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Teaching the politics of policy analysis, aided by a blog

Enseñar la política del análisis político, con la ayuda de un blog

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NOTA BIOGRÁFICA

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ABSTRACT

When we teach policy analysis, we should focus not only on how to be a policy analyst but also how to situate the act of analysis within a wider political and policymaking context. There is the potential to achieve this aim: policy analysis texts focus on the individual and professional skills required to act efficiently and effectively in a time-pressured political environment, policy process research helps to situate this activity in a policymaking environment out of their control, and critical policy analysis prompts students to identify the inequalities of power that underpin policy practice and outcomes. However, students embody the concept of “bounded rationality” that is central to such studies: there is an overwhelming amount of information that they could encounter, and they have limited resources to learn. In that context, how can we help students to navigate the study of public policy well enough to make “good enough” choices about what and how to learn? I discuss the role of blog posts (and textbook materials) to foster that learning, and a mixture of coursework to help students reflect on the practical implications of what they learn.

KEYWORDS

Teaching; policy analysis; bounded rationality; blog; public administration.

RESUMEN

La enseñanza del análisis de políticas públicas no debería limitarse a formar futuros analistas, sino que debería también tomar en cuenta el contexto global de producción de la acción pública. La mayor parte de los textos básicos se centran en las competencias individuales necesarias para convertirse en un buen profesional capaz de actuar de forma eficaz y eficiente en un entorno político donde el tiempo apremia. En paralelo, las investigaciones sobre el proceso de políticas públicas ayudan a ubicar esta actividad en un entorno cambiante e incontrolable. Por su parte, el análisis crítico de las políticas públicas insta a los estudiantes a identificar las desigualdades que sesgan la práctica y los resultados de la acción gubernamental. Sin embargo, a lo largo de su carrera universitaria los alumnos/as de políticas públicas suelen experimentar el concepto central de «racionalidad limitada» en su propia carne. Se enfrentan a una cantidad ingente de información y disponen de recursos limitados para procesarla. En este contexto, ¿cómo ayudarles a orientarse en sus estudios para que puedan elegir

los contenidos y los métodos apropiados? Es aquí donde interviene el uso de un blog (así como de otros materiales) para fomentar la enseñanza de las políticas públicas y la reflexión acerca de sus implicaciones prácticas.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Enseñanza; análisis de políticas públicas; racionalidad limitada; blog; administración pública.

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1. INTRODUCTION

When we teach policy analysis, we focus on how to be a policy analyst or how to situate the act of policy analysis within a wider policymaking context. Ideally, students would learn about both. This aim is central to Lasswell's vision for the policy sciences, in which the analysis of policy and policymaking informs analysis for policy, and both are essential to the pursuit of human equality and dignity (Lasswell, 1951; 1956; 1971; see Cairney & Weible, 2017).

There is the *potential* to achieve this vision for the policy sciences. Policy analysis texts focus on the individual and professional skills required to act efficiently and effectively in a time-pressured political environment. Further, they are supported by the study of policy analysts to reflect on how analysis takes place, and policy is made, in the real world (Radin, 2019; Brans et al., 2017; Thissen & Walker, 2013; Geva-May, 2005). The next steps would be to harness the wealth of policy concept and theory-informed studies to help understand how real-world contexts inform policy analysis insights.

First, almost all mainstream policy theories assume or demonstrate that there is no such thing as a policy cycle. It would be misleading to suggest that the policy process consists of clearly defined and well-ordered stages of policymaking, from defining problems and generating solutions to implementing solutions and evaluating their effects. If so, there is no clear route to influence via analysis unless we understand a far messier reality. In that context, how can policy analysts understand their complex policymaking environment, and what skills and strategies do they need to develop to engage effectively? These discussions may be essential to preventing the demoralisation of analysts: if they do not learn in advance about the processes and factors that can minimise their influence, how can they generate realistic expectations?

Second, if the wider aim is human equality and dignity, insights from critical policy analysis are essential. They help analysts think about what those values mean, how to identify and support marginalised populations, and how policy analysis skills and techniques relate to those aims. In particular, they warn against treating policy analysis as a technocratic profession devoid of politics. This rationalist story may contribute to exclusive research gathering practices, producing too-narrow definitions of problems, insufficient consideration of feasible solutions, and recommendations made about target populations without engaging with the people they claim to serve (Bacchi, 2009; Stone, 2012).

However, this aim is much easier described than achieved. Policy analysis texts, focusing on how to do it, often use insights from policy studies but without fully explaining key concepts and theories or exploring their implications. There is not enough time and space to do justice to every element, from the technical tools of policy analysis (including cost-benefit analysis) to the empirical findings from policy theories and normative insights from critical policy analysis approaches (e.g. Weimer & Vining, 2017, is already 500 pages long). Policy process research, focusing on what happens, may have practical implications for analysts. However, they are often hidden behind layers of concepts and jargon, and most of their authors seem uninterested in describing the normative importance of, or practical lessons from, theory-informed empirical studies. The cumulative size of this research is overwhelming and beyond the full understanding of experienced specialist scholars. Further, it is difficult to recommend a small number of texts to sum up each approach, which makes

it difficult to predict how much time and energy it would take to understand this field, or to demonstrate the payoff from that investment. In addition, critical policy analysis is essential, but often ignored in policy analysis texts, and the potential for meaningful conversations between critical or interpretive versus mainstream policy scholars remains largely untapped (e.g. Durnová & Weible, 2020) or resisted (e.g. Jones & Radaelli, 2016).

In that context, policy analysis students embody the problem of “bounded rationality” described famously by Simon (1976). Simon’s phrase “to satisfice” sums up a goal-oriented response to bounded rationality: faced with the inability to identify, process, or understand all relevant information, they seek ways to gather enough information to inform “good enough” choices. More recently, policy studies have sought to incorporate insights from individual human, social, and organisational psychology to understand (1) the cognitive shortcuts that humans use, including gut-level instinct, habit, familiarity with an issue, deeply-held beliefs, and emotions, and (2) their organisation’s equivalents (organisations use rules and standard operating procedures to close off information searches and limit analysis – Koski & Workman, 2018). Human cognitive shortcuts can be described negatively as cognitive biases or more positively as “thinking fast and slow” (Kahneman, 2012) or “fast and frugal heuristics” (Gigerenzer, 2001). However, the basic point remains: if people seek shortcuts to information, we need to find ways to adapt to their ways of thinking, rather than holding onto an idealised version of humans that do not exist in the real world (Cairney & Kwiatkowski, 2017).

While these insights focus on policymakers, they are also essential to engaging with students. Gone –I hope– are the days of lecturers giving students an overwhelmingly huge reading list and expecting them to devour every source before each class. This approach may help some students but demoralise many others, especially since it seems inevitable that students’ first engagement with specialist texts and technical jargon will already induce fears about their own ignorance. Rather, we should base teaching on a thoughtful exploration of how much students can learn about the wider policy analysis context, focusing on (1) the knowledge and skills they already possess, (2) the time they have to learn, and (3) how new knowledge or skills would relate to their ambitions. For example, if students are seeking fast and frugal heuristics to learn about policy analysis, how can we help?

To help answer this question, I focus on what students should learn, can learn, and how blog posts and coursework can contribute to that learning. First, I describe the valuable intersection between policy analysis, policy process research, and critical policy analysis to demonstrate the potential payoffs to wider insights. In other words, what *should* policy analysis students learn from mainstream policy process research and critical policy analysis? Second, I describe the rationale for the blog that I developed in tandem with teaching public policy. I taught initially at an undergraduate level as part of a wider politics programme, before developing a Master of Public Policy and contributing to shorter executive courses and one-off workshops. This range of audiences matters, since the answer to the question “what *can* people learn?” will vary according to their existing knowledge and time. Third, I summarise the rationale for the coursework that I use to encourage the application of public policy theories and knowledge to policy analysis (as part of a wider degree programme), including skills in critical thinking about policymaking dilemmas, to accompany more specialist research and analytical skills.

2. WHAT CAN POLICY ANALYSIS STUDENTS LEARN ABOUT THE WIDER POLITICAL AND POLICYMAKING CONTEXT?

Studies of policy analysts –largely in the US, Canada, Western Europe, and Antipodes– identify a major shift in thinking about their role since the post-war period. They describe an old story of policymaking as centralised and exclusive, providing a clear link between elite analyst and audience. In this scenario, policy analysis was a rationalist pursuit, to translate scientific evidence into policy, using techniques such as cost-benefit analysis to find an optimal solution for society (during a period of post-war optimism about the new benefits of science). As more time passes, this idea becomes more like an ideal-type to compare with the real world, rather than a realistic story of what used to happen. Or, it is a cautionary tale, told by critical or interpretive scholars, to question the ongoing pursuit (or pretence) of rationalism with “neopositivist” methods (Fischer, 1998). In its place is a story of power and complexity, where policymaking is messy, involving many policymakers spread across political systems, and many analysts contesting the evidence and its implications for solutions.

In that context, there are many modern policy analysis texts available to students, engaging with these newer stories of (largely Western) political systems, and attempting to encourage the technical and political

skills to engage effectively (Bardach & Patashnik, 2020; Dunn, 2017; Meltzer & Schwartz, 2019; Weimer & Vining, 2017; Mintrom, 2012; compare with the UK classic Hogwood & Gunn, 1984). These skills revolve around a step-by-step process to get from defining a problem to making a recommendation (Cairney, 2021a, pp. 12-15):

- *Define a policy problem identified by your client.* Problem definition is a political act of framing, to determine an issue's: primary nature, cause, size, severity, and urgency. For example, is smoking a public health crisis or economic opportunity? If the former, is the problem caused by smokers or tobacco companies? Is smoking harm akin to an epidemic that should be treated in the same way as communicable disease?
- *Identify technically and politically feasible solutions.* Policy options should be technically and politically feasible. In other words, they will work as intended if implemented, and are acceptable to your client and the people whose support they seek. For example, tax rises and prohibitions of smoking in public places may help to reduce smoking overall (but with inequalities across populations), but are they straightforward to produce and maintain?
- *Use value-based criteria and political goals to compare solutions.* Common values include: *efficiency* (will it provide the most benefits for the same cost?), *equity* (will the processes and outcomes be fair or equal), *freedom* (such as from state intervention or harm from others), *human rights* or *dignity*, and *sustainability* (such as to balance economic and environmental aims). Analysts relate trade-offs between options in relation to these values and their political goals, such as to retain government popularity and policy legitimacy. For example, if tobacco control improves population health, does this outcome trump issues of freedom from state coercion (and will it be popular)?
- *Predict the outcome of each feasible solution.* Estimating the future impact of policies is problematic but routine. Some analyses are amenable to cost-benefit models (using a common metric for both) or cost-effectiveness analysis (to estimate the benefits –such as reduced smoking prevalence and health harm– related to the cost of each intervention). Others may be amenable to best –and worst– case scenarios to warn against basing policies on fixed assumptions.
- *Make a recommendation to your client.* Different accounts place more or less emphasis on providing a choice to policymakers or providing a strong and direct recommendation based on a client's initial brief. Most emphasise the need to communicate recommendations concisely, framed in a way that a client would accept.

Comparing these texts helps to identify some different emphases (and different numbers of analytical steps). For example, Weimer & Vining (2017) emphasise insights from economics to explain the role and process of cost benefit analysis, Meltzer & Schwartz (2019) focus more on the possibilities for design methods to help co-produce analysis, Mintrom (2012) explores the ability of analysts to emulate “policy entrepreneurs”, Bardach & Patashnik (2020) highlight the need for storytelling skills when communicating with clients, and, Dunn (2017) recommends monitoring policy outcomes to examine how each solution has worked.

However, these texts share the same broad approach, to focus on situating (1) the individual and professional skills required to act efficiently and effectively in (2) a *time-pressured political system*. Time pressures prompt Dunn (2017, pp. 4 and 68) and Bardach & Patashnik (2020) to warn against the naïve attachment to a purist version of “evidence based policymaking”, in favour of a researcher's ability to adapt quickly and pragmatically to the evidence-demands of policymakers. Political pressures prompt most accounts to warn against a sole focus on analytical methods and the technical feasibility of all solutions, since analysts need to rule out options that won't be acceptable to politicians or their audience (Cairney, 2021b, discusses similar advice for policy designers). While policy analysts need technical skills –including research methods and modelling– most advice relates to political pragmatism or strategy, including the need to see a problem through the eyes of a policymaker/ client, make a complex problem seem simple enough to solve, and tell a persuasive story about feasible solutions (Cairney, 2021a, p. 6). Only some invite analysts to *challenge* their clients. For example, Mintrom (2012, pp. 20-22) describes researching more radical options that may be increasingly feasible over time (e.g. in relation to climate change), while Meltzer & Schwarz (2019, pp. 40-45 and 90-91) highlight the value of design principles to generate “empathy” with people affected by policy, and “co-create” solutions with stakeholders.

Studies of policy analysts situate the development of professional skills in wider context where analysis is highly contested and not monopolised by an elite cadre of actors in a notional centre of government. Many actors (in many organisations and roles) compete to interpret evidence, draw attention to and frame problems, and negotiate the political feasibility of solutions in different venues (Cairney, 2021a, p. 35; Brans et al., 2017,

pp. 4-5; Enserink et al., 2013, pp. 17-34; Radin, 2019). These conclusions help to identify the existence of different policy analysis “styles”, which vary according to:

- *The policymaking context.* Examples include the level or type of government responsible for policy (the audiences for analysis), the rules of each policymaking venue, the capacity for analysis in government bureaucracies (or contracted out to other organisations), and the expected role of advisory bodies (such as to provide information only, or make detailed recommendations) (Hassenteufel & Zittoun, 2017; Cairney, 2021a, pp. 38-39).
- *Our assumptions about the nature of policy debate.* Actors may pursue a “rational” style if they believe that they can produce straightforward analysis in a well-ordered system. Alternatively, they may pursue: “argumentative” styles to reflect the need to compete to define problems; “client advice” styles to treat analysis as part of a “political game”; “participatory” or “interactive” styles to facilitate wider involvement in the generation of policy relevant knowledge and more deliberation on its meaning; or, “process” styles to prioritise the rules that may produce credible analysis (Mayer et al., 2013, pp. 50-55).

They also inform discussions of policy analysis training: it is not enough to teach research and modelling, since analysts need a wider set of skills to navigate political systems, identify which stakeholders matter, encourage collaboration, and exploit opportunities for solution adoption (Radin, 2019; Fukuyama, 2018).

2.1. Insights from policy process research

Policy process theories combine two main concepts to identify the wider policymaking context. First, “bounded rationality” describes the limits to a policymaker’s ability to process information and make choices, as an individual with cognitive limits, or as part of an organisation with limited resources. Second, terms like “complexity” or “multi-centric policymaking” describe a policymaking environment that consists of: many policymaking venues or “centres”, each with their own policy actors, formal and informal rules and norms, networks, dominant beliefs, and responses to socioeconomic conditions (Cairney et al., 2019). They describe policymaking processes as: (1) beyond the understanding of any individual, (2) impervious to the control of a single centre, (3) unlike the old story of policy analysis, and (4) not described accurately by concepts such as the policy cycle (Cairney, 2020). Consequently, the task of policy analysis is unclear without a better understanding of the processes in which analysts will actually engage.

Two classic accounts describe how policymakers (and analysts) might respond to bounded rationality within complex policymaking environments. Simon (1976) describes policymakers as unable to gather all information to define a policy problem, predict the effects of each solution, separate facts from values, or produce policies that maximise societal benefits. Rather, they use values and political goals to identify a small number of priorities, seek information from a small number of trusted sources, and “satisfice”, or seek an outcome that seems “good enough” (Simon, 1976, p. xxviii). Lindblom (1959; 1979) suggests that policy analysts should (and generally do) focus on investigating a small number of feasible options that represent non-radical change from the status quo: avoid using resources to investigate the solutions that few will support; engage in trial-and-error to monitor the effect of incremental steps to a desired end; and avoid radical policy change, which is a shot in the dark and wastes the effort invested in previously agreed positions. In each case, these accounts have clear parallels with policy analysis advice, such as to take a pragmatic approach to gathering information and assessing solution feasibility.

Modern accounts seek to incorporate newer insights from psychology, which highlight—for example—the extent to which people: pay more attention to issues or information if they are already familiar with the subject, rely on others to simplify and frame complex problems, sum up social groups with reference to few people, describe reality with reference to vivid events, try to find patterns in a mess of information, value the things they might lose over things they might gain, are vulnerable to groupthink, or otherwise rush to judgement (Kahneman, 2012). These insights help to examine how policymakers might combine cognition and emotion to make choices quickly, in an environment out of their full understanding or control (Cairney, 2020, p. 233; Cairney & Kwiatkowski, 2017; Cairney & Weible, 2017). Indeed, almost all policy theories use bounded rationality and complexity to describe policymaker responses and the consequences. Examples include:

- *Punctuated equilibrium theory.* Policy change is a function of disproportionate attention and information processing. Policymakers can only pay attention to a small number of problems (and a small proportion of available information) at any one time. At the “macropolitical” level, they focus on some

and delegate the rest. This attention may be necessary to overcome resistance to change in policy-making venues that reproduce rules and standard operating procedures. Therefore, the overall outcome across political systems is a small amount of major policy change (such as when issues receive high senior policymaker attention) and huge amount of minor changes (such as when issues receive minimal attention) (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; 2015).

- *Policy communities.* Most policy is processed through policy networks or communities at a level of government not particularly visible to the public. For example, UK ministers delegate most issues to civil servants, who seek information and advice from interest groups. Governments assign status to groups according to their resources (such as their size and representativeness), policy beliefs, and willingness to follow the “rules of the game”. These rules relate to how to define the problem (in a way acceptable to governments), but also to present modest demands, accept losses, and avoid criticising the outcomes in public. Communities contain “core insiders” (consulted in multiple policy sectors) and “specialist insiders” (consulted on a specific issue), surrounded by “peripheral insiders” (consulted only as part of a “trawling” exercise) and outsiders (Richardson & Jordan, 1979; Jordan & Maloney, 1997; Jordan & Cairney, 2013).
- *Advocacy coalition framework.* People enter politics to translate their beliefs into policy. They form coalitions with like-minded actors, and compete with coalitions who pursue other beliefs (Sabatier & Weible, 2007). As with policy communities, these actors operate in subsystems that process relatively specialist issues, although the ACF identifies greater levels of participation and competition, and less scope to insulate the process from peripheral players.
- *Multiple streams analysis.* Major policy change will only happen if enough actors pay serious attention to a problem, a technically and politically feasible solution already exists, and policymakers have the motive and opportunity to select it. Yet, attention is fleeting, and these windows of opportunity for major change usually close before a solution can be produced and agreed (Kingdon, 1984).
- *Narrative policy framework.* Actors compete to turn complex problems into simple stories. They use narrative to persuade their audience to pay attention to their interpretation of the setting (what is the policy problem?), characters (who are the villains causing the problem, or the heroes who can solve it?), plot (such as a hero’s triumph over political adversity), and moral (regarding the solution to the problem) (Jones et al., 2014). These narratives are unlikely to change the minds of their audiences. Rather, if people juggle many (often contradictory) beliefs or aims, then an effective story can encourage an audience to act by drawing attention to one belief at the expense of another (Crow & Jones, 2018).
- *Social construction and policy design.* Policymakers make emotional or strategic choices, drawing on social stereotypes to describe some groups as deserving of benefits and others deserving of punishment or limited support. Only some groups have the resources to exploit a positive image or challenge a negative image and secure government rewards. These rewards and punishments become routine features of policy design, and send clear signals to citizens about how they will be treated (Schneider & Ingram, 1997; 2005).
- *Institutional Analysis and Development.* There is no single centre of authoritative policy choice. Rather, policymaking is characterised by polycentricity, in which many actors in many authoritative venues (including semi-autonomous policymaking organisations) –inside and outside of government– are essential to policy change. As such, they need to co-produce rules to collaborate effectively. These rules allow them to build mutual trust and reduce the costs of monitoring cooperation. They help to establish who should be involved, their roles, who sets the rules, the rewards for cooperation, and the punishments for defection (Ostrom, 2007; 2011; Schlager & Cox, 2018).

What practical lessons could we draw from such a wide range of theoretical insights? First, try not to privilege agency over context. Advice from policy analysis texts tends to see the world through the lens of the analyst even if we accept that they are one small part of a very large puzzle. Most texts draw to some extent on policy process theories to caution “against too-high expectations for their influence in a large, complex, and competitive policy process”, but also to produce effective strategies to navigate and influence their environment (Cairney et al., 2022, p. 19). If so, analysts should note that most policy theories are not produced for this purpose, and many zoom out to examine systemic dynamics rather than individual behaviour. Therefore, retrofitting their findings to aid analysts may produce some unrealistic strategies (Weible & Cairney, 2018). Rather, these theories help policy actors to identify common problems and reflect on the dilemmas that follow, such as:

- Be prepared for an issue to be ignored for long periods, only for policymaker attention to lurch and create an immediate demand for solutions (in other words, be prepared to exploit a window of opportunity to put forward evidence or solutions).
- Reflect on your strategies to gain inclusion in policy networks: should you follow the “rules of the game” to gain inclusion in one community or make more explicit value choices to seek membership in one advocacy coalition?
- Consider the extent to which analysis should take on a narrative form, and appeal to specific audiences (with firmly held beliefs) rather than a catch-all message to influence them all.
- Consider the extent to which analysis should be a fixed document setting out the options in advance, or a living document that changes in relation to ongoing collaboration between many policymaking centres.

In each case, there is a big difference between identifying detailed and contingent scientific insights on policy processes versus simple and universal strategies to engage in processes. Indeed, the identification of a policymaking environment, out of the control or full understanding of policy actors, does not necessarily make that environment more amenable to policy analysis. For example, studies of framing establish which frames generated policymaker attention or found support in some venues. Further, policy theories show that policy actors tell stories that “combine facts with emotional appeals” to seek policymaker attention to a problem (True et al., 2007, p. 161), interpret evidence through the lens of coalition beliefs (Weible et al., 2012), or propose solutions during a window of opportunity (Kingdon, 1984). However, knowledge of these processes does not show *how* to produce a successful framing strategy to change how policymakers (in multiple venues) see a problem. Indeed, multiple theories suggest that the audience is more important than the storyteller.

Second, avoid treating policy processes as if they were –or could be– orderly and predictable. Policy analysis texts relate strongly to the idea of policymaking via a linear series of stages in a policy cycle. In the old story of policy analysts, key steps of policy analysis would map (somewhat) onto policy cycle stages, including to define the problem and generate solutions, then legitimise recommendations before implementing and evaluating policy. In the new story, we find a messier reality in which 5-step analysis is difficult to connect to policy processes. One implication of this narrative shift is to warn against treating policy analysis as a one-shot act (although this lesson is, to some extent, conveyed by the idea of a continuous cycle). Rather, effective policy actors may need to engage for the long term to help them learn the rules, gain inclusion in coalitions or networks, and spot opportunities (Cairney & Weible, 2017, pp. 624-625). Even so, they may lack the resources to engage effectively in multiple venues, the same strategy “can succeed in one venue and fail in others”, and it is rare for the process to produce major policy change (Cairney et al., 2022, p. 22).

2.2. Insights from critical policy analysis

Broadly speaking, critical policy analysis (CPA) identifies (1) the inequalities of power inherent in policy analysis and policymaking, which (2) cause or exacerbate inequalities in policy and societal outcomes, and (3) should prompt scholars to build emancipation into their research (to identify and take “the side of those who are harmed” – Bacchi, 2009, p. 44). CPA scholars challenge the idea that policy analysis *could* or *should* be a rationalist project. Indeed, to portray (a) policy analysts as able to use analytical methods to remain objective, and (b) policy problems as amenable to technical fixes, is (c) a political act. The projection of analyst objectivity helps to reproduce the marginalisation or subordination of social groups in the following ways.

First, *by privileging some forms of policy relevant knowledge over others*. Claims to knowledge rest on the rules agreed within each profession or community, and asserted as superior to others, rather than a universally agreed set of rules that can be employed to ensure objectivity (Hindess, 1977). For example, studies of colonisation and critical race theory highlight the exercise of power to privilege “Western” norms of scientific knowledge and dismiss other knowledge claims, such as indigenous and experiential knowledge (Smith, 2012; Doucet, 2019).

Second, *by downplaying the contestation to define and use values to inform analysis*. A story of rationalist analysis suggests that actors could employ techniques systematically and dispassionately to produce one agreed definition of a problem and generate solutions with reference to clearly defined and universal values. Yet, humans do not have the ability to separate cognitive and emotional assessment, the same person or community can juggle multiple contradictory beliefs, and values and political goals are ambiguous and contested (Stone, 2012). For example, *equity* may describe the reduction of unfair inequalities, but there is intense contestation to decide which inequalities matter (such as in relation to income, gender, race, disa-

bility) and which measures of outcomes matter (such as –in education– inequalities of access to schools or exams-based attainment).

Third, *by characterising chronic social problems –such as inequalities– as natural and inevitable*. For example, Bacchi's (2009) "What's the problem represented to be" (WPR) approach includes six questions to identify how policy actors: define a problem's cause and the role of government in solving it, use "deep-seated cultural values" and social stereotypes to decide who to support, reproduce the same definitions for long periods, and ignore or silence alternative ways to define problems. WPR encourages analysts to find ways to challenge the policy frames that downplay problems and marginalise social groups, such as when they treat negative consequences as the responsibility of individuals rather than the state.

2.3. Combining these insights to prompt policy analyst reflection

We can use these insights to prompt further reflection and debate on the role and impact of policy analysts. For example, Cairney (2021a) explores:

- *The difference between functional requirements and policymaking reality*. Policy analysis texts, and policy cycle accounts, often describe what analysts and policymakers need to happen, rather than what they can realistically expect when engaging in policy processes. For example, a focus on technical feasibility asks if the policy solution will work as intended if implemented. Yet, any "new" solution is likely one of many instruments that add to an existing policy mix, and the overall impact is not so easy to predict (Cairney, 2021a, p. 105).
- *The opportunities and limits to entrepreneurial policy analysis and "systems thinking"*. Some "entrepreneurial" skills matter, such as to set realistic goals, build teams, use evidence well, tailor arguments to each audience, and build wide networks (Mintrom, 2019). However, most entrepreneurs fail, and the reasons for their success relate more to their environments than skills (Cairney, 2021a, p. 126). Similarly, "systems thinking" could describe trying to understand how to produce a disproportionate impact on policy, but policy theories refer to systems to describe their imperviousness to such influence (Cairney, 2021a, p. 134).
- *Who should be included in policy analysis?* Policy analysis texts juggle ideas that may prove to be contradictory in practice, such as to pursue (a) "evidence based" policymaking by relying on an elite group of experts, and (b) analysis and policy "co-produced" with many stakeholders and citizens.
- *What is your role as an analyst?* CPA helps to challenge the routine advice, in policy analysis texts, to tailor your analysis to your client's demands and beliefs, and be pragmatic when considering the political feasibility of solutions. Such strategies legitimise the status quo that reinforces profound and enduring inequalities.
- *How much impact can you expect, and how far would you go to secure it?* We can use policy theories to warn against expecting a major policy impact from evidence and analysis. Then, we consider if analysts can –and should– seek greater influence by exploiting key aspects of policy processes, such as to encourage limited attention, demonise your opponents, or exploit a tendency for policymakers to base policy on stereotypes (Cairney, 2021a, pp. 142-145).

3. HOW CAN A BLOG HELP STUDENTS LEARN?

3.1. An original website

My website contains three series of blog posts: the original 1000-word¹ posts to explain policy concepts and theories; the 500² series focusing on take-home messages for teaching; and the 750³ series that summarises policy analysis texts and generates the themes and questions described above. The most obvious rationale to develop these blogs relates to the subject matter and the ability of non-specialists to understand it. The policy theory literature is large and expanding, and full of jargon that takes time to understand, which can make the initial stages of reading dispiriting. This learning can be aided by supervision and teaching, but

¹ <https://paulcairney.wordpress.com/1000-words/>

² <https://paulcairney.wordpress.com/500-words/>

³ <https://paulcairney.wordpress.com/policy-analysis-in-750-words/>

not everyone is engaged for the long term with people that can guide them through every step. Rather, key sources of variation can relate to the following questions:

- *At what level are we teaching* (and how many people at a time)? The learning experience varies markedly in relation to undergraduate and postgraduate taught courses, PhD training with or without a background in political science or policy theories, and short executive training.
- *How specialized are they?* Prior knowledge and experience matters to a student's ability to pick up and use new concepts.
- *How much time do they have?* Some PhD students may train in political science and methods for two years before writing a thesis (or pick up theories during a thesis in another subject). Some undergraduate or postgraduate students may be studying policy as part of a political science degree, or taking one-off modules as part of a degree in a different discipline. In executive training, learning may take place during one day (perhaps with the ability to set reading in advance).
- *How much can you expect them to read?* Some may be able to read extensive lists of books and articles, while others get by on blog posts and textbooks.
- *What reference points are useful?* For example, a rehearsal of the policy cycle may be essential if it is already a key reference point for new students or policy practitioners. Further, for some, we begin with theories to help understand policy processes as a whole. For others, one topic (such as public health or climate change) or one process (such as evidence-informed or collaborative policymaking) matters, and theories only matter if they help to provide practical lessons.
- *What do we want to do with theories?* Much of the specialist work on policy theories is to “take it forward”, or improve theories with new insights and applications. Yet, the aim in teaching is to minimize the extent to which non-specialists are left behind.
- *Where are they from?* Most publications describe experiences in the US and Europe without always considering their wider applicability or generalizable lessons.

First, when I began teaching policy in the UK, it was to an undergraduate audience in politics, so I saw the blog post (and accompanying podcast) as a gateway to a textbook chapter (Cairney, 2020) which was a gateway to reading the source material. Second, I now deliver a postgraduate taught programme –the Master of Public Policy– in which the level may be higher, but most students tend to come from other disciplines (or from policy and practice), and often from countries whose political systems do not resemble the UK (or US). In that context, the short introductory explainers are essential if I want students to begin to learn from multiple theories –and consider their implications for policy analysis– without having a background in political studies. During their study of policy analysis, a focus on 5-step approaches will be limited unless they can relate their problem definition and recommendations to a policy process that actually exists, not the one they need. Third, I give regular guest talks to different audiences, including to PhD thesis students seeking to connect policy to their discipline (such as health), masters-level social research students seeking to make an impact on policy, and practitioner audiences seeking to understand how they or their audience fits into the policy process.

This range of possibilities requires me to find out what people know, and how to connect these theories to the knowledge and skills that they already possess, and the limited time they have to learn, while answering the “so what?” question (since few audience members see policy theories as useful in their own right). For example, my most frequent talk (accompanied by a separate series of posts and podcasts) is to answer the general question, “why do policymakers ignore my evidence?” The answer is that: policy actors (including researchers, analysts, and policymakers) have different ways to determine what is good evidence; policymakers have to ignore almost all information; and, they engage in a policymaking environment over which they have limited knowledge and control, which makes it difficult to know where and how “evidence” would fit in (see Cairney, 2016, and the EBPM page on my website⁴).

3.2. What is the role of coursework to aid policy analysis learning?

Two core University of Stirling MPP modules (60 of 120 taught credits, and 180 overall) map onto these blog posts and books: (1) *The Politics of Policy Analysis* links to the 750 series and Cairney (2021a); and (2) *Understanding Public Policy* links to the 500 and 1000 series and Cairney (2020), followed by guest lectures

⁴ <https://paulcairney.wordpress.com/ebpm/>

to compare political science with other disciplinary perspectives on policy (including feminist research, strategic communication, public health, and behavioural insights).

In the first module, the aim is to produce policy analysis for a client, and a blog post for a wider audience, underpinned by strategies that relate to policy process theories and critical policy analysis. Since the practical impact of their theoretical insights is not obvious (there is no blueprint for analysis), I encourage students to be creative and reflexive, to think about the skills that they need, such as to produce or find evidence, and use argumentation or storytelling in relation to their chosen audience. I ask them to write three pieces of work (and give a short oral presentation) to help them develop skills to communicate the same topic to different audiences. These exercises include:

- *Three-minute oral presentation.* The aim is to define a problem, at least one feasible solution, and arrive to a convincing conclusion in three minutes. I ask students not to use powerpoint, partly because –in real life– they may not have such a captive audience, may need to make a very short and informal pitch at short notice, and should focus on making a small amount of information memorable (rather than cramming too much into slides). This exercise helps students to gauge how long it takes to make a case, followed by questions from their peers to help the presenter understand the audience reaction. At the end, I ask the large room which take-home messages they remember and why, to emphasise that presentations are primarily about who is listening and what they remember.
- *1000-word policy analysis paper.* The aim is to make an efficient case to policymakers with minimal time to read briefs. It represents a contrast between the tendency for (a) scientific reports to be long (to project professional authority and comprehensive analysis) but (b) briefs to be short, to focus only on getting the audience to care about the problem and see it as solvable with current resources. I ask students to consider who is their audience, what is their role, and how “manipulative” they should be when telling a story.
- *1000-word essay reflecting on their analysis.* I ask students to show how their knowledge of policy concepts and theories informs their policy analysis, such as to draw on bounded rationality to consider how policymakers will process the information, and complexity to consider who is the audience, when and why they might act, and what are the likely consequences. For example, do they seek to influence multiple audiences, or accept that the same case will attract one and not another? Further, does their analysis focus on the policy instrument alone, or its contribution to a complex policy mix? Does the recommendation come only with a solution, or also a plan to relate the solution to the process necessary to its application?
- *500-word blog post.* The aim is to write a short and punchy account of the problem (and possible solutions) to a non-specialist “lay” audience. It requires skills to argue a case to a larger group of less interested people, likely to find the post via social media. Students should be guided by conceptual insights, but without describing them directly (in other words, avoid unnecessary jargon). The exercise prompts them to communicate in a new way to an audience that will only read further if the problem seems urgent and important to them.

Crucially, while we begin the module by discussing the advice from policy analysis texts, most of the module relates to the wider policymaking context. Further, most students are new to policy theories, and some only take this module as part of a different programme. As such, the blog posts become essential introductory reading to students (1) already unsure about how to produce policy analysis for the first time, (2) without enough time to read multiple 500-page texts to compare their advice, and (3) seeking to reflect on the likely impact of their work. Subsequently, in the second core module, we focus more on the policy theory source material and use it to answer more traditional essay questions (such as what is this policy, how much did it change, and why?) (see Cairney, 2021a, Annex).

4. CONCLUSION

It is necessary but difficult to teach policy analysis in relation to a wider political and policymaking context. Students already need to learn a suite of technical skills –including research methods to produce or gather data on problems, and cost-benefit analysis techniques to compare solutions– while learning what it means to engage in ethical or professional analysis. They may also benefit from a wider range of skills in relation to stakeholder analysis, collaboration, deliberation, and argumentation. However, the relevance and benefit of these skills only emerges when students appreciate the uncertain and complex nature of policymaking.

king. Studies of policymaker psychology suggest that they: can ignore issues and information for long periods, then suddenly pay attention; are members of coalitions that interpret information through the lens of their beliefs; and, build policy narratives on social stereotypes, or use other shortcuts to sum up complex problems in simple ways. Studies of critical policy analysis suggest that these processes contribute to the maintenance of inequalities of power in policy and society.

This necessity to learn does not equate to the capacity to learn. Rather, students resembled the policy actors subject to bounded rationality, seeking efficient ways to learn, and trying to avoid the dispiriting confusion that accompanies their engagement with many new concepts in a short period of time. Policy analysis texts help to address this problem by describing the politics of policy analysis, and using policy theories to some extent. However, most texts scratch the surface of policy process research. Students could address this problem by reading the source material, but the literature is large and unwieldy, and it is difficult to know where to start. In that context, the conceptual blog posts and podcasts provide an accessible way into a diverse field, containing multiple concepts and theories. Further, the policy analysis posts help students to relate those textbook insights to critical policy analysis, including texts that engage directly with policy analysis, and a much wider literature that is relevant without using the same terminology. These posts matter particularly when policy analysis or theory students do not intend to become specialists in policy theory. In that context, students can generate and reflect on a range of practical lessons from policy theories if there is a clear and encouraging way to engage with the field.

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