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Part I
1

Reflections on Our Understanding of Policy Paradigms and Policy Change

John Hogan and Michael Howlett

Introduction

This volume seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversation among policy scholars on the subject of policy paradigms. It provides a window into the research frontier of policy dynamics and a re-evaluation of the precision and utility of existing policy paradigm orthodoxy. A ‘policy paradigm’ constitutes a theoretical tool to specify and understand the guiding principles, or ideas, for creating public policy, why the various actors involved are involved, and why they pursue the strategies they do. The book provides unique and varied insights into the current state of the art regarding how a range of scholars understand such paradigms, and public policy ideas, both conceptually and empirically. It does this by drawing together contributions from leading political science and social science researchers, to provide a multidimensional set of perspectives on how paradigm-related elements such as policy ideas, coalitions, discourses, interests, crises, anomalies and routines contribute to policy development and our understanding of that process. As academics, we are conscious that, by presenting a variety of perspectives in one book, we and our readers can learn from each other.

Although a variety of books look at the topic of ideas and their impact on policy making, we have placed policy paradigms at the centre of our focus in this volume, and use the policy making/policy change process lenses to perfect our understanding of these phenomena. We provide a critical analysis of what is currently taking place at the nexus of discourses, ideas and discussions of policy anomalies that has resulted in the extant iterations of the policy paradigm concept and its application to policy studies. Readers will see both the commonalities and
differences across the concepts of policy paradigms used in the book and how these concepts are evolving and changing.

The chapters are grouped into related sections, but each contribution is also a self-contained unit. In this way, readers can, by examining just one chapter, gain an insight into specific aspects of contemporary thinking about policy paradigms, how that thinking has evolved and how it is likely to develop in future. Students of public policy are also provided with the opportunity to familiarize themselves with a more comprehensive appreciation of policy paradigms, as the book presents multiple examples of the application and critique of paradigms in theory and in their practical application to policy developments.

In summation, our hope is that readers will find this a useful volume in assisting them gain a more comprehensive appreciation of the concept and application of the policy paradigm notion in contemporary policy studies. In providing the readers with a varied set of studies we hope to encourage them to investigate further those aspects of the paradigm idea that interest them, or that they find useful in comprehending aspects of policy-making, and in so doing help push forward the research frontier on this subject.

This chapter seeks to place the volume and its aims in context and provide the reader with a guide to the wide-ranging, diverse and thought-provoking contributions on policy paradigms made by its contributors. Here we will show how the other chapters in the book link together and emphasize the importance of better defining paradigms, their origins and diversity. As the book looks at how paradigm-based theoretical frameworks tie cognitive ideas, discourses and coalitions to policies and to the norms and values of the wider society, the chapter aims to show how understanding policy in such a paradigmatic manner can provide a better appreciation of why and how policies change and evolve as they do. Such insights can help us appreciate how polities develop their unique and sometimes confusing characteristics and policies.

The chapter is structured in four main sections. The first section looks at the broader academic context within which the book is set and at the origins and development of the policy paradigm concept. The second section looks at how policy paradigms, ideas and discourses are intertwined. The other two sections provide the reader with an introduction to several outstanding research questions in the field and an overview of the book’s structure and objectives, highlighting how each of the chapters help us to better understand policy paradigms and policy change.
Policy paradigms and the study of policy change

According to Carson (2004, p. 38) ‘a policy paradigm is a cognitive model shared by a particular community of actors, and which facilitates problem solving’. Similarly, Baumgartner (2013, p. 252) states that ‘when ideas are widely shared by an entire policy community, they can be called a paradigm’. ‘Ideas on steroids’ is how Baumgartner (2014, p. 476) has referred to policy paradigms’ significance in the context of all policy ideas. It is ‘a set of coherent and well-established policy ideas’ capable of having an impact on the content of public policy (Daigneault, 2014, p. 482).

In talking about policy paradigms we are talking about policy dynamics, as the idea of a policy paradigm is one of an ideational construct that provides some continuity to policy content and discourse over time. But, although the term policy change is something that is often spoken of, written about and considered, our understanding of policy change processes remains limited. As Capano (2009, p. 7) noted, due to the multidimensional nature of policy dynamics, ‘policy change is a very ambiguous area of academic study, and one full of pitfalls’. This is because recognizing how public policy develops is complex and difficult. Policy change is a multifaceted process that must be understood in the context of larger societal/political change, but is not limited to it (Feldstein, 1994). The complex dynamics of policy change constitute a significant obstacle to further progress in our understanding of policy making. However, the study, development and evolution of the idea of policy paradigms is one which has promised to help resolve this problem and enable us to better comprehend policy change by understanding how ideational factors can structure, or limit, policy debate and action. This is important because comprehending the policy change process, how policies evolve and develop over time, is vitally important in gaining deeper insights into how societies develop.

Not surprisingly, efforts to comprehend policy change have fostered a variety of theoretical frameworks. The theoretical, and accompanying empirical, literature has developed through the efforts of researchers to examine the spectrum of public policies from a variety of perspectives, which has provided a rich diversity of comparative and single-case examinations at various levels of governance – international, national and subnational. The frameworks used in policy studies are myriad and have included, but are not limited to, the multiple stream approach, the punctuated equilibrium framework, the advocacy coalition framework, the path dependency framework, notions of layering, exogenous shocks,
focusing events, displacement, critical junctures, and drift, as well as the study of epistemic communities, policy entrepreneurs and barriers to change (Birkland, 1997; Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972; Garrett & Lange, 1995; Haas, 1992, 2004; Howlett, 2009; Jenkins-Smith, 1990; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Jones & Jenkins-Smith, 2009; Kleistra & Mayer, 2001; Legro, 2000; Meijerink, 2005; Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Nohrstedt, 2011; Sabatier, 1988; Streeck & Thelen, 2005; True, Jones, & Baumgartner, 2007; Weible et al., 2011; Zahariadis, 1999). These frameworks each seek to provide glimpses into the mechanics of policy development, windows of understanding, but approach the problem from slightly different angles.

The result has seen the creation of a variety of competing ontological perspectives on the subject of policy change. For instance, policy change has been studied from the perspective of exogenous shocks, incremental changes and uncertainties as well as the perspective of groups and coalitions who have a vision of how policies can change. As Howlett (2009, p. 241) pointed out, ‘most attention to date has focused upon homeostatic models in which exogenously-driven shocks undermine institutionally entrenched policy equilibria’. But, as Blyth (2011, p. 86) noted, ‘what’s actually exogenous and what is endogenous to the social world is oftentimes analytically, not empirically, adjudicated’ and, moreover, such institutionally based conceptions fail to take into account the key role played by policy ideas in affecting the substance of policy content and change. As Blyth (1997) also argued, ideas are important objects in the investigation of the context and content of policy dynamics which cannot be ignored.

The study of policy paradigms begins from the recognition that ideas are important, underlying processes of policy change and stability and a key to appreciating patterns and processes of policy dynamics (Lewis & Steinmo, 2010). To attempt to understand policy change also serves to shine another, and much needed, light into the black box of policy making which Heclo (1974, pp. 305–6) described as a form of collective puzzlement on society’s behalf, providing greater transparency for the wider society as to how choices are made and decision arrived at. Investigating the complexities and nuances of policy ideas is thus expected to provide us with a window into our own society, how it seeks to solve problems and how the solutions it generates often have unforeseen consequences, as they are frequently constrained by earlier policy decisions as well as exogenous factors. Béland (2009) has encouraged this growing interest in ideas, as he regards them as central to our understanding of public policy.
Some of the most significant works of the last century developed the concept of a paradigm while trying to understand large-scale policy change. This includes Weir and Skocpol’s (1985) examination of Keynesian responses to the great depression and Hall’s (1989) seminal work on the spread of Keynesian ideas. For Hall (1993) the spread of the Keynesian paradigm relied on extant arrangements aligning with new ideas. But, empirical failure was also necessary for Hall (1993) as were sociological and discursive factors (Blyth, 2013, p. 204). In this case, paradigm change was episodic, as in the Kuhn (1962) model.

There have been many definitions of ‘paradigms’ put forward in this work, from Kuhn (1962) onwards, but we are particularly interested in the policy paradigms concept as developed by Hall (1990, 1993). In his path-breaking work, Hall (1993) sought to overcome the problems that led to questioning of how the basic ideas behind extant and new policies are related, change and transform. In this respect, Hall’s 1993 article pushed the concept of policy paradigms to the centre of our understandings of public policy (Baumgartner, 2014, p. 475); despite the fact that the empirical basis of Hall’s (1993) work was subsequently challenged by Oliver and Pemberton (2004).

While useful, in and of itself, as a means of describing the ideational components of policy (Campbell, 1998; Hall, 1993; Kern, Kuzemko, & Mitchell, 2014), in Hall’s work the concept of a policy paradigm provides a normative and cognitive reading as to how policy should change and develop – as a solution to the extant problem (Campbell, 1998). As Princen and ‘t Hart (2014, p. 472) argue, this is very useful in the assessments of policy dynamics since ‘the presence or absence of policy paradigms can, we believe, predict the pattern of policy change that a policy sector is likely to display’.

A better appreciation of paradigms, and their capacity to explain the policy process, is thus expected to enable us to better explain and comprehend public policy dynamics in the world around us. This volume shows how a selection of theoretical frameworks, at the research frontier, are employed in understanding extant public policies, policy making and historical and ongoing policy change. In addition, it provides practical examples of the application of these paradigms and what we can learn from them. Although the contributing authors look at policies from a variety of frameworks, each with somewhat different perspectives on the role of ideas, beliefs, coalitions, discourses, interests and crises in affecting policy ideas and policy-making, the book shows that, across the paradigms employed and topics investigated, there are commonalities and consistencies in relation to how the various theoretical
frameworks examine public policy and its development. These commonalities derive from the shared lineage contained within the paradigms – effectively their shared intellectual DNA. It is to paradigms, ideas and the discourse surrounding them that this volume is focused.

The context of the book

The last half decade has witnessed the onset of what is being referred to as the ‘Great Recession’. After three decades marked by the apparent triumphant march of free market economic ideas and policies across the world, we have seen private companies, particularly in the form of banks and other financial institutions, rescued by states and their citizens (Hogan, Donnelly, & O’Rourke, 2010). For whatever reason, these institutions have been deemed to be ‘too big to fail’. As a consequence, the ideas underlying the doctrine of free market capitalism are being questioned; a similar phenomenon to that of the late 1970s examined by Hall when then orthodox ideas underlying communism and Keynesianism struggled in the face of efforts to maintain price stability and low unemployment (Rutland, 1994, p. xi). This suggests the free market paradigm and ideas that underlie many current policies, financial and otherwise, may be failing. However, it is by no means obvious that this will lead to policy change. We are left asking if many current policies and ideas will change and evolve to respond to the situation, or if states will continue to cling to them in the hope that the problems with the political economy will come right? A better understanding of the role of policy paradigms is required to answer these questions.

This is because paradigmatic change is not an automatic process put into motion by crisis, as some would have it. Just because there is a crisis, or policy failure, does not mean change will result. As Baumgartner (2013, p. 243) points out, ‘where the status quo policy can be demonstrated to be functioning reasonably well, or where there is no widely accepted alternative policy available, significant policy change is unlikely’. Or, as Blyth (2013, p. 209) noted, ‘It is entirely possible that the dominant paradigm is seen to fail and that nothing in particular comes along to replace it.’

The policy reality is that ‘occasionally people come up with new ideas for policy solutions, but for the most part they work with old ideas, thinking about ways to reformulate them or combine them with others’ (Mintrom, 2000, p. 43). Governments typically react quite slowly in response to new ideas (Mintrom, 2000). Even when greater degrees of
change are required, or desired, any change of this type can have unintended and unanticipated consequences – making it risky for politicians to enact (Hood, 2010). There can be reluctance to engage in policy change even when extant policy has failed – such a window of opportunity is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for policy change (Keeler, 1993; Kingdon, 1984).

Recently, Hall (2013) pointed to policy paradigms as the means by which policy change occurs, but also noted that on their own are insufficient for transformative change. As Hogan (2006) and Donnelly and Hogan (2012) argue, the presence of policy and political entrepreneurs, championing ideas, is crucial in driving policy change. But, there is no guarantee that even in a crisis a group of policy entrepreneurs is on hand to implement a paradigmatic shift (Baumgartner, 2013; Birkland, 2004).

As Blyth (2001, p. 4) noted, once a policy has become institutionally embedded, ‘policy making becomes possible only in terms of these ideas’. The greater the level of consensus surrounding a policy and the ideas it is based upon, the greater its level of protection – ensuring its continuity. Yet, despite the fact that there has been no radical overthrow of the current economic policy framework, we will continue to see this policy change and evolve incrementally. This is because the ideas underlying extant policy can be undermined by alternative ideas over a longer period than just the crisis phase – meaning that a crisis is not the only time when extant ideas and policy are discredited.

**Re-evaluating policy paradigms: Their relationship to ideas and discourses**

To better understand the role of policy paradigms, it is important to begin at the beginning; with the role of ideas in policy-making more generally. For Hall (1993), as well as Blyth (2013) and Baumgartner (2014, p. 475) and others, the power of ideas is critically important to our understanding of policy change, as reflected in their centrality to frameworks such as advocacy coalitions framework (ACF) (Sabatier, 1988; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993) and punctuated equilibrium (Baumgartner & Jones, 1991, 1993) approaches. When it comes to paradigms, ideas matter, ‘particularly in the form of structured complexes of ideas’ (Carson, 2004, p. 16). Ideas are the lifeblood of paradigms.

This stresses, as Campbell (2002) noted, that it is vital to the better understanding of policy change that we understand how ideas affect policy making. Ideas reduce uncertainty, allow coalitions to form.
around them, can be used to challenge existing policies, build new poli-
cies to replace older one, and produce policy and institutional stability.
Thus, ‘ideas are more powerful than commonly understood and can
have a definite and long lasting impact on policy’ (Pérez-Caldentey &
Vernengo, 2007, p. 1). However, exactly how this happens remains
a matter of some controversy in policy studies, as each framework
of analysis understands the role of ideas in policy making slightly
differently.

According to Daigneault (2014), for example, there is now wide-
spread recognition of the power and role of ideas in the field of public
policy. Ideas and paradigms are seen as crucial in determining policy
choices due to uncertainty over the basic workings of policy, the dif-
ficulties of interpreting policy effectiveness and the lack of agreement
over what constitutes ‘correct’ policy (Baumgartner, 2013; McNamara,
1998, p. 57). The idea of a policy paradigm offers a conceptual frame-
work to help us understand events and their causes, as well as prob-
lems and their definition, and what criteria can resolve these problems
(Carson, 2004).

Ideas are themselves influenced by, and embedded in, political dis-
course (be that descriptive or metaphoric), being used to justify and
articulate a particular view of reality that feeds back into the theoreti-
cal frameworks (Berman, 2001). In this respect Cox and Béland (2013)
argue that it is essential we appreciate such factors as the valence of
policy ideas, by which they mean the emotional quality of those ideas,
be they positive or negative, which can serve to differentiate one idea,
or set of ideas, from another. One set of ideas can become embedded in
the political discourse and become cognitive locks while another set can
come the means to breaking these locks (Schmidt, 2008; Skogstad &
Schmidt, 2011, p. 3).

A central precept of the notion of a policy paradigm is that ideas exist-
ing in the absence of a policy paradigm have less influence on policy
than ones bundled together into more or less interlocking sets of ideas
(Princen & ’t Hart, 2014). For Daigneault (2014, p. 482) policy para-
digms, in effectively simplifying reality by referring only to policy ideas
that are coherent and powerful, convey information better than indi-
vidual ideas.

Consequently, how policy paradigm research deals with the topic of
ideas is very important, as any time an extant policy is found wanting,
its underlying ideas, and the validity of those ideas, can be called into
question. This results in discourse that may serve to legitimize, or chal-
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