Paul Cairney *Understanding Public Policy Third Edition* p.a.cairney@stir.ac.uk

Chapter 2 What is policy for? Who is policy for? Perspectives from policy analysis, policy design, and critical policy analysis

Key questions in this chapter

This chapter examines the purpose of public policy from three broad perspectives: policy analysis, policy process research, and critical policy analysis. These perspectives help to identify an ideal-type policy process, explain why it would not happen, and wonder if the gap between ideal-type and reality is something to lament. Key questions include:

- *What is the classic policy analysis story about the purpose of policy?*

Elected policymakers should be in charge of identifying government aims. They should use evidence and their beliefs to define and address policy problems. They should be aided by systematic policy analysis to produce feasible solutions, identify the trade-offs between each solution, and estimate their effects. Such accounts emphasise clear lines of accountability, orderly processes, evidence, and 'rational' policy and analysis.

- *Does anyone think that this story is realistic?*

Aspects of this story resonate in optimistic accounts of evidence-based policymaking. However, modern policy analysis guidebooks describe a more time-pressured search for evidence and limited focus on politically feasible options.

- *How does policy process research describe what actually happens?*

Many policy analysts compete to define problems and propose solutions, in a policymaking environment in which there are many elected and unelected policymakers. No-one fully understands or controls these processes. Policy design aims such as *policy coherence* or *policymaking integration* are elusive.

- *How does critical policy analysis reflect on what happens?*

Rationalism is not a good ideal anyway since it downplays the essential role of politics. Instead, we need to identify how political actors exercise power to decide whose knowledge is relevant, who should make and influence key choices, and who should benefit from policy outcomes.

- *Should the purpose of public policy always be contested?*

Critical policy analysts challenges dominant ways to conduct analysis and define the purpose of public policy. They seek radical changes to policymaking in favour of the social groups marginalised by the status quo. They remind us that policy analysis and policymaking are political acts. They warn against describing them in technocratic terms.

Introduction: three perspectives on policy and policymaking

Chapter 1 showed that, while it is difficult to define public policy, we can still use definitions to identify key insights on policymaking. Here, we do the same with the question: what is the purpose of public policy? It is useful to begin with this answer: the role of public policy should be determined by policymakers: (1) elected by citizens to act on their behalf and (2) seeking optimal benefits to society (Box 2.1). I use this answer to provide a simple story of **post-war ideas** about rationalist policy analysis in a small number of **liberal democracies**. This story suggested that governments could harness science and reason to turn the aims of a small group of powerful policymakers at the centre of government into optimal solutions. They could do so via the systematic application of analytical steps, from defining problems to identifying a range of solutions, and combining policymaker values and science to identify the trade-offs between each solution and predict their effects (Box 2.1). While I treat this desire as an ideal-type, some advocates of 'evidence based policymaking' (EBPM) treat it as an ideal that could happen.

Policy process research has prompted new studies of policy analysts and policy design to provide a more realistic portrayal of political activity. The new story replaces the optimistic language of rationalism with cautionary tales of uncertainty, ambiguity, contestation, argumentation, and complexity. Policy actors address issues without fully understanding them, and they compete with others to determine how to define problems and defend solutions. This contest does not take place in a single centre of government. In multi-centric policymaking systems, many analysts working for many governmental and non-governmental organisations compete to establish whose analysis matters and whose choices should prevail. In that context, could anyone control or coordinate the overall results? While it makes sense to seek *policy coherence* or *policymaking integration*, both are elusive when so many actors engage in so many venues to produce so many different things.

> **Post-war ideas**. A general description of stories associated with an 'Anglo-Saxon family of nations' including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the US, and UK, and sometimes with countries in Western Europe, in the 1945- period (Brans et al, 2017: 4-5). Stories of the past can contain empirical assessments of what *is* and normative assessments of what *should be*. Narrators may explain the difference between old and new stories of how things work. Some might applaud ideals such as 'rational' and 'evidence based' policymaking. Others portray them as naïve and damaging ways to conduct policy analysis.
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> **Liberal democracies**. 'Political systems that use regular elections to maintain the authority of governments, which (1) enforce the rule of law while protecting the rights and freedom of their citizens, and (2) maintain capitalism by regulating markets for goods and services' (Cairney and Kippin, 2024: 4).

Studies of critical policy analysis argue that rationalism and optimality are not good ideals anyway. The language of scientific objectivity, in the pursuit of EBPM, downplays the essential role of politics and dismisses the importance of power. Power is a key element of all aspects of policy analysis, including to decide whose knowledge is policy relevant, whose values should influence key choices, and who should benefit from policy outcomes when there are no 'optimal' solutions to benefit everyone. In that context, more noble aims are to seek equity or justice. Critical policy analysis seeks to challenge the exclusion of many voices during analysis,

question taken-for-granted ways to define problems and their cause, and seek radical changes rather than simply doing the bidding of policymakers. It suggests that stories of rationalist policymaking are not only misleading, but also likely to reinforce the status quo which exacerbates social inequalities and damages already marginalised social groups. In other words, the purpose of policy is – and perhaps *should be* - highly contested (Box 2.1).

Box 2.1. The contested purpose of public policy

The purpose of public policy is unclear and contested. We can address this problem in two main ways. First, to assign authority to determine purpose, such as by electing people to make choices on our behalf and assigning epistemic authority to a range of experts, stakeholders, and communities. Second, to relate policy to enduring values or principles that relate to social and economic benefits to society. For example, Bromell (2024): (1) identifies a collection of purposes relating to population happiness or wellbeing, justice, liberty, and citizen participation and deliberation, and (2) suggests that no government should consider itself to be above these aims. However, think of assigning authority and identifying values as political acts rather than technical ways to settle the matter. For example, using authority to produce a narrow interpretation of values can be a way to close off debate and limit the role of the state in fostering justice or equity. If so, perhaps the purpose of public policy *should be* contested, since continuous debate may be required to keep important aims on the policy agenda (Cairney et al, 2022b).

The old policy analysis story: rationalism and optimality

How do modern scholars portray policymaking of the past and present? There are three key features of modern stories of the past (Cairney, 2021: 33-6). First, there was early postwar optimism about the ability of scientific policy analysis to help elected policymakers solve problems. Second, this activity would take place in a single powerful centre of government. An elite analytical profession would inform a small number of elected policymakers. Third, while recognising the essential role of elected politics, this language could often be technocratic. It emphasised the scientific objectivity of well-trained analytical profession, their focus on providing high quality evidence, and the importance of systems or analytical procedures – such as **cost benefit analysis** (CBA) - that would inform reliable recommendations. Policymakers were in the business of translating their values and aims into effective policy solutions. They would operate in governments that could harness science and reason to turn those aims into optimal benefits for society. They could do so via the systematic application of analytical steps, from defining problems to identifying a range of solutions, and combining policymaker values and science to identify the trade-offs between each solution and predict their effects.

Cost benefit analysis (CBA). A method designed to identify the most efficient solution by translating the costs/benefits of solutions into the same unit of analysis (e.g. $ benefit per $ spent).

This is a stylised story of clear lines of accountability, orderly processes, and 'rational' policy and analysis. Does anyone think that it is accurate or desirable? Perhaps some contemporary and normative accounts of EBPM resemble this simple story of rationalist policy analysis:

> 'The evidence-based policy community has tended to favour the classic linear model of policy or practice development, whereby thinking proceeds sequentially through stages of problem definition, objectives, options, choice of action, implementation, feedback, evaluation and learning from experience, guided at each stage by rational analysis. An attraction of this model is that it provides clear opportunities for evidence to influence decision making and maintains a separation between facts and values' (Boaz et al, 2008: 242).

In such stories, these aims seem desirable but generally unachievable. Cairney (2016a: 19; 2019a) identifies, in many EBPM stories, the sense that technocratic approaches to policy analysis are an underused antidote to the worst excesses of politics. The phrase 'policy based evidence' sums up the complaint that politicians decide first then draw on evidence selectively to back up their choices ('cherry picking'). Rather, policy should be 'evidence based' and scientists should decide, with reference to research methods, what counts as good evidence.

Modern stories of policy analysis: practical step-by-step guides

These hopes for EBPM do not feature strongly in modern policy analysis guidebooks (Cairney, 2021). These guides may describe similar analytical steps, but relate the process to a far messier policymaking reality:

Step 1. Define a policy problem identified by your client.
Defining or framing a problem involves assessing its size, severity, and urgency. Framing is a political act to establish who or what caused the problem and who is responsible for its solution. For example, analysts may compete to define poverty or inequality as (1) the fault of the individual, or (2) a structural problem outside of individual control, to reject or promote state intervention.

Step 2. Identify technically and politically feasible solutions.
Technically feasible means a solution will work as intended if implemented. Politically feasible means it will receive enough support by key actors or not too much opposition by stakeholders or the public. Both are essential, and infeasible solutions may not be worth an analyst's limited time. The analyst may recognise the value of state intervention – such as to tackle inequalities - but not see a way to persuade their client.

Step 3. Use value-based criteria and political goals to compare solutions.
Key values and questions include:

- *Equity.* Will the process and outcomes be fair?
- *Efficiency.* Which solution has the greatest benefits in relation to costs?
- *Sustainability.* What are the environmental or other costs?
- *Human dignity.* Will it protect the rights and freedoms of individuals and social groups?

Step 4. Predict the outcome of each feasible solution.
Analysts do not know the future impact of each solution. However, they can generate useful forecasts or plausible scenarios and relate them to the measures that their clients favour. For example, methods such as CBA can be used to estimate which solutions would produce the highest benefits for the same cost.

Step 5. Make a recommendation to your client
Analysts seek to tell a convincing story about the most feasible options, tailored to the beliefs and expectations of their audience (Cairney, 2021: 12, summarising Bardach and Patashnik, 2020; Dunn, 2017; Meltzer and Schwartz, 2019; Mintrom, 2012; Weimer and Vining, 2017).

Different texts provide distinctive ways to guide analysis. Bardach and Patashnik (2020) focus on supporting analysts well enough to gain practical experience. Weimer and Vining (2017) seek to equip students with a detailed knowledge of economics and CBA. Dunn (2017) emphasises the monitoring the outcomes of choices and responding to new information, rather than seeing choice as a one-shot event. Meltzer and Schwartz (2019) use insights from service design to foster more inclusive or participatory ways to generate and use policy relevant knowledge. Mintrom (2012) explores advice for analysts seeking to change the world rather than simply deliver their client's agenda.

However, they also have the following points in common. First, they value concise and clear communication, albeit without agreeing how long an oral or written presentation should be (see also Smith, 2015). Second, there is never enough time to process information comprehensively, prompting analysts to find **pragmatic** and efficient ways to gather and present evidence (Dunn, 2017: 4; Weimer and Vining, 2017: 327-39; see also Lindblom and Cohen, 1979 on 'usable evidence'). This pursuit of brevity and efficiency should not be confused with the selective use of information to make misleading claims. Rather, an ethical analytical profession should be skilful consumers and honest communicators of evidence (see also Geva-May, 2005; Spiegelhalter, 2018). Third, policy analysis is client-oriented, which requires analysts to see the problem through a policymaker's eyes and communicate in ways expected by their audience. Fourth, it is difficult to manage the large number of values and political goals that should inform trade-offs between solutions. Fifth, while methods like CBA may be popular, they are also 'resource-intensive', more 'vulnerable to bias and error' than they might look, and only one of many ways to inform choice (Cairney, 2021: 21). Overall, these points encourage us to avoid seeing policy analysis as a technocratic exercise. The analysis to inform policy choice involves a series of political acts.

Pragmatic. Unless stated otherwise (to describe Dewey), refers to practicality and flexibility in the use of judgement (as opposed to a hard-line approach to a rule or principle).

Policy process research: what actually happens?

This advice relates strongly to a new story of policy analysis informed by the study of policy processes and analysts (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1: Old and new stories of policy analysis

	The old story	The new story
Who is involved?	An elite profession employed to give advice directly to central government	A large profession, employed inside and outside of government, to give advice across many policymaking venues
What is their role?	To provide objective advice to their client	To provide technical and political advice to clients
What solutions do they seek?	An optimal solution for society	A solution that enjoys political support and may work as intended if implemented

What skills do they need?	Technical skills (e.g. CBA)	Technical and political skills, to gather evidence and foster collaboration

Source: author's own, adapted from text in Enserink et al (2013: 17-34) and Cairney (2021: 35)

Gone are the mythical days of an objective elite profession providing advice directly to a single centre of power. In their place is a crowded and competitive process in which: many analysts, working for organisations inside or outside government, compete to define problems and advocate for solutions; and, many policymaking venues may share responsibility for policy problems (Radin, 2019: 9-25; Brans et al, 2017). Further, gone are most hopes for 'rational' policy analysis since political contestation, **policy complexity**, and **policymaking complexity** are 'more in line with political reality' (Enserink et al., 2013: 13–6). Consequently, analysts require more than technical skills; their role requires them to engage in advocacy and work across networks in more than one venue. There are many ways to envisage 'styles' of policy analysis beyond *rationalism*, such as to emphasise *argumentation* when competing to define and address problems, *strategy* when engaged in a 'political game', *participation* when seeking to include more voices and reflection in policy debate, and *process* when trying to set or follow rules to minimise volatility in decision-making (Mayer et al, 2013: 50-5).

Policy process research informs this new story with reference to two foundational concepts introduced in Chapter 1 and explained in Chapters 3 and 4. First, *bounded rationality* sums up the ever-present limits to processing information and making consistent choices. These limits contribute to *uncertainty*, which describes a lack of information or knowledge about the size, severity, or cause of a policy problem, and *ambiguity*, which describes the ability to interpret a multi-faceted policy problem in many different ways (Zahariadis, 2007: 66). To some extent, analysts can gather more information to reduce uncertainty. However, evidence does not reduce ambiguity. Rather, policy actors engage in argumentation and exercise power to generate attention and support for their preferred definition of the problem (Majone, 1989).

Policy complexity. Policy problems are multi-faceted, difficult to break down into specific parts, and not amenable to simple solutions ('policy solution' is a misleading term).
Complex policy mix. The overall impact, of directing many policy instruments at one or more problems, is difficult to control or even predict.
Policymaking complexity. Policymaking systems resemble complex systems.

Complex does not mean *complicated*. Chapter 9 describes complex policymaking systems which: are greater than the sum of their parts, exhibit non-linear dynamics, and prompt outcomes that emerge without central control.

Second, *policymaking complexity* sums up the absence of a single all-knowing all-powerful government making and implementing policies successfully from the top-down. Policymakers have limited knowledge and powers, which prompts them to pay attention to a small proportion of their responsibilities and delegate the rest, make choices about problems that they do not fully understand, propose solutions without knowing what their impact will be, in an environment over which they have limited control. To some extent, we can relate this absence of a single centre to the *choice*, in liberal democracies, to share powers via a constitution or other means to establish the positive role of many venues. However, this absence of central direction also relates to *necessity*, when governments lack the resources to fully understand problems and control policy outcomes. Most guidebooks respond by encouraging ways to identify where the action is and engage with multiple policymaking venues.

New policy design, complexity, and the search for coherence

'Policy design' is broad term to describe (1) *an action*, to define a problem and the aim of a solution, and (2) *a product*, or policy instrument designed to fulfil policymaker aims (Howlett et al, 2014: 291). In other words, 'design' is a noun and a verb, or a process and an outcome (Howlett, 2014: 191-4). Further, stories of 'new policy design' are akin to stories of new policy analysis, which relate technical aspects of design to a wider political and policymaking context. A focus on sophisticated design techniques helps to identify what policy actors *need to do* to produce well-designed instruments, such as to conduct research and collaborate with citizens and stakeholders to co-produce knowledge or policy. It also highlights *what they require* from policy processes to ensure their effectiveness, such as political support and sufficient resources to ensure policy delivery. A focus on politics and policymaking complexity helps to identify a profound gap between these requirements and reality. Policy instruments may be based on meticulous analysis and skilful design, or cobbled together to deal with crisis. Either way, they will not be adopted unless they are politically feasible. If adopted, they will be part of a **complex policy mix** in which the impact of each instrument is difficult to separate from the whole, and the outcomes are difficult to predict. Box 2.2 describes the kinds of policy tools or instruments that may be part of that mix.

Box 2.2 Types of policy instruments available for policy design

Chapter 1 identifies four categories of policy tools related to information sharing, regulation, tax and spending, and establishing organisations to make, deliver, and monitor policy. However, Salamon (2002) introduces a much wider range of public and private activity including the use of 'grants, contracts, insurance, regulation, loan guarantees, vouchers, corrective fees, and tax expenditures'. Similarly, Howlett's (2024: 3) definition - 'Policy tools or instruments are techniques of governance that are used to give effect to stated policy objectives' - suggests a broad range of activity, from generating attention to providing analytical advice, using decision-making models, monitoring, and evaluating activity in relation to initial aims. The following examples highlight more specific policy instruments.

1. *Gathering and using evidence for policy formulation* (Jordan and Turnpenny, 2015). Examples include analysis by funded research organisations or the 'co-production' of policy-relevant knowledge or solutions by policymakers, citizens, and stakeholders (Durose and Richardson, 2015; Durose et al., 2017).
2. *Public education.* To provide advice to citizens to encourage learning or exhort behavioural change.
3. *Regulations and enforcement*. Measures to limit individual or organisational behaviour, backed by enforcement such as punishments for non-compliance. Examples include:

- Setting standards, with or without enforcement.
- State enforcement to deter or oblige behaviour.
- Self-regulation, such as to allow a profession or industry to set and enforce standards.
- Using multiple instruments to influence things like market prices (such as to set a cap or oblige competition) or overall inflation (such as to change central bank interest rates).
- 'Franchising' or determining which organisation gets to deliver what service.
- Obliging businesses to manage risks, such as to stop banks over-investing.

- The tools of regulation, such as by people or algorithm (Lodge and Weigrich, 2012; Baldwin et al, 2012; Yeung and Lodge, 2019).

4. *Voluntary agreements*. To work with businesses to deliver aims, such as to limit the advertising of unhealthy products (Baggott, 1986). To encourage cooperation between unions and business, or fossil fuel and environmental groups (Jordan, 2001).
5. *Behavioural public policy*. To gather and use evidence on how people think to influence how they act (John, 2018; Esmark, 2023;Chapter 7).
6. *Taxation*. Includes taxes on individual incomes, business profits, property, and sales.
7. *Public expenditure*. Spending on policy areas such as education, populations such as children, and current or capital (e.g. teacher wages or building schools).
8. *Economic incentives*. Subsidies to encourage behaviour, such as grants to support students or payments to encourage farming. 'Tax expenditures' involve foregoing income by providing exemptions, such to encourage people to donate income to charity.
9. *Economic disincentives*. Punitive taxation on the sale of products such as tobacco.
10. *Providing public services*. To deliver services such as healthcare or schooling directly, fund non-governmental organisations, or manage private activity. To provide tax-funded services for free, subsidise services, or make charges.
11. *Reforming government departments or services.* To establish a new department, change who is responsible for policy delivery, or try to integrate services.

When thinking about which instruments to design or select, policymakers need to engage with political dilemmas (akin to political feasibility) *and* anticipate a lack of connection between policy design and effect (akin to technical feasibility). First, they engage with debates on the purpose of government, including:

- How much tax-funded state intervention should there be, and who should shoulder the largest burden (e.g. high profit businesses and high earners)?
- Which populations need or deserve the greatest support, and should it be conditional on behaviour (e.g. to seek work)?
- If governments seek to influence behaviour, should they provide information, exhort change, use economic incentives or disincentives, or regulate?
- Should they provide public services directly, subsidise services, or regulate a market?
- Should they provide universal services or targeted services based on a means test?

In that context, a government's policy mix reflects more or less commitment to state intervention. Some may restrict policy to providing information and advice, on the assumption that individuals are responsible for their own wellbeing. Others may tax and spend to redistribute income and wealth, and use state regulations to oblige social change, on the assumption that the state is responsible for population wellbeing (Cairney and St Denny, 2020: 18; Dowding, 2020).

Second, designers help policymakers estimate the technical and political feasibility of policy instruments. If policy design was solely a technical exercise, we would expect policymakers simply to adopt the solutions that would work as intended when implemented. However, it is not. Policymakers need to identify what solutions are consistent with their beliefs and those of

their allies, and expect that policy change will not make them too unpopular or provoke opposition that would undermine implementation. In that context, Lowi (1972: 299; 1988: 726) famously claimed that 'policies determine politics': each category of policy instrument has its own 'political dynamic' relating to the level of state coercion required, the type of government involved, and its intended target. The likely effect of policy on individuals or groups will influence their levels of opposition, how they mobilize to influence policy, and where they engage. Some types of policy are more difficult to sell and deliver because they are more coercive or costly, requiring more political resources to ensure success:

- *Redistributive* policies take resources from some to give to others, such as via the tax and benefits systems of central governments. They have visible winners and losers, prompting opposition from groups seeking to protect their position and limit the role of the state.
- *Distributive* policies provide benefits to some groups, such as via benefits or services provided by central or local governments. They can benefit some without prompting a stark sense of winners and losers.
- *Regulatory* policies limit the behaviour of individuals or organisations. They are coercive, but the costs of individual regulatory policies can be shifted to individuals and private companies without creating an overall sense of winning and losing.
- *Constituent* policies relate to the design of political systems and administration, providing broad societal costs and benefits and provoking interest largely among political party or governmental actors (Lowi, 1964: 690-1; 1972: 300; see also McCool, 1995: 246–48; Smith, 2002; Tolbert, 2002).
- *Behavioural* policies use evidence on how people think to influence how they think and act (Chapter 7). They did not feature in Lowi's schema, but we can imagine their attractiveness to governments if (1) they can sell them as non-coercive ways to enhance or replace regulation, and (2) there are no visible losers (although compare John, 2011 with Pykett et al, 2018).

Much like policy analysis guidebooks, classic studies of design engaged pragmatically with such issues. They emphasised the need to adapt to limits to policy implementation without concluding that effective policy design was impossible (Howlett, 2014: 187; Howlett and Lejano, 2012: 357; May, 2003: 223; Sidney, 2007: 80). Examples of advice included:

- *Be pragmatic (technical feasibility)*. Identify the policymaking capacity of governments first, then design solutions that are possible and deliverable (Salamon, 1981: 256 in Howlett and Lejano, 2012: 362).
- *Be pragmatic (political feasibility)*. Identify the interest groups essential to policy support, generate widespread ownership of policy, and anticipate how groups might block implementation (Linder and Peters, 1984: 242; May, 1991). Anticipate and address problems with intergovernmental relations (May, 2003: 225).
- *Monitor the use and impact of policy designs in different contexts*. A 'blueprint' approach to design is inappropriate since the same instrument may be interpreted and used in different ways. Identify 'how participants actually do things and why they do them one way rather than another' to understand how to modify instruments (Polski and Ostrom, 1999: 3).

- *Build capacity*. Invest in training and guidance for policy designers. Don't relate design only to individual creativity or policymaker whims (Linder and Peters, 1984: 253).
- *Promote participation and deliberation*. Deal with bounded rationality, and the dangers of insular and elitist policymaking, by encouraging widespread deliberation on problems and solutions (Dryzek, 1983: 362-4; Bobrow and Dryzek, 1987: 8).
- *Challenge policymaker biases*. Experienced and skilful designers, aided by stakeholder and citizen participation, may help to challenge the whims and damaging biases of elected policymakers (Schneider and Ingram, 1988; Sidney, 2007: 81; Chapter 14).

Such advice recognises the role of politics and policymaking complexity but identifies a strong rationale for designers 'to base their analyses on logic, knowledge and experience rather than, for example, purely political calculations or bargaining' (Howlett et al, 2014: 292). Or, they may favour participatory processes, to connect design success more to 'democratic values' than technical measures such as 'efficiency' (Peters et al, 2018: 3).

In that context, 'new policy design' seeks to incorporate insights from policy process research to foster effective design. First, they identify a crowded landscape in which many 'designers' are spread across political systems (much like Table 2.1). Second, they note the difficulties of effective policy design:

> While academics from diverse fields such as architecture and computer design to public policy … remain very optimistic about designing innovative solutions to public problems, the enthusiasm of policy scholars has been moderated by past experience. Public policy scholars recognize the high degree of difficulty that is involved in making democratic forms of governance work effectively in addressing social problems whose very definitions and solutions are typically highly charged and contested, and linked closely to prevailing ideologies and electoral considerations (Peters et al, 2018: 3).

Third, they seek to understand complex policy mixes, in which designers propose multiple instruments, those instruments add to a pile of existing measures, and new designs may be attempts to patch up old measures following their poor effects (Howlett et al, 2014: 297-300). In each case, the outcomes of each new measure are difficult to predict or even separate from the overall mix (Howlett, 2014: 297-300; Peters et al, 2018). Policymaking complexity accentuates this problem. When responsibility for policymaking is fragmented within governments, and spread across many levels of government, each 'centre' may contribute to contradictory or ineffectual policy mixes (Box 2.3).

Overall, as with new stories of policy analysis, gone are the days of treating policy design as a panacea. Still, there remains some optimism about the ability of governments to oversee fair design processes, design sophisticated policy instruments, and ensure that policy solutions are deliverable (e.g. Bromell, 2024). This mix of pragmatism and mild optimism is essential to engage with 'wicked' issues over the long term (Box 2.3).

Box 2.3 The search for policy coherence and policymaking integration

When policy designers focus on what they require, *policy coherence* and *policymaking integration* are high on their list. *Coherence* describes a policy mix in which each instrument is mutually reinforcing and devoted to the same well-defined aims. *Integration* is the policymaking equivalent: the aims and rules of many organisations are in harmony. Related

terms include *mainstreaming*, where the same policy aim is part of all policy agendas, and *intersectoral action*, where policy actors from many policy sectors collaborate effectively.

However, designers find that many analysts compete to define problems and propose solutions to many influential actors spread across many governments. Incoherence occurs when different governments produce different instruments at different times for different reasons. Integration is elusive when different organisations have competing aims and rules. When viewed from afar, these dynamics seem like systemic *bugs to be fixed*. Yet, they make sense through the lens of the designer of each instrument, or the rules in each organisation. Incoherence and non-integration is the *inevitable feature* of any policymaking system without a single all-knowing and all-powerful centre.

This feature is accentuated when governments address 'wicked' problems (Box 1.2). My co-authors and I have reviewed hundreds of articles in which researchers, who criticise inequalities and seek equity, find routine barriers to progress. Examples include:

Social determinants of health. The 'social and economic factors that influence population health and inequalities, such as income, wealth, education, housing, and safe physical and social environments' (Cairney and Kippin, 2024: 101)

Health equity. Most governments signed up to a 'Health in All Policies' (HiAP) agenda that treats health as a human right, recognises its **social determinants**, and seeks state intervention and intersectoral action. Yet, they also prioritise other aims such as economic growth, relate health inequalities to individual 'lifestyle' choices rather than state responsibility, and struggle to produce coherent responses (Cairney et al, 2021).

Education equity. Governments may commit rhetorically to education equity, but there is contestation to determine what it means. It can describe rewarding merit, equal opportunities to access education, or more equal outcomes. Further, governments rarely address the 'out of school' factors – such as poverty, marginalisation, sexism, and racism – that undermine meaningfully equal access (Cairney and Kippin, 2022).

Recognitional justice. The avoidance of privileging some voices and marginalising others.
Procedural justice. 'Fair ways to participate, deliberate, inform and make choices'
Distributional justice. 'Fair ways to pay for, and minimise inequalities associated with' policy (Cairney et al, 2023).

Climate justice. Researchers seek **recognitional**, **procedural** and **distributional justice**, but identify a lack of meaningful reference to justice when governments address climate change (Cairney et al, 2023; Box 2.4).

Gender mainstreaming. Many governments commit to mainstreaming gender equality efforts across government, but few purse a 'maximal variant in which there is a system-wide commitment' (Cairney et al, 2022a: 159).

Some experiences show that a coherent policy mix is possible. For example, 'comprehensive tobacco control' helps to 'denormalise' smoking by raising prices, prohibiting advertising and smoking in public places, obliging health warnings, and supporting smoking cessation (Cairney, 2019a). However, such mixes are only present in some countries, took decades to

produce, and were not always based on coherent long-term plans. Further, smoking-related health inequalities persist even when smoking rates reduce overall (Mamudu et al, 2015).

How does critical policy analysis reflect on what happens?

Policy theories and critical policy analysis (CPA) both show that policy analysis is not, and could not be, "a disinterested, objective search for truth and an optimal policy solution (often described as a 'rationalist' project)' (Cairney, 2023: 1820). CPA scholars go one step further to reject the pursuit of rationalism: it is a damaging story, not an ideal to which anyone should aspire. Why? Rationalist approaches downplay the role of power in the politics of policymaking and therefore close down necessary debate. Instead, if we engage openly in normative discussions, we may identify fairer approaches to policy analysis. We can relate this broad argument to recognitional, procedural and distributional justice (Box 2.3).

Recognitional justice: whose knowledge counts in policy analysis?

Rationalism downplays the politics of knowledge, or the process to decide whose knowledge counts. It comes with the language of scientific objectivity and EBPM, which privileges some actors and marginalises others. The search for policy-relevance is restricted to the knowledge of an elite profession relying on a narrow range of methods to produce evidence. The same is true for EBPM stories that rely on a 'hierarchy of evidence', based on research methods such as **RCTs** that very few people can conduct (Cairney, 2016: 20-1). In contrast, more pragmatic or inclusive approaches seek **methodological pluralism** and to include citizens and stakeholders in the **co-production** of knowledge (Boaz et al, 2019).

Randomised control trials (RCTs). Experiments to identify the impact of a drug or intervention. Researchers randomly assign similar people to different groups, give one the drug and the other placebo, and compare the outcomes.
Methodological pluralism. An approach to research that values evidence from different methods.
Co-production. A process to encourage people with different backgrounds or skills to produce something together, such as knowledge or policy instruments.

How do scholars challenge recognitional injustice? Doucet (2019) draws on insights from critical race theory (CRT) to situate analysis in a wider context of race and racism and the need to challenge social injustice. If we begin with a commitment to social justice, we prioritise new aspects of policy processes, including to:

- recognise how the routines and norms of policy analysis contribute to the subordination of some social groups by devaluing their contribution to policy relevant knowledge
- assign proper value to 'transdisciplinary approaches' that help to gather a wider range of information, including 'experiential knowledge' (2019: 5-7; 10-22).

Procedural justice: who gets to participate and inform analysis?

Rationalism downplays the use of rules and procedures to limit participation during problem definition and policy design. The routine act of favouring some sources of knowledge and perspective over others, and therefore some participants over others, is political and by choice, not natural or inevitable. We need proper acknowledgement of who is included or excluded from deliberation, and more debate on why the process should in a particular way.

How do scholars challenge procedural justice? Bacchi's (2009) *What's the Problem Represented to Be?* (WPR) approach challenges a tendency to treat some ways of thinking and acting for granted. Rather than asking what is 'the problem', which encourages actors to see a definition as 'fixed' or 'self-evident', ask what is 'the problematisation', which highlights how actors exercise power to create problem definitions (2009: 30-1). The six-step WPR process involves questioning how actors define problems, who wins or loses from this framing, and how it can be challenged to pursue fairer definitions, policies, and outcomes (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2 Bacchi's WPR approach

The WPR question	The factors to examine
What's the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy?	How actors portray a problem's cause and the role of government in solving it
What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?	Taken-for-granted 'cultural values' about which groups deserve support and how far the state should get involved.
How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?	The old ways of doing things. Shifts in public attention or attitudes. A change of government. New information or technology.
What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?	Comparisons across countries, cultures, or time can help to identify different ways to frame problems.
What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?	Closed-off debates. Stigmatised and alienated groups.
How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated, and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted, and replaced?	Policy analysts serving the beliefs and biases of their clients. Social justice advocates challenging these problematisations.

Source: Bacchi (2009: 1-24). Note: each WPR question is reproduced verbatim.

For example, if we use these six prompts to examine health inequalities, a damaging problematisation would suggest that:

1. The problem is represented to be poor health caused by personal lifestyle choices, so state action should be health education(not economic support).
2. The assumption is that you should take responsibility for your own – and your own family's – health and avoid seeking special treatment.
3. This representation of individual responsibility has long been part of **neoliberal** approaches.
4. Thinking differently begins with treating inequalities as beyond individual control. Healthy lifestyles require resources for nutrition, warm houses, and safe communities.
5. The effect of the dominant problematisation is that only some people have the resources to live healthily and be safe from social, environmental, and state harm.
6. The challenge would be to neoliberal approaches in favour of a HiAP approach that treats health as a human right (and therefore a state responsibility) and fosters state

Neoliberal. Describes 'a preference to (1) encourage individual and market rather than state solutions, and (2) prioritise economic growth over other policy aims' (Cairney and Kippin, 2024: 9).

intervention to address the social determinants of health (Cairney et al, 2021, summarising Solar and Urwin, 2010; Whitehead and Dahlgren, 2006; Bliss et al., 2016; De Leeuw and Peters, 2015).

WPR helps to identify how policy analysis and policymaking contributes to policy problems, such as by defining them badly and reinforcing the social norms that benefit some groups and marginalise others. It encourages policy actors such as analysts and researchers to build a commitment to emancipation into their analysis, to take 'the side of those who are harmed' rather than pretend to be neutral observers (Bacchi 2009: 44). This approach includes self-reflection, using WPR to question your own role in upholding or challenging negative problematisations rather than assuming that your beliefs and practices are inevitably righteous ('Step 7' in Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016: 20; 24).

Distributional justice: who should win and lose from policy outcomes?

Rationalism downplays the inevitability of winners and losers from policy outcomes. It provides a misleading account of 'optimal' solutions which benefit society as a whole. Instead, politics is about persuading people to share your values, beliefs, and definitions of problems to decide who should benefit most from policy (Chapter 14).

How do scholars surface or challenge distributional injustice? Stone (2012: 379-85) shows how politics and power permeate all aspects of policy analysis and choice. The starting point is a story of policymaking in which people are 'social actors' in a community, living 'in a dense web of relationships, dependencies, and loyalties', and unable to detach themselves to produce rationalist analysis (2012: 10). Further, they find it difficult to act 'rationally' in the sense of being able to produce clearly-defined and rank-ordered preferences. Rather, they maintain many – often contradictory – beliefs or objectives, and base choices on some combination of cognition and emotion (Chapter 4).

This starting point informs our understanding of problem definition and solution generation (policy analysis steps 1 and 2). During analysis, one policy actor can draw selectively on their values, objectives, and policy relevant information to define the same problem in different ways. Or, a group of actors can produce one conclusion *or its opposite* when asked different questions about the same problem. As a result, it is possible for the same people, with the same aims and beliefs, to seek or accept very different solutions depending on the specific framing of problems and sequence of choice (2012: 3-4). If so, policy analysis is 'inescapably political, involving a series of choices about which criteria to use, and which questions to ask, when conducting research' (Cairney, 2023: 1823).

This inescapably political process extends to the use of values and political goals to consider trade-offs and forecast scenarios (steps 3 and 4): 'behind every policy issue lurks a contest over conflicting, though equally plausible, conceptions of the same abstract goal or value' (Stone, 2012: 14). While political values such as equity and efficiency might seem like valence issues (who would object to such aims?) there is high contestation to define and apply them in analysis. Examples include:

- *Equity* describes the fair treatment of people or social groups or the eradication of unfair inequalities. There is contestation to decide: whose experiences of unfairness should be

prioritised, how to assess the merit of their case, and the extent to which state resources should be used to redress unfairness (2012: 39-62). For example, education policy actors debate the extent to which unequal outcomes are fair if driven partly by 'merit' or endeavour (Cairney and Kippin, 2022: 11; Gilead, 2019: 439).

- *Efficiency* describes the greatest benefit in relation to the same cost, or the least cost to produce the desired benefit. There is contestation to decide which aims or objectives determine the measure of benefits, who should receive those benefits, and how to define a cost or benefit (e.g. to describe spending on government staff or social security as a needless cost or important social investment) (2012: 63-84).
- *Need* describes what people require or should receive to maintain a minimum quality of life. There is contestation to determine what that threshold should be, if the state should be responsible for everyone's needs, and if a social security 'safety net' exacerbates **moral hazard** (2012: 85-106).

Moral hazard. Describes the greater risk that an actor might take when they are not fully responsible for the consequences (e.g. if a person or business is insured against bankruptcy).

- *Liberty* can describe freedom from state coercion or state action to reduce the harm caused by other people. There is contestation to decide what state actions constrain or facilitate freedom and whose harmful behaviour should be reduced (2012: 107-28). There are similar debates on how to manage risks to population *security* when there is uncertainty over the level of risk (e.g. regarding terrorism or environmental damage), how much to tolerate, who to target with surveillance and punishment, and the potential damage of high state surveillance on faith in democracy (2012: 129-53).

Each of these actions – to define a problem, generate feasible solutions, and manage trade-offs – can have profound and unfair distributional consequences. If so, we should not use the cover of rationalist policy analysis to downplay the politics of each choice. Rather, Stone (2012: 229-47) describes policy analysis as the presentation of stories to influence how their audience understands problems and solutions. For example, these stories can draw on *symbols* and *synecdoche* to sum up an issue or social group concisely or dramatically, *characters* such as the villains deserving of sanctions or victims requiring state support, *metaphors* to help turn an abstract issue into a concrete or relatable problem, and *numbers* to suggest that some authoritative experts can represent a complex problem in a simple way (2012: 157-205). In each case, a story describes the size, urgency, and cause of a problem and its amenability to state or non-state solutions (2012: 206-28), such as to show that climate change is caused by humans or that institutional racism is not restricted to a few 'bad apples'. This focus on storytelling helps consumers of policy analysis to question its assumptions and arguments.

Box 2.4 The Pursuit of Climate Justice

This focus on recognitional, procedural, and distributional justice is a key feature of climate justice research which identifies the need to foster 'inclusive policy processes (who is heard, and who defines the problem?) plus equitable contributions (who pays to solve the problem?) and outcomes (who wins or loses?). They also need to collaborate to create fair policy processes that produce both transformational and equitable policy change' (Cairney et al, 2023: 4).

Discourse: 'a shared way of apprehending the world' (Dryzek, 2022: 9-10)

Climate justice research draws heavily on non-mainstream or critical scholarship, which uses **discourse** analysis to identify, question, and challenge the dominant language to describe climate policy problems and solutions. This approach rejects rationalist accounts of policy analysis and focuses on unequal power and the dominance of certain actors and arguments.

Hajer (1995: 2) examines the 'social construction of environmental problems' in liberal democracies to explain why there is such a gap between required versus actual changes to policy and policymaking. First, neoliberal governments protect a capitalist system and pursue economic growth, then fit environmental aims into that context. While climate justice researchers may see capitalism as a key cause of climate change and injustice, governments treat it as a system that can be adapted to solve the climate change problem. Second, this treatment of capitalism as part of the solution (not the problem) helps to explain why neoliberal problem definitions are 'seen as authoritative, while other understandings are discredited' (1995: 44). Third, terms such as 'sustainable development' or 'ecological modernization' contribute to a 'rhetorical ploy' to make substantive climate policies seem consistent with neoliberalism (1995:12). Their advocates express hopes for scientific and technological innovations and for collaboration between competing groups (e.g. business and environmental groups) to produce technically and politically feasible solutions (1995: 12; 26-34).

In that context, Dryzek (2022: 14-17) identifies four 'storylines', describing (1) a departure from capitalist approaches in *reformist* or *radical* ways, and (2) treat current arrangements as inevitable (*prosaic*) or envisage something better (*imaginative*). For example, *problem solving* puts faith in experts to solve problems, markets to manage climate policy incentives, and engaged citizens to keep these aims on the agenda (2022: 73–146), while *green radicalism* – such as 'ecological justice' or 'ecofeminism' – connects radically new policy to a radically new social, economic, and political system (2022: 187–222). More recently, Dryzek (2022: 223-32) identifies a fifth storyline – gray radicalism – that sums up a political backlash against environmentalism and what it represents (such as high state intervention to change behaviour and redistribute resources) (2022: 223-32; Cairney et al, 2023: 21).

Will the purpose of policy and analysis always be contested?

Policy analysis will always be contested, and our choice is to surface or ignore that contestation. Critical policy analysis performs the former and rejects the latter. It challenges narrow searches for evidence, unfair analytical practices, and the taken-for-granted problem definitions that exacerbate inequalities. This focus on equity or justice connects to a much wider literature that contributes in two key ways to the study of 'policy analysis' (even when not using that phrase).

Epistemic violence: dismissing an individual, social group, or community by undermining the value of their knowledge or claim to knowledge. Spivak (1988) relates it to the acts of the colonial **West** to subjugate colonized populations or the 'subaltern' (someone of low social status, oppressed or excluded from society) (see also Rutazibwa and Shilliam, 2018; Shilliam, 2021).
Epistemicide: 'the killing of other knowledge systems' by the West.
West or **Western**. A general term to describe a collection of countries, their disproportionately high military, economic, and cultural power, and its frequent abuse.

First, CPA connects to the wider study of power and knowledge: who decides whose knowledge is legitimate and counts as policy relevant? Chapter 5 explores **epistemic violence** or **epistemicide** in which the marginalisation of some forms of knowledge is akin to, or an integral part of, the often-violent marginalisation of some communities or social groups. For example, Smith (2012: 1-2; 23-6) relates **Western** 'European imperialism and colonialism' not only to violent military rule but also the imposition of cultural practices associated with the European Enlightenment. These practices extended to the exploitative academic research used to portray indigenous communities in dehumanising ways and claim that their cultures and low intelligence were the cause of inequalities in relation to health, education, and crime (2012: 4, 12). A key part of this process is to privilege Western scientific knowledge (as part of a rationalist approach to policy analysis) and reject the idea of policy relevant indigenous community knowledge (2012: 44-9). Such discussions inform key challenges to policy analysts (explored by Cairney, 2021: Chapters 5, 8, 9):

1. *Pursue more inclusionary and collaborative practices*.

Policy analysis should be built on a proper respect for marginalised groups (see '*recognitional justice*' above). For example, Smith (2012: xiii; 111–25) shows how to connect research and analysis to explicit political aims such as emancipation or indigenous community 'self-determination', 'survival', 'recovery', and 'development'. Such practices go beyond the vague idea of consulting with stakeholders towards the meaningful inclusion of communities in the process of defining problems, generating feasible solutions, and engaging with trade-offs.

2. *Beware the unintended consequences of EBPM*.

It is difficult to reconcile EBPM-style policy analysis with truly collaborative policy analysis. The former involves narrow and restrictive scientific criteria to decide what or whose knowledge counts. The latter seeks wide criteria and inclusive practices to gather knowledge, deliberate, and puzzle together (see also Chapter 15 on epistemic versus reflexive learning).

3. *Beware the pragmatism of textbook advice*.

Most policy analysis textbooks emphasise client-oriented problem definition and pragmatic approaches to generating politically feasible solutions. However, this description may be 'a euphemism for conservatism, as an excuse to reject ambitious and necessary plans for policy change … the identification of colonisation and systematic racism, from the production of knowledge to its use in policy analysis to produce racist policy and institutions, warns us about the role of policy analysis in maintaining the status quo' (Cairney, 2021: 88). CPA suggests

that the ‘questioning, storytelling, or decolonising policy analyst’ may be preferable to the archetypal ‘pragmatic or professional, client-oriented policy analyst’ (2021: 120).

Second, CPA connects to research-informed approaches that identify the need for major transformations to policy and policymaking (Box 2.4). Chapter 4 explores Lindblom’s famous idea that policymaking is, and should be, an incremental process. This involves incremental analysis to research only politically feasible options, and seeking change via a series of non-radical steps to allow for trial-and-error learning (and to respect previous political agreements). In contrast, CPA and related approaches - such as feminist policy research - warn against treating policy change as a ‘technical project’ in which proponents seek to fit their ambitious aims into current practices. This approach may contribute to a ‘tendency for radical aims to be co-opted and often used to bolster the rules and practices that protect the status quo’. In contrast, the deliberate act of ‘fostering continuous contestation’ may keep low-priority issues higher on the policy agenda and ward-off attempts to depoliticise policy analysis (Cairney et al, 2022b: 375).

Conclusion: the contested purpose of public policy

What would it take for an elected government to harness science and reason to turn policymaker beliefs and aims into optimal solutions? First, the process would be highly centralised, to ensure a coherent policy mix and the integration of key aims across all aspects of policy delivery. Second, the process would be rationalist and systematic, to use evidence to define a problem in the correct way, produce technically feasible solutions, identify the trade-offs between each solution, forecast their effects, then implement and evaluate the results to see what worked. While some advocates of EBPM might like this ideal, this chapter treats it as an ideal-type. It draws on policy analysis guides, policy process research, and critical policy perspectives to describe and reflect on the gap between ideal-type and real world policy processes.

New stories of policy analysis highlight a far messier policymaking reality in which no-one fully understands or controls policy processes. Gone is the idea of an elite and technically expert analytical profession giving objective advice, to elected policymakers, on how to deliver optimal solutions. In its place is the story of a larger and more diverse collection of policy actors, engaging with audiences inside and outside of government, and across many policymaking centres. These analysts need political skills to foster some degree of collaboration or agreement. They compete with many other policy actors to define problems and generate technically feasible solutions with sufficient political support, and they know that any solution produces winners and losers.

New policy design tells a similar story about the elusiveness of optimal solutions or aims such as policy coherence or policymaking integration. Policy designers have long needed technical skills to design evidence-informed policy instruments, alongside skills to determine what kinds of instruments would be politically feasible. They engage with a wide range of instruments which involve more or less state intervention, from voluntary agreements and the sharing of information to direct regulation and taxation to redistribute resources. The political feasibility of each measure relates to the level of coercion involved, who would win and lose, how aware the losers would be, and how powerful they are to oppose such measures. In that context, designers may seek to harness good evidence on what solutions would work as intended, and

good collaboration to foster democratic participation and widespread citizen or stakeholder ownership of any policy change. However, they do so in a crowed landscape in which many actors compete to influence and make policy, and the aims and desirability of each instrument are contested. The overall policy mix is in no-one's control, which limits coherence and integration, and the effect of that mix (and each instrument) is difficult to predict.

Critical policy analysis suggests that many aspects of the ideal-type do not represent appropriate ideals in the first place. Rationalism downplays the role of politics and power and undermines equity or justice. Recognitional justice requires analysts to give more respect to diverse sources of policy relevant knowledge. Procedural justice requires more awareness of the rules used to define and address problems in unfair and damaging ways, and a greater opportunity to challenge the taken-for-granted ways of doing things. Distributional justice requires us to dispense with the misleading language of optimality, engage in open debate on the values that should underpin solutions, and use resources to redress the unequal impacts of policy on marginalised groups.

All of these perspectives highlight a major gap between ideal-type rationalist policy analysis and real world policymaking, particularly when describing the 'wicked' problems that defy simple definitions and solutions. However, there is less agreement on how to respond. Policy analysis textbooks suggest that the appropriate response is pragmatic and client-oriented. Maximise the technical and political feasibility of your recommendations by addressing problems defined by your client, directing limited analytical resources towards solutions that they would favour, and avoiding radical solutions that their audiences would oppose. Critical policy analysis equates such pragmatism with the preservation of an unfair status quo. Challenge the pursuit of depoliticised analysis, and maximise the opportunity to increase support for radical change, by fostering continuous contestation and challenges to current ways to define and solve problems.

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