Theory in Social Policy Research: Rationality and Its Discontents

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Welcome to the Last Issue of Volume 2!

As I have in other issues, I present one or more policy-relevant theories to encourage authors to focus their work through the lens of theory (Hoefer, 2021a, b). These articles add to the theoretical scope and relevance by discovering the theories' current strengths and weaknesses, which may have shifted over time.

Rationality and Its Discontents

The theory of rationality is the bedrock of traditional policy process theory, even if it has many critics. Sometimes known as the economic model, the rational actor policy model posits that the reason certain issues are chosen to be acted on, particular policies are selected, and policies change is because it is the most beneficial thing to do. In this sense, “rational” means that humans are self-interested and will choose the course of action that maximizes benefits to them. The focus for anyone using a rational approach is on constructing goals and seeking the most efficient means of achieving those goals. The key element is the assumption that behavior is based on a system of values that is stable and consistent as well as believing that the actor has enough information to make accurate choices to maximize one's goals. As Hoefer (2012) states “to be rational actors, then, means that decision-makers try to efficiently maximize gains and minimize losses as they consistently support their primary values, having all the time and resources desired” (p. 68). The process to follow if using the rational actor theory is as follows:

1. Define the problem;
2. Determine evaluation criteria;
3. Identify alternative policies;

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4. Evaluate the various alternative policies to decide which will attain the most or lose the least in terms of achieving one's desire values;
5. Select the preferred policy; and
6. Implement the preferred policy. (Hoefer, 2012, p. 69)

The rational actor model has been heavily criticized for being unrealistic—decision makers never have unlimited time, resources, or capacity to search for an objectively true best option. The rational actor model is structured to explain individual level behavior, and its application at a system level leaves the door open for many other factors, such as power and bias, to lead to nonoptimal policy choices.

In addition, this model, derived from economics, is seemingly plausible, but it is more prescriptive than descriptive. Adherents believe it is the best way to make decisions, but it does not seem to accurately depict how decisions are actually made. With the emergence of behavioral economics and related disciplines, researchers have shown that cognitive biases and thinking errors prevent people from fulfilling the requirements of being “rational” (see, e.g., Tversky & Kahneman, 1986). Other policy models try to take into account the deficiencies of the rational actor model while trying to be more realistic. Two such linked models are bounded rationality and incrementalism.

Bounded Rationality, Incrementalism, and Satisficing

The problem of not being able to collect all the information needed to make a fully rational decision was addressed by developing the idea of bounded rationality. Bounded rationality relaxes the need for complete information recognizing that humans addressing policy problems run into three areas of limitations. First, policy problems are highly complex and perhaps intractable, thus there may be no way to fully achieve the goal of eliminating them. Second, humans, no matter how intelligent, have limitations on their intellectual capacities for processing and understanding potential solutions. Finally, time limitations prevent using as much time to understand all the components of the situation as might be needed, if even such an understanding is possible.

Decades ago, Lindblom (1959) wrote a tremendously influential article that asserted that the rational approach (or root analysis) in policymaking was impractical due to the tremendous demands for information to develop “best” or optimal solutions. He proposed, instead, an incremental approach to creating policy whereby a small step toward an agreed-upon goal would be taken and then observations made to determine if this step was leading in the correct direction or not. He called this the branch approach, successive limited comparisons, or muddling through. The approach was intended to help policymakers resist the urge to go all in for a solution to intervene in highly complex situations because it was impossible to grasp fully what the results would be. Better, he argued, to approach policy changes from a humbler intellectual position—try something, see what happens, and make additional small shifts as long as these lead closer to the ultimate goal.

One problem with this approach, in a practical sense, is that no end point exists where the process ends, and other topics can be taken up.

A way around this is presented by Simon (1956) who contributed the idea of “satisficing.” This means that decision makers should set up minimum standards for completing their search for solutions. Rather than demanding solutions that are optimal, they then accept the first idea that meets the criteria decided upon and thus seems good enough, or satisfactory. Satisficing thus leads to an end to the decision-making process and for decision makers to move on to the next issue on their agenda.

We can apply these models to a decision that many people are familiar with, that of choosing which college to attend. A rational approach would have the potential student determine clear goals (“I want to attend a school where I can get a high-paying job in my field afterwards,” “I want to move away and ‘experience life’ while having a good time,” and “I don’t want to get into a large amount of debt”). These goals may be contradictory in some ways, but they certainly involve a large number of possible variables that should be examined if the best school is to be located. A typical approach would be to list all the variables on a piece of paper (or spreadsheet) and rate each possible college on all of the variables. Some of the variables could be weighted because they are more important to the final decision. When all the attributes are scored, the answer to the question of which college to attend is answered—select the one that has the best score. Of course, all of the information may be impossible to collect or assess without campus visits to every university, which obviously is a time-consuming and expensive proposition.

Lindblom’s approach to decision-making could entail a similar process but allows for leaving some of the colleges’ variables unrated. The decision process could be shortened by comparing two colleges against each other. The one that is worse could be dropped from further consideration (successive limited comparisons). The student could end up with a shorter list and visit only a few of the more highly ranked options. Given the large number of possible universities that exists, even this bounded search would take a long time and could be expensive. To take the approach even further, the student could select and attend one college for a semester, then attend a second university, and so on, until a degree was awarded. This would entail a truly good college education, although significant costs would be entailed.

In the end, many students end up with a satisficing conclusion to their college search. After determining the minimum standards of acceptability (location, cost, availability of the desired major, etc.), a search for a college that meets the standards is conducted. When one is found, the search is over, and the student can focus on other matters (assuming the college accepts the student!).

All of the approaches presented so far have been criticized for their descriptive nature and the difficulty for researchers to develop testable hypotheses. As the policy studies field has evolved, simple heuristics or frameworks have been left behind in favor of more refined ideas. Thus, with these foundational, yet flawed, ideas about policy making covered, we will turn in future issues to models that are both more recently developed and closer to the notion that theories should produce testable hypotheses and have a body of literature that assesses their accuracy.

Articles in this Issue

Just over a year ago, the people of the USA elected a new President. Soon thereafter, the incumbent implemented a set of actions to deny that he lost the election. The low point (so far) was the insurrection of January 6, when adherents of the 45th President attacked and damaged the Capitol of the country, with fatalities and many injuries being sustained by members of the Capitol police force. The denial of his loss and the destruction of the norms of democracy continue. Few in the Republican Party are willing to disagree publicly, and conflict now is rampant from the national political scene to the local. Still, recent policy shifts such as the bipartisan “Build Back Better” infrastructure bill have provided the Biden administration with large victories despite difficulties.

Before most of this occurred, I envisioned a special issue of this journal to “give advice” to President Joe Biden and other leaders in government regarding social policies to be enacted. These were intended to be short discussions, perhaps involving students with faculty members. Two articles in this issue responded to the challenge of the special issue. (Others are slated for future issues.) The first, by Lisa Mason, examines the vital topic of climate change, climate justice, and social work’s responsibilities in this policy area (that impacts everything else). The second, by Danielle Layton, looks at the topic of school resource officers. She argues that defunding these police officers would increase student safety, if the funds were re-purposed.

The rest of the issue is filled with more traditional manuscripts that have been reviewed for scholarly excellence on some topic related to policy practice and policy research. The first of these is by Adelaide Sandler and Shannon Lane. They explore diverse views of political empowerment, particularly voting, among a particular population, community college students who receive food assistance benefits. Clearly grounded in theory, the paper categorizes the qualitative interviewees around their voting patterns and helps readers grasp how empowerment concerning voting can be better fostered. Understanding who votes, and why (or why not), is important to broaden the base of voting and thus the policy direction of government at all levels.

Emily Douglas and co-authors Marguerite M. Ammerman, Lena Sophia Thompson, and Heather Burner’s paper “Who calls the national Safe Haven Alliance Hotline? Evaluating one element of policy implementation” leapfrogs us to the other end of the policy stage model—from creation to implementation. State hotlines concerning infant relinquishment exist in every state but little research to now has studied them in terms of the types of information hotline callers request or how well their questions are answered. Implementation theory is used to provide a clear pattern of analysis of the data. Although this appears at first light to be only about implementation, the authors point out how the results can provide effective understanding of client/caller issues based on the questions asked. The suggestion to use the questions asked by callers to diagnose issues in the program, is inspired. It also shows how intertwined all aspects of policy creation and implementation are.

The final article in this issue is co-authored by Stacy Elliott, Stacia West, and Amy Castro, who wrote “Rent Burden and Depression Among Mothers: An Analysis of Primary Caregiver Outcomes.” This research makes use of a large-scale dataset (the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Study) to explore the association

between depression and housing cost burden (typically this term references housing costs exceeding 30% of income). Financial stress caused by a heavy housing cost burden impacts health and well-being, making this study an important aspect of designing programs to be both efficient and effective. Because of the care-giving role many women play, help to women is especially important for alleviating future instances of depression which negatively impacts them and those they care for.

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Rick Hoefler, editor.

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