The Surprising Usefulness of the Policy Stages Framework

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In the previous issue, I laid out a challenge to readers and scholars of social policy to be more intentional in the use of theory when designing and conduction social policy research. I said I intended to highlight various theories in upcoming issues of the *Journal of Policy Practice and Research* (Hoefer, 2021). As they say in the world of politics, “Promises made, promises kept!” In that issue, I started with the Civic Engagement Model (Verba et al., 1995).which has become increasingly well-known among researchers examining political participation and how to increase it in the United States and elsewhere. This issue.

Stages of Policy Framework

The stages of policy framework is a representation of the process of policy development moving from conception to evaluation. It is primarily a description of what happens, rather than an explanation, but it also easily orients analysts to important aspects of policymaking processes. “The stages model highlights the procedural logic of public decision-making from goal-setting to evaluation” (Peters, 2015, p. 54).

While many different versions of the stages model exist, using different terms and having slightly different emphases (Peters, 2015; Smith & Larimer, 2017), Fig. 1 presents a typical set of stages and is most similar to Anderson’s (1974) formulation (cited in Smith & Larimer, 2017, p. 26). The major question answered at each stage is as follows:

- Agenda setting: What issue shall we work on?
- Policy formulation: What possible policies (solutions to the chosen issue) can we develop?
- Policy selection: How do we choose a policy and why that one?
- Policy implementation: How do we put the policy into effect?
- Policy evaluation: Is the policy doing what we want it to do?

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Fig. 1 The Stages of Policy Framework

McNutt & Hoefer, 2021, p. 134.

After evaluation, an issue may seem to be “resolved” and not in need of being taken up again, or the process may need to begin again if the original issue is still a problem needing attention.

Social workers can immediately recognize the stages model as a cousin of the generalist problem-solving approach common to social work practice at all levels, including advocacy (Hoefer, 2019). These stages will sound familiar to you if you’ve learned about social work practice. Substitute the word *intervention* for policy and imagine working with a client (individual, family, group, or community), and it could come straight from your practice textbook.

As a way to orient oneself to the policy process, the stages model is successful for the researcher and observer of policymaking. As Smith and Larimer (2017) state, the “stages model is useful for its simplicity and direction. It provides policy researchers with a broad and generalizable outline of the policy process as well as a way of organizing policy research” (p. 29). Policy researchers may specialize in one or another of the stages (such as agenda setting) or relate a particular project to the flow along two or more of the stages (such as how policy selection impacts policy implementation).

The stages framework is frequently criticized for several reasons. First, it seems to assume a rational approach to policymaking, which later theories dispute. Second, the stages framework conceptualizes policymaking as linear, starting with agenda setting and moving in only one direction, needing to complete the cycle of policymaking steps over and over. Finally, the framework is only descriptive, without any causal linkages between the stages. Thus, it has difficulty producing testable hypotheses, which is considered a necessity for a theory. Detractors argue the stages approach is thus of limited usefulness. This critique is undoubtedly accurate, yet, as noted by Smith and Larimer (2017), The stages of

policy framework is “economical, provides an organizing function, is a heuristic, is useful, is reliable, is objective and is powerful both in the sense of guiding the study of policy process and in the effect it has had on the field of public policy” (p. 31). It may not lead to testable hypotheses, in other words, but for students and practitioners of social welfare policy, it is important to comprehend the policy process and to work in the policy world.

It’s important to reiterate that the stages of policy framework has not yet had the kind of history that a “good theory” has—lots of development and testing of its main relationships. Still, everyone doing policy-related research should think about (at least to themselves!) which stage or stages do their research questions emerge from. They can compare them to the literature’s current state and try to choose one of the stages that is lesser studied or is on the verge of becoming more testable. For example, we believe that social work programs should have policy practice skills when they graduate, according to NASW and CSWE guidelines. Still, should we be prioritizing some stages more than others? Do we want to provide more skills in the agenda-setting stage or in the policy formulation stage? Those two stages may require strengths in different skills, so our end purpose needs to reflect where in the process we want graduates to end up. It seems that most educators presume that we are teaching in the policy selection stage—how we influence policy decisions. Course syllabi are full of “how to write a letter to an elected official,” “how to testify,” and “how to lobby/educate/persuade decision-makers”. I think these are absolutely necessary, but it is not something that we have decided in any fully laid out way.

Policy implementation is usually covered in management courses, if it is covered at all. Unfortunately, it isn’t often taught as a “policy practice” skill. In addition, many social work programs teach program evaluation courses and this is part of the policy process cycle. Do we teach the skills to translate evaluation results into policy recommendations beyond a single evaluation setting? That’s not taught in research courses or in the texts we usually see, but shouldn’t it be?

Policy practice and research, along with education on these topics could be much improved with the teaching of appropriate policy formulation theories, which I will continue to explore in future issues. As we can see, we can even take a humble, not very theoretical, framework and use it to ask important questions about our own and others’ research questions. Description is a starting point but is limited in terms of generalizing the findings. Too often “preliminary research” is conducted and then left without follow-up efforts. Think clearly about potential implications of your research before you begin it. What might be different about our levels of knowledge for theory, research methods, practice after you complete the study? Consider the larger context of the policy process and its stages when you begin to conceptualize your research questions. If you apply the stages of policy framework, remember that your work may fit into more than one stage. Policy-making is complex and iterative, so think about your results in different ways. Let’s bring the study of policy and policy practice further along. The more we normalize theory (and frameworks) as starting points, the more powerful our knowledge base becomes and also our ability to shape policy-making..

Introduction to Articles in Volume 2, Issue 3

We have four outstanding articles in this issue. First, Leslie Hodges and Lisa Vogel, in “Too Much, Too Little, or Just Right? Recent Changes to State Child Support Guidelines for Low-Income Noncustodial Parents” provide insight into the setting of noncustodial parents’ child support payments. As they write, “Our findings add to current understanding of how child support agencies and lawmakers attempt to address the financial needs of low-income families through policy and statute.” This work has implications for many of the stages of policy-making, notably policy formulation. Asking the question “Who benefits from different approaches to the issue?” can uncover unstated value positions and greater understanding of policy impacts. This knowledge is helpful when understanding how to engage in policy practice with decision-makers and others.

Second, Lana Pelecijn and Yinthe Feys, with “Stepping out of the Comfort Zone? Challenges, advantages and good practices when conducting academic-practitioner research” brings an example of successful research collaboration between academic researchers and practitioners in Belgium. The issues raised about bridging the many gaps between academia and practice seem universal and so the paper may enhance the research experience for both. “Being forewarned is to be forearmed” as we engage with others’ views and priorities and confront ethical issues discussed by Dr. Pelcijn and Dr. Feys. While this is not a theoretically-based policy paper, it is a valuable contribution to social policy research methodology that I hope will be widely used.

Next, Ashley Palmer, Sarah Narendorf, and Genevieve Graaf provide us an analysis of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act by analyzing the policy design and social justice values of three federal workforce programs for youth. Their work finds many shortcomings in the current programs due to programs being underfunded. Despite a strong value of equity for program participants, adequacy of funding is problematic. In addition, the program design neglects important research on helping youth and young adults’ successful transitions into adulthood. When thinking of where this research might fit into the stages of policy framework, the clearest area of connection is policy formulation and subsequent program design. Having this information at hand can assist policy practitioners to re-create the programs studied to be more effective in their primary goals.

Our last manuscript in this issue is by Vincent Fusaro. In “Operationalizing the salience of race to state social policy: A comparison of approaches with application to TANF” we read about the impact of race on the design and implementation of important social welfare programs, such as the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program. TANF (the successor to AFDC) is frequently stigmatized as a handout to racial minority groups (although more white families receive TANF than any other group), so the impact of ideas about race are important. It is possible to measure the impact of race on policy in several ways. Dr. Fusaro uses several different approaches and finds that most of the measures converge in their results. This means that, researchers have a variety of approaches to using the saliency of race variable that will yield similar results when testing TANF benefits and other issues.

As part of the policy-formulations and selection stages, the results are quite interesting. Seemingly, it may be less important the exact measure of the salience of race in policy formulation than the fact that race is acknowledged and is part of the model being tested. Of course, this may be an artifact of “welfare” policy and may not hold true for medical, social services, mental health, or other kinds of social policy categories. Fortunately, this paper provides a replicable approach for use in other policy arenas. In the USA, the perception of which racial and ethnic groups are using a program is probably an important predictor of program support, so these findings across the spectrum of policies are perfect for comparisons between program types, states, and even between nations.

As with every issue, I wish to thank the authors, reviewers, and Springer staff for all the work they put into making *The Journal of Policy Practice and Research* the success it is becoming. It is these folks behind the scenes that make every issue the delight it is to prepare and read. In a future issue we will see the results of a call for papers providing ideas for the Biden Administration to consider as they contemplate the remainder of his term. I’m looking forward to that! Other special issues are planned, and the usual flow of articles has picked up in the past few months, with many excellent manuscripts being sent for review. I can’t wait to see what comes over the electronic transom next!

Dr. Rick Hoefer.

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