties <i>and</i> less frequent and weak ties, supported by frequent face-to-face interactions 2. Avoid obstacles to collaboration, including transaction costs, by identifying shared commonalities, creating incentives and using monitoring mechanisms <i>and/or</i> adaptive multilateral agreements 3. Facilitate collaboration through leadership, managerial autonomy and government commitment

Table 3: Synthesising lessons for structuring government and designing public policies

Structuring government
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus on the generation, consumption and use of information when structuring governments and their procedures 2. Increase your capacity to process information by balancing between centralisation and fragmentation of government, and varying the levels of citizen representation. 3. Foster effective information searches through bundling issues to deepen and broaden the scope of the catch
Designing public policies
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recognise that all policies are designed in venues with their own rules, values and beliefs, information, knowledge, motivations and network relations. 2. Design contextually-appropriate policy incentives, focusing on the types of rules embedded in the policies, and how those rules interact with the incentives and information that different policy actors use in implementing a policy 3. Design policies by incorporating the autonomy and problem-solving capabilities of policy actors whose behaviour the interventions are designed to change.

Another common thread through Tables 1–3 is that policy actors operate in complex environments over which they have limited control (Cairney and Weible, 2017). Although many would like to see a simple process in which choices are clear on what to think and how to act, it is more effective to engage with a process that actually exists. The lessons from Tables 1–3 all work from the assumption that policy actors are bounded rationality, which prompts them to develop strategies that overcome barriers to persuasion and learning; build and maintain coalitions over the long haul with policy actors whose beliefs they share and who give them more political leverage; and structure government to help in searching and processing information and to avoid one-size-fits-all policy designs and instead design policy solutions that incorporate context. Moreover, the recommendations in Tables 1–3 reach beyond the ‘policy cycle’, which describes the decision-making procedures of government as taking place in an orderly series of stages. The policy cycle may be a useful conceptual framework for simplifying policy processes, but Tables 1–3 point to a far more complex environment.

Contribution 3: Learning about the challenges in translating practical lessons from theories

This is the first time that a special issue or edited volume has been assembled with the single goal to draw practical insights from policy theories. The special issue’s strength is that it shows how theories can offer practical recommendations, ways of thinking, or strategies for influencing the policy process. The collection of theories provide an impressive breadth of findings that span topics of persuasion and learning, political participation, collective action, structuring government, and designing public policies. However, this special issue also points to several obstacles in continuing this effort.

First, the special issue underscores the complexity of policy processes and encourages humility when describing the capacity of any single theory or collection of theories to offer practical strategies. For example, the lessons from a single theory such as the Institutional Analysis and Development Framework offers important insights from one research program but not the entire field of policy design (Howlett, 2010). Multiple streams aids the study of policy entrepreneurs, but is only one of many

approaches. This is not to discount the contributions of any single article in this collection but to recognise that there are benefits and limitations to zooming in on the contributions of a single theoretical approach. We still have more to learn about the when, where, why, and how our best recommendations apply or not. This initial collection highlights the importance of comparative research agendas in advancing the field of policy processes. Too much of our research, even within a single theory, is bound by a complex context that researchers have a difficult time grasping. As a result, we continue to struggle to generate generalisable knowledge applicable across time and space, and localised or particularised knowledge applicable to a specific context. The lesson is simple: the field of policy process has made significant advances but we still have a long way to go in contextualising our findings.

Second, this special issue underscores broad scope of knowledge in the field of policy process. Or, to put another way, one special issue cannot cover the entire field. Other approaches with potential lessons include the Ecology of Games (Lubell, 2013), Social Construction and Policy Design (Schneider and Ingram, 1997), Diffusion of Innovation (Berry and Berry, 2017), and Policy Feedback Theory (Mettler and SoRelle, 2017). There is a real opportunity to advance the field further if we pull together a broader selection of theories and draw practical insights from them.

Third, future studies could go further, to consider how a new aim – to produce practical lessons, not solely basic science – should inform research design. For example, there is a growing literature on the role of ‘coproduction’ or ‘engaged scholarship’ in which academics work with policy actors to produce new policy or new knowledge (Nutley, 2010; Orr and Bennett, 2012; Van de Ven, 2007). Some obstacles are apparent, including: a lack of clarity on what ‘coproduction’ actually is, prompting some concerns about its potential to ‘pollute’ scientific research (Flinders et al, 2017); practical concerns about the investment and new skills required; and, ethical concerns about the loss of critical distance if we cooperate to produce research with the policy actors that we would otherwise study. On the other hand, the payoffs can range from an ability to inform policy as we study it, to the greater ability to explain policy theory insights to – *and learn from* – actors with a different background and way of thinking but eagerness to share perspectives.

Finally, few theories provide directly applicable normative advice on matters such as accountability. If the policy process is as complex and dynamic as we suggest, containing many different policy actors in many venues at many levels of government, and responding to events and policy conditions often outside of their control, it seems unrealistic to expect policy actors at the ‘centre’ to control all policy outputs (many actors make and deliver policy), and even more unrealistic for them to determine the effect of those outputs on policy outcomes. Indeed, complexity studies describe the ‘emergence’ of policy at local levels, while others describe policy as the joint product of the interaction between many actors, which makes it difficult to measure the independent effect of government intervention, separate from the myriad of factors that affect social behaviour (Cairney, 2012).

Consequently, we need a language that allows us to hold elected and appointed policymakers responsible and to account for their actions without extending that responsibility to all outputs made in their name, or the outcomes over which they only have limited control. The aim is not to let them off the hook, but to enhance scrutiny and accountability by focusing on action and reasonable responsibility for the contribution of that action to policy outcomes. This language is a key part of the

practical effect of the study of public policy. So far, our contribution to such debates has great untapped potential.

Concluding thoughts on advancing policy theory translations

Policy process research is nearing 70 years in its growth and development. Over this time, theories have come and gone and some theories have endured and developed. As theories continue to mature, so does the knowledge embedded in them. Our challenge is how to translate complicated theories into something practical and understandable for existing scholars, new students, and policy actors. This special issue tackles this challenge by providing clearer translations of some of major theories of the policy process and identifying practical insights from them.

The policy process is inherently messy and marked by a sticky resistance to change. It is also diverse across contexts and constantly evolving over time. Given this complexity, there are no easy solutions. Students and policy actors looking for that simple solution to influence or improve policy processes will be disappointed. Instead, policy process theories offer a way of thinking about policymaking-related phenomena. Policy theories also offer systematic ways to simplify the complexity in policy processes, to move from uncertainty towards theoretically-informed action. In this respect, this special issue shows the power of general heuristics to help guide decisions. Knowing, for example, that stories matter and that the policy actors should consider the setting, plot, characters, and moral is a way to simplify and organise thinking about designing a message for persuasion and gaining attention in the policy process.

This special issue is the first of its kind and we hope to see this effort continued. We see several steps to encourage such continuation of this effort. First, embrace the notion that clear translations and practical insights from theories is a good idea. Then, think about how we can improve the practical insights of theories through new research. This new agenda requires a reciprocal exchange of information where theories are used to help shape and inform how policy actors understand and act in policy processes, and, in turn, these same people shape and inform the substance, validity and value of theory-based knowledge. This does not mean that policy scholars must do both applied- and theory-based science but rather encourage and reward those that do.

Second, this special issue shows the initial value in taking a practical turn and the potential to include more theories. One next step is to repeat this exercise with a different cast of theories or to try it on a phenomenon (such as agenda setting, for example) that cuts across the different theories. Third, changing the direction of the field requires coordination and ongoing dialogue. In this respect, we encourage panel organisers and editors of books and journals to support these efforts. The editorial team of *Policy & Politics* is exemplary in this respect.

Rarely can a single individual or academic study wield any observable influence across different contexts and over time. Any policy actor – as well as policy scholars – should not be too self-critical of their lack of influence. The policy process is too complex to guarantee impact. Yet, unlike the past, policy process research is now more globalised, more diverse with a cornucopia of theories, and more likely to explore the practical implications from scholarship. This is an exciting development that we hope will continue.

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