

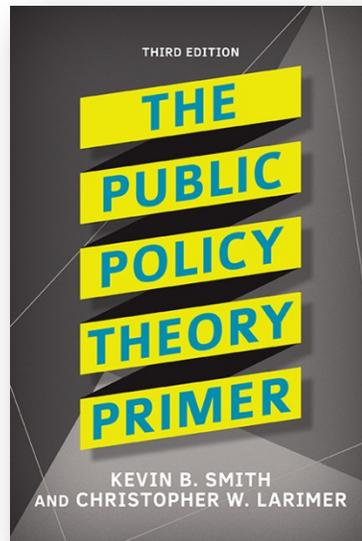


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The Public Policy Theory Primer

Kevin B. Smith and Christopher W. Larimer



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The Public Policy Theory Primer

THIRD EDITION

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PREFACE

The third edition of *The Public Policy Theory Primer* has the same justification and objectives, and almost the same organization, as the first and second editions. Content-wise it differs in description, inference, and conclusion, which is simply a reflection of the fact that policy scholarship is evolving. Indeed, it is precisely because the field of policy studies is constantly updating itself that this new edition of the *Primer* is called for.

Since the publication of the second edition, the work of policy scholars has pushed back the boundaries of what we know, thus necessitating a reconsideration of some important issues discussed in earlier editions. To cite just a few examples: Implementation research is now increasingly being defined by studies of specific program implementation rather than by studies seeking to identify general implementation frameworks. Program evaluation and impact analysis continue to be influenced by developments in behavioral economics—what might be called the “nudge” movement. The effort to integrate positivist methodological approaches and post-positivist conceptual criticisms has moved forward. And an increasing number of scholars are incorporating advances in the psychological underpinning of human decision making into the study of public policy. One measure of all the activity in policy studies since the second edition was published is the inclusion of numerous new citations in the third edition’s references.

In addition to the new scholarship, there are a few other changes from the second edition. In response to reviewer feedback, we have moved the chapter on policy design forward in the table of contents, where it seems to be a more natural fit in the flow of the book. We have also added new figures and tables in several chapters, and have made it a point of emphasis to use more “real-world” examples when revising chapters.

Just as important as the changes, however, is what hasn’t changed. The book remains a projected motivated by the challenges of introducing upper-division undergraduates and beginning graduate students to the field of policy studies.

Advanced survey courses in public policy are a standard curricular component of graduate programs in political science, public administration, and other fields, and similar courses are increasingly being offered to upper-division undergraduates as well. However, the field of public policy is so broad, diffuse, and balkanized that imposing order on it from an instructor's perspective—let alone from a student's perspective—can be a difficult and frustrating undertaking.

In facing this challenge in our own classes, we realized that it involved more than just the logistical and organizational demands of putting together a coherent syllabus. What lay beneath was a fundamental question, perhaps *the* fundamental question, in the field of public policy studies: Does such a field really exist? Comparing syllabi with colleagues, we soon discovered many differences in approaches to introducing students to the study of public policy. These differences range across methodology, epistemology, theory, and specific policy subject matter. They entail variations not just in teaching style but in the substance of what is being taught. In viewing the fractured nature of the field of policy studies, we came to the conclusion that it is not possible to provide a comprehensive and coherent introductory survey of the field until those of us who study public policy come up with a coherent notion of what that field is.

So the book still has two primary aims. The first is to provide an integrationist vision of the field of policy studies. In short, we mount an argument for what is at the core of the study of public policy. Our approach is to define the key research questions in the field and use them to organize policy studies into coherent and related subfields that address those questions. The second aim is to provide a coherent and organized introduction to the field of public policy studies. In this respect, we see our table of contents as a reasonable outline for a generic survey course on public policy.

Our broader academic goal is inseparable from our pedagogical goal, in that the latter is a direct outgrowth of the former. However, we have also tried very hard to ensure that the latter is useful and practical even to those less concerned with the former. In what follows we claim to contribute to, rather than just report on, the professional academic public policy research. We are fully cognizant that our integrationist argument, sustained through two previous editions, will continue to draw skepticism, and perhaps even outright opposition, from some quarters. We expect that, for partisans from the rationalist and post-positivist camps, parts of what follow are worth damning or praising (and that they will not be shy in letting us know which is which). We recognize the scope for disagreement and encourage readers to make up their own minds rather than simply accept or reject our argument. Regardless of the level of agreement or disagreement with our more theoretical goals, however, what springs from our attempt to seriously engage and answer the question “What is the field of policy

studies?” is what we believe to be a coherent and logically organized survey of the field itself. Regardless of one’s conclusions about our integrationist vision of the field, we believe the resulting organizational structure can be practically adopted and adapted to virtually any advanced survey course on public policy.

A book is rarely the product only of the authors acknowledged on the cover; they simply get the credit for what is very much a team effort. Thanks are due to many people for making this book possible. These include our editor, Ada Fung, and all the good folks at Westview Press, who helped translate the idea into reality. We are also grateful to the peer reviewers for their thoughtful feedback and suggestions, including Debra Borie-Holtz (Rutgers University), Francine Romero (University of Texas, San Antonio), Jos C. N. Raadschelders (Ohio State University), Robert Wood (University of North Dakota), and others who wish to remain anonymous.

Kevin Smith would like to thank his family and his students, who continue to teach him that he really doesn’t know as much as he thinks he does. Chris Larimer would like to thank his kids, Drew and Nora; his wife, Danielle; and his parents for their loving support. To his dad and sister-in-law, Ashli: your courage and amazingly upbeat attitudes are inspiring.

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Public Policy as a Concept and a Field (or Fields) of Study

The field of public policy studies is sort of like the Loch Ness Monster: a lot of people believe in it even though no one is really sure it exists. Perhaps this is because the study of public policy is concentrated in no single academic discipline, has no defining research question, is oriented toward no fundamental problem, has no unifying theory or conceptual framework, and employs no unique methods or analytical tools. As the introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy* puts it, the study of public policy is “a mood more than a science, a loosely organized body of precepts and positions rather than a tightly integrated body of systematic knowledge, more art and craft than a genuine ‘science’” (Goodin, Rein, and Moran 2006, 5). Even the field’s best-known scholars can be openly skeptical of its coherence; Ken Meier once described policy research as “65 variables explaining 25 cases” (Meier 2009, 9).

Despite this ambiguity, there is no question that a lot of people *are* studying public policy. Public policy courses are undergraduate curriculum standards in fields such as political science, public administration, and economics. Indeed, prestigious institutions such as Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government and the University of Michigan’s Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy offer graduate programs in policy studies. There are professional societies for the study of public policy (e.g., the Policy Studies Organization, the Society for the Policy Sciences) and entire academic journals devoted to promoting and disseminating the best of academic public policy scholarship (e.g., *Policy Studies Journal*, *Policy Science*, *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*). Outside academia, thousands of professional students of public policy—typically called

policy analysts—are scattered throughout all levels of government, with some agencies (e.g., the Congressional Budget Office, the Government Accountability Office, state-level legislative reference bureaus) focusing almost exclusively on studying public policy. Outside government, there are plenty of think tanks, interest groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and private sector consulting firms producing cost-benefit analyses, program evaluations, decision-making methods, and alternate public policy options on everything from watersheds in Colorado to counterterrorism strategies in the Middle East. And none of this is limited to the United States; studying public policy is a global activity and has been for some time (Blume, Scott, and Pirog 2014, S33).

Is there anything that ties all of this together? Is there some common thread that unites such a varied group of people and activities? In short, is there really such a thing as a distinct and definable field that can be called public policy studies? The primary purpose of this book is to seek an answer to these questions. The goal is not just to provide an overview of how policy is studied and why, or to tour the major conceptual models and methodologies commonly employed in the study of public policy, though we hope to do both in what follows. The real core of the task we have set ourselves is to help readers draw a reasoned conclusion about the nature, and future, of the field of public policy studies.

A central difficulty for the beginning (and often the experienced) student of public policy is gaining just this sort of coherent perspective on and orientation to the field. It is so all-encompassing, in terms of both its potential subject matter and its promiscuous attachments to wildly different academic disciplines, that it seems less a noun (“I study policy”) and more an adjective (“I am a policy economist” or “I am a policy political scientist”). Studying public policy takes so many forms, from so many different perspectives, that stitching its constituents into an overall systematic pattern is an undeniably daunting task. Nonetheless, that is the goal of this book. In what follows, we claim that it is possible to integrate the many strands into a coherent whole and to present a systematic picture of a field that is at least as much a science as it is an art or a craft.

Defining Public Policy

A logical place to begin is to establish what the field is actually studying. That sounds simple enough, but public policy is maddeningly difficult to pin down. Public policy is in one sense like pornography. As US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously commented in his concurring opinion in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964), definitively defining hard-core pornography might be nigh impossible, “but I know it when I see it.” Public policy is like that: an intuitive concept that is difficult to define precisely.

A small academic industry has dedicated itself to defining public policy. Some definitions are broad. Policy is “whatever governments choose to do or not to do” (Dye 1987, 1); “the relationship of a governmental unit to its environment” (Eyestone 1971, 18); or “the actions, objectives, and pronouncements of governments on particular matters, the steps they take (or fail to take) to implement them, and the explanations they give for what happens (or does not happen)” (Wilson 2006, 154). Such definitions are accurate in the sense that they cover pretty much everything that might conceivably be considered public policy, but are so general that they do little to convey any idea of what makes policy studies different from political science, welfare economics, or public administration. They lay down no clear boundary to isolate the intellectual turf of the policy scholar and differentiate it from, say, the political scientist who studies institutions or even voting behavior (what elected governments choose to do or not to do is, after all, ultimately tied to the ballot box).

Other definitions are narrower. James Anderson’s widely used undergraduate textbook, for example, defines policy as a “purposive course of action or inaction undertaken by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern” (1994, 5). This definition implies a distinguishing set of characteristics for public policy. Policy is not random but purposive and goal oriented; public policy is made by public authorities; public policy consists of patterns of actions taken over time; public policy is a product of demand, a government-directed course of action in response to pressure about some perceived problem; public policy can be positive (a deliberately purposive action) or negative (a deliberately purposive decision not to take action). Others seek to extract common characteristics by isolating common elements of broader definitions. Theodoulou (1995, 1–9) used this approach and ended up with a list that overlaps considerably with Anderson’s, but she also added that public policy has distinct purposes: resolving conflict over scarce resources, regulating behavior, motivating collective action, protecting rights, and directing benefits toward the public interest.

Defining public policy by trying to distill a set of characteristics at the core of the underlying concept, as Anderson and Theodoulou have done, is no doubt a useful exercise. However, this sort of approach is vulnerable to the criticism that it simply takes a different route to end up at the same conceptual destination of the more succinct “it’s what government does.” The list of characteristics becomes so long that taken together they still add up to the “everything and nothing” approach captured more succinctly by Dye and Eyestone. A purposive course of action or inaction to address a problem or matter of concern covers a lot of ground.

The bottom line is that there is no precise and universal definition of public policy, nor is it likely such a definition will be conceived in the foreseeable future.

Instead, there is general agreement that public policy includes the process of making choices, the actions associated with operationalizing those choices, and the outputs and outcomes produced by those actions; that what makes public policy “public” is that choices or actions are backed by the coercive powers of the state; and that, at its core, public policy is a response to a perceived problem (Birkland 2014).

Consensus on generalities, though, does not automatically provide conceptual specifics. The lack of agreement on what policy is and thus what policy scholars are actually studying is a key reason why the field is so intellectually fractured. As Bobrow and Dryzek put it, policy studies is “a babel of tongues in which participants talk past rather than to one another” (1987, 4). This is not surprising. If we cannot agree on what we study, it is difficult to talk about it coherently. The fact that we cannot universally define the concept *public policy*, however, does not mean we cannot define the field (or fields) of *policy studies*.

Defining the Field(s) of Public Policy Studies

The lack of a universal definition means students of public policy are free to adopt the definition that makes the most sense for their own purposes without worrying too much that other policy scholars seem to be studying something very different. From this perspective there is not a *field* of public policy studies; there are *fields*—plural—of public policy studies. This plurality is not necessarily a bad thing. For one thing, it frees the study of public policy from the insular intellectual silos that constitute traditional academic disciplines. Policy scholars can easily jump fences, picking whatever disciplinary pasture seems most suited to the issue or question at hand. The policy sciences have been described as “a-disciplinary or trans-disciplinary,” with scholars adopting and adapting theories and methods from multiple fields depending on what works best for the question at hand (Pielke 2004, 216).

Instead of defining a single concept as the core focus of different activities, then, perhaps it is better to define the field (or fields) rather than the core concept. Some may argue that this restates the definitional problem rather than solving it. The field of policy studies, for example, has been defined as “any research that relates to or promotes the public interest” (Palumbo 1981, 8). Such a broad definition makes the field of policy studies as vague and general as the concept of public policy appears to be. Definitions of the “policy sciences”—for our purposes, a synonym for “policy studies”—include the “application of knowledge and rationality to perceived social problems” (Dror 1968, 49) and “an umbrella term describing a broad-gauge intellectual approach applied to the examination of societally critical problems” (deLeon 1988, 219). From the

field-level perspective, then, the study of public policy is about identifying important societal problems that presumably require government action to be effectively addressed, formulating solutions to those problems, and assessing the impact of those solutions on the target problem (deLeon 2006).

Under this general umbrella is a range of subfields that have developed quite independently of each other. These include policy evaluation, policy analysis, and policy process. *Policy evaluation* seeks to systematically assess “the consequences of what governments do and say” (Dubnick and Bardes 1983, 203). Policy evaluation is typically an *ex post* undertaking that uses a wide range of methods to identify and isolate a causal relationship between a policy or a program and an outcome of interest (Mohr 1995). The fundamental question in policy evaluation is empirical: What have we done?

Whereas policy evaluation is largely an empirical exercise, *policy analysis* is more normative. Policy analysis focuses on *ex ante* questions. The most fundamental of these is: What should we do? The object is to determine the best policy for public authorities to adopt to address a given problem or issue of concern (Weimer 2009). The challenge for policy analysis is coming up with some comparative yardstick to measure what is “best.” Efficiency and effectiveness, for example, are both defensible criteria for judging what is, or is not, the best policy to address a particular problem or issue of concern. Yet the most efficient policy is not necessarily the most effective, and vice versa.

If policy evaluation asks questions about what we have done, and policy analysis asks questions about what we should do, *policy process* research is focused on the how and why of policymaking. Those who study policy process are interested in finding out why governments pay attention to some problems and not others (agenda setting), why policy changes or remains stable across time, how individuals and groups affect policy, and where policy comes from.

Imposing organization and order on the field of policy studies through a taxonomy of its constituent subfields such as policy analysis, policy evaluation, and policy process can in one sense lead us back to the definitional dead ends we found when trying to squeeze specificity and clarity out of the underlying concept of public policy. Most of these fields have an intellectual history that mimics the definitional struggles surrounding the concept of public policy. Policy analysis, for example, has been defined as “a means of synthesizing information including research results to produce a format for policy decisions” (Williams 1971, xi) and as “an applied social science discipline which uses multiple methods of inquiry to produce and transform policy-relevant information that may be utilized in political settings to resolve policy problems” (Dunn 1981, ix). Parsing out such definitions leads either to loopholes (shouldn’t the definition say something about who is using the information, and for what purposes? See

Weimer and Vining 2005, 24) or to vacuous generalities (policy analysis covers everything dealing with government decision making).

This approach, however, does provide at least one clear advantage. *By carving the field into broad, multidisciplinary orientations such as policy or program evaluation, policy analysis, and policy process, we are able to identify within each some roughly coherent framework.* If nothing else, this approach clarifies a series of research questions central to the field of public policy studies as a whole: How do public authorities decide what problems or issues to pay attention to? How does government decide what to do about those problems? What values should be used to determine the “best” government response to a particular problem or matter of concern? What do government actions intend to achieve? Have those goals been achieved? If so, to what extent? If not, why not? These questions systematically sort and organize different policy subfields such as policy process (the first two questions), policy analysis (the second two questions), and policy evaluation (the last three questions). And within each of these particular orientations identifiable conceptual frameworks have been either constructed or appropriated to provide systematic answers to the underlying questions. Even accepting the difficulties in defining the concept of public policy, most would agree that these are important questions and finding the answers is important, both to improve the lot of society and to better understand the human condition generally.

Although it is not immediately clear what connects the work of a political scientist studying the formation of policy subsystem coalitions to, say, a program evaluator running randomized field trials on job training programs, those connections definitely exist. For one thing, most (if not all) of the subfields under the policy studies umbrella trace back to a common historical root. There may be fields (plural) of policy studies rather than a field (singular), but the original intent was to till all with a common intellectual plow.

The Policy Sciences:

A Very Short History of the Field of Policy Studies

Though its historical origins can be legitimately debated, most scholars consider the field of public policy studies to be a fairly recent development. Public administration, economics, and political science consider their respective policy orientations to be no more than a century old. Many claim a lineage of less than half of that. Some political scientists attribute systematic policy analysis to the development and adoption of cost-benefit analyses by the federal government (mostly for water projects) in the 1930s (Fuguitt and Wilcox 1999, 1–5). Others trace the roots of policy analysis back no further than the 1960s (Radin 1997).

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Whereas any claim to identify the absolute beginning of the field of public policy studies should be taken with a grain of salt, most histories converge on a roughly common starting point. That starting point is Harold Lasswell, who laid down a grand vision of what he called the “policy sciences” in the middle of the twentieth century. Even though his vision has been at best imperfectly realized, most of the various policy orientations discussed thus far share Lasswell as a common branch in their intellectual family trees.

Lasswell’s view of the policy sciences was in some ways a vision of what political science should become (see Lasswell 1951a, 1956). Yet though he gave political science a central place in the policy sciences, his vision was anything but parochial. The policy sciences were to draw from all the social sciences, law, and other disciplines. The idea of the policy sciences was an outgrowth not just of Lasswell’s academic interests but also of his practical experience in government. He was one of a number of high-profile social scientists who helped government formulate policy during World War II. At the time, Allied governments—particularly the United Kingdom and the United States—drafted experts from a wide range of academic fields to apply their knowledge, with the aim of helping to more effectively prosecute the war. Out of such activities was born a more rigorous and often quantitative approach to studying and making policy decisions. Lasswell was one of these experts drafted into government service. His expertise was in propaganda—he wrote his dissertation on the topic—and during the war he served as the chief of the Experimental Division for the Study of War-Time Communications. This experience helped solidify Lasswell’s idea that a new field should be developed to better connect the knowledge and expertise of the social sciences to the practical world of politics and policymaking.

Lasswell’s vision of the policy sciences, and of the policy scientist, was expanded and refined in a series of publications between the 1940s and his death in 1978. The foundational article, “The Policy Orientation,” was published in an edited volume in 1951. Here Lasswell attempted to lay out the goals, methods, and purposes of the policy sciences. He began with a clear(ish) notion of the concept of public policy, which he viewed generically as “the most important choices made in organized or in private life” (1951b, 5). In his view, then, public policy was the response to the most important choices faced by government. The policy sciences would be the discipline that was developed to clarify and inform those choices and to assess their ultimate impact. Specifically, Lasswell laid out the following distinguishing characteristics of the policy sciences:

- *Problem oriented.* The policy sciences were defined by their focus on the major problems and issues faced by government. This focus was not limited to the actual or predicted outcomes of government programs

or policies. Under the umbrella of important problems were the formation and adoption, as well as the execution and assessment, of particular choices. The key focus of the policy scientist was not a particular stage of policymaking (analysis, evaluation, process) but, rather, an important problem faced by government. (What should we do to best address the problem? How should we do it? How do we know what we've done?)

- *Multidisciplinary.* Lasswell made clear that the policy sciences and political science were not synonymous (1951b, 4). The policy sciences were to cut across all disciplines whose models, methods, and findings could contribute to addressing key problems faced by government.
- *Methodologically sophisticated.* Lasswell recognized that many of the important public policy contributions made by the social sciences during World War II were tied to their methodological sophistication. In his 1951 essay titled “The Policy Orientation,” he specifically mentioned improvements in economic forecasting, psychometrics, and the measurement of attitudes. Advances in these areas helped government make more effective decisions about everything from allocating resources within the war economy to matching individual aptitudes with particular military specialties. Lasswell saw quantitative methods as “amply vindicated” and assumed that any debate would not be about the development and worth of quantitative methods but, rather, about how they could best be applied to particular problems (1951b, 7).
- *Theoretically sophisticated.* If the policy sciences were to help effectively address important problems, they had to understand cause and effect in the real world. Understanding how social, economic, and political systems operated and interacted was absolutely critical if government was going to squarely address problems in those realms. This meant that policy scientists had a critical need for conceptual frameworks with enough explanatory horsepower to clarify how and why things happened in the larger world of human relations. How do institutions shape decision making? How can governments best provide incentives for desirable behaviors? An effective policy science had to be able to credibly answer these sorts of questions, and to do so it would need sophisticated theoretical models.
- *Value oriented.* Importantly, Lasswell did not just call for a development of the policy sciences. He called for development of the policy sciences of *democracy*. In other words, he maintained that the policy sciences had a specific value orientation: their ultimate goal was to maximize democratic values. In Lasswell's words, “the special emphasis is on the policy sciences of democracy, in which the ultimate goal is the realization of human dignity in theory and fact” (1951b, 15).

Overall, Lasswell's vision of the policy sciences was of an applied social science with a roving charge to fill the gap between academically produced knowledge and the real world of politics and problems. The job of the policy scientist was to diagnose the ills of the body politic, understand the causes and implications of those ills, recommend treatment, and evaluate the impact of the treatment. Like a doctor, the policy scientist had to have scientifically grounded training, but would employ that knowledge to serve a larger, value-oriented purpose. Though there was no suggested Hippocratic oath for the policy scientist, his or her expertise was supposed to be harnessed to the greater good and deployed for the public good and the general betterment of humanity.

This, then, was the original vision of the field of policy studies. It was not a field built around a core concept; it did not need a universal definition of public policy to function as an independent discipline. In Lasswell's vision, policy studies (or as he would put it, the policy sciences) was a field analogous to medicine. Within the field were to be numerous subspecialties, not all necessarily tied together within a universal intellectual framework. What was to give the field its focus was its problem orientation. Yet while Lasswell gave policy studies a unifying focus in problem orientation, his vision contained the seeds of its own demise.

The Fracturing of the Policy Sciences

Lasswell's vision of the policy sciences is breathtaking in scope, and many find it an attractive notion of what the field of policy studies *should* be (see Pielke 2004). For good or for ill, though, this vision is not an accurate description of what the field of public policy studies *is*. Why? The short answer is that Lasswell's vision contains too many internal contradictions to support the broader project. He called for the training of a set of specialized experts to play a highly influential role in policymaking. Ceding such influence to technocrats smacks of elitism, not the more egalitarian ethos of democracy. Where does the citizen fit into democratic policymaking? It is difficult to discern in Lasswell's vision much of a role for the citizen at all. The policy scientist as physician for the body politic might produce more effective or efficient policy, might help solve problems, and might even produce policy that is viewed as being in the public interest. However, it is hard to see how this approach is democratic when it assigns the ultimate source of sovereign power—the citizen—to a passive and secondary role (deLeon 1997).

It is also hard to square the values underpinning science with the values that underpin democracy, for the simple reason that science's fundamental values are not particularly democratic. Science values objectivity and believes in an

objective world that is independent of those who observe it. It is oriented toward a world in which disagreements and debates are amenable to empirical analysis. If one set of people hypothesizes that the sun moves around the earth and another group the opposite, careful observation and analysis of the universe that exists independently of either perspective ultimately decides which hypothesis is false. This is because the universe operates in a certain way according to certain laws, and no amount of belief or ideology can make them work differently. It matters not a whit if one believes the sun revolves around the earth; the simple empirical fact of the matter is that the sun does no such thing. The earth-centric worldview is empirically falsified, and no degree of faith or belief will make it otherwise in the eyes of science.

As critics of the Lasswellian project point out, it is not a particularly accurate description of the world of politics. In the political world, perception is everything. Indeed, these critics argue that perception in the social and political world *is* reality; no independent, universal world separate from our own social and mental constructions exists (see Fischer 2003; Majone 1989; Stone 2011). It is exactly one's faith or belief in a particular part of the world that creates political reality. What constitutes a problem, let alone what constitutes the best response, is very much in the eye of the political beholder. Some believe the government should take on the responsibility for ensuring that all citizens have access to adequate health care. Others believe it is not the government's role or responsibility to provide health care; these are services best left to and controlled by the market. What resolves that difference of perspective? Whatever the answer, it is unlikely to be an objective, scientific one. Both sides have access to the same facts, but it is how those facts are filtered through particular belief systems that defines problems and suggests solutions. And indeed, empirical evidence demonstrates that coalitions on both sides of an issue exhibit strong biases in how they process information—forming partnerships with those who share their beliefs, while ignoring and not trusting those with opposing viewpoints (Henry 2011). The answers, in other words, are value based, and those values are held by particular individuals and groups—there is no independent, objective world with the “correct” set of values.

As a method or process of gaining knowledge, science has few equals. Its benefits have contributed enormously to the betterment of humankind and to a deeper understanding of our world. Sciences' epistemological benefits, however, cannot and do not make political decision making any less political. The difficulty of reconciling knowledge with politics, of fitting values into the scientific approaches that have come to dominate the social sciences, has never been resolved. Lasswell argued that facts would be put to the service of democratic

values. He never seemed to fully recognize that facts and values could conflict, let alone that values might in some cases determine “facts.”

These sorts of contradictions fractured and balkanized the field of policy studies from its inception. Lasswell’s vision helped birth a new field, but simultaneously crippled it with logical inconsistencies. As one assessment put it, “Lasswell’s notion of the policy sciences of democracy combined description with prescription to create an oxymoron” (Farr, Hacker, and Kazee 2006, 583). Rather than a coherent field, what emerged from Lasswell’s vision was the range of orientations or subfields already discussed: in other words, policy evaluation studies, policy analysis, and policy process. Each of these picked up and advanced some elements of the policy sciences, but none came close to fulfilling the grander ambitions of Lasswell’s call for a new field.

Across these different perspectives were some discernible commonalities rooted in the larger policy sciences project. The methodological aspects, for example, were enthusiastically embraced and pursued. It is all but impossible, at least in the United States, to study public policy in a sustained fashion without getting a heavy dose of quantitative training. Cost-benefit analysis, risk assessment, operations research, matrix analysis—just about everything in the econometric, statistical, and mathematical tool kit of the social sciences has been adopted and adapted to the study of public policymaking. The jury is out, however, on just how much that has contributed to the study of public policy. The heroic assumptions required to make, say, cost-benefit analysis mathematically tractable (e.g., placing a dollar value on human life) justifiably raise questions about what the end product of all this rigorous quantitative analysis is able to tell us. Critics of the development of technocratic policy studies argue that the most science-oriented aspects of policy research have a spotty historical record. Number-crunching policy scientists wielding complex causal models bombed (sometimes quite literally) in a series of big, broad-scale problems, such as the war in Vietnam, the war on poverty in the 1960s, and the energy crisis of the 1970s (Fischer 2003, 5–11; deLeon 2006, 43–47). Others counter that data-driven, heavily quantitative, science-based policy analysis for at least fifty years has provided an important and highly valued source of information for policymakers and played a critical role in testing and advancing the most important and influential theories of the policy process (Head 2008; Sabatier 2007; Blume, Scott, and Pirog 2014).

Whether one agrees or disagrees with their merits, there is no doubt that the methodological aspects of Lasswell’s vision have been enthusiastically embraced. Other aspects, however, have been largely ignored. Lasswell’s notion of the policy sciences was explicitly normative; it was the policy sciences *of democracy*.

This created an internal tension within all disciplines with a policy orientation, a conflict between those who gave precedence to the values of science and those who gave precedence to the values of democracy (or at least to particular political values). Academics of a scientific bent are inherently suspicious of pursuing explicit normative agendas. Declaring a value-based preference or outcome tends to cast suspicion on a research project. Ideology or partisanship does not require science, and the latter would just as soon do without the former. With notable exceptions, academics have not been overly eager to build political portfolios, because their aim is to further knowledge rather than a particular partisan policy agenda.¹

Those who see their job as shaping policy in the name of the public good, on the other hand, may find themselves less than satisfied with a mathematically and theoretically complex approach to public policy. The technocratic orientation of the policy sciences can be especially frustrating to those with an advocacy bent; the very notion of reducing, say, proposed health-care programs to cost-benefit ratios strikes some as misleading or even ludicrous. From this perspective, the real objective of policy study is not simply the production of knowledge. The more important questions center on values: Do citizens in a given society have a right to universal health care? What is the proper place and influence of minority viewpoints in public policy decision making? How do we know if a policy process, decision, output, or outcome is truly democratic? The answers to such questions will not be found in a regression coefficient generated by a model that assumes an independent, value-free world. To borrow from the second US president John Adams, values, like facts, “are stubborn things.”

Setting aside the problems involved in trying to get objectively grounded epistemologies to deal with normative values, coalescing the various academic policy orientations into the more coherent whole envisioned by Lasswell has also been bested by practical difficulties. Because policy scholars are almost by definition multidisciplinary, it can be difficult to find a definite niche within a particular field. Political scientists who study American politics, for example, tend to study particular institutions (Congress, special interest groups, the media) or particular forms of political behavior or attitudes (voting, opinion). These provide neat subdisciplinary divisions and organize training, curriculum offerings, and, not insignificantly, job descriptions within the academic study of American politics. The problem for policy scholars is that they do not do any one of these things; they do *all* of them, and quite a bit else besides—which tends to give them a jack-of-all-trades, master-of-none reputation (Sabatier 1991b). This in turn gives rise to the widespread view that policy scholars within political science are not pulling their weight, especially in terms of generating theories of how the social, political, and economic worlds work—that, instead, they are

simply piggybacking on the subfield specialties, borrowing liberally whatever bits of conceptual frameworks they find useful, but doing little in the way of reciprocation. As we shall see, this is a central criticism of policy studies generally, one that must be creditably answered if policy studies is to make a supportable claim to be an independent field of study.

The internal inconsistencies in Lasswell's vision of policy sciences, the friction it manifests between science and democratic or other political values, and its failure to generate conceptual or methodological coherence have largely prevented this vision from taking root as an independent academic discipline. The policy sciences are so fragmented and spread out that, even within a relatively small discipline like political science, policy scholars can operate completely independent of each other, not just ignoring each other's work but largely unaware that it even exists. In 2008, some of the biggest names in policy process theory convened a conference at the University of Oklahoma to discuss potential advances in their field. One of the telling comments at that conference came from Chris Weible, who noted that three-quarters of the people in his home department—all doing public policy—did not know anyone in the room (Eller and Krutz 2009). This compartmentalization of policy studies between disciplines was neatly demonstrated in a study by Adams, Infeld, Minnechelli, and Ruddell (2014) analyzing the publishing trends in the two most prestigious academic journals dedicated to general policy studies: the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* (JPAM) and the *Policy Studies Journal* (PSJ). Between the 1980s and today, Adams et al. found that JPAM evolved to become more of an outlet for economists whereas the PSJ became dominated by political scientists. Between 2007 and 2010, roughly a quarter of the articles published in JPAM were written by economists compared to 5 percent by political scientists, while half the articles in the PSJ were written by political scientists and only 3 percent by economists. Even more worrying, policy scholars in political science and economics seem only dimly aware of one another, citing broadly from within their home discipline but rarely from each other. In short, the two leading policy studies journals currently seem to be reflecting two different fields rather than the transdisciplinary project envisioned by Lasswell. Differing disciplinary orientations like those embodied in JPAM and PSJ's publishing trends obviously do not seamlessly fit together, and they make for a poor vessel to hold Lasswell's vision. The gaps in the joints are so large, the policy sciences simply leak away.

Does this mean that we have managed to answer our key question before we have even finished the first chapter? Is there really no such thing as the field of policy studies, just a set of marginally related academic orientations cobbled together out of bits and pieces of different social sciences, each distinguishable only by the sorts of questions it's trying to answer? Not necessarily.

The research questions at the heart of the subdisciplines that make up the field of policy studies are big ones, with large, real-world consequences. We contend in this book that if there is, or ever is going to be, such a thing as a field of policy studies, those important questions have to be pushed to the forefront, and so must the broader conceptual frameworks created to answer them. It is not just core questions, in other words, that define a field. It is some systematic, core gyroscope that serves to orient those searching for the answers. In short, a field—a distinct, defensible, coherent discipline—needs theory. And theory, according to critics and champions of public policy scholarship, is something that policy scholars have done pretty miserably for a very long time.

Why Build When You Can Beg, Borrow, and Steal?

There is no general theoretical framework tying together the study of public policy. So how is it possible to make sense of the complex world of public policy? Sabatier (1999a, 5) argued that there are two basic approaches. The first is to simplify and make sense of complexity ad hoc: simply use what works in a given situation. Use whatever theoretical lens brings focus to a particular issue or question at a particular time and place. Make whatever assumptions seem to make sense, and make up whatever categories bring tractability to the analysis at hand. The second approach is science. This means trying to do in public policy what students of markets have done in economics. Specifically, it means assuming that underlying the highly complex world of public policymaking is a set of causal relationships. Just as assumptions about utility maximization and the law of supply and demand can explain a wide-ranging set of observed behaviors in markets, there are corollaries that explain how and why governments address some problems and not others. If these causal relationships can be identified, presumably they can be linked together logically to build overarching explanations of how the world works. These claims can be tested, the tests can be replicated, and the model can be refined into general propositions that hold across time and space. In other words, generalizable theories can be built.

The problem with these theory-building projects is that generalizability has thus far proven highly elusive; public policy is such a diffuse topic that it is hard to even imagine a single, broad conceptual model that all policy scholars could practically adopt and apply. Frameworks might work for this or that aspect of policy study, but nothing currently or in the foreseeable future provides a conceptual core to the field in the same way that, say, the model of rational utility maximization serves as a universal gyroscope for economics. This can make it difficult to assess the quality of theories in the field of public policy, because the theories are built for different purposes, to answer different questions.

Comparing these theories to decide which is “best” in a scientific sense is all but impossible. As one long-time student of public policy put it, “the scholar seeking the optimal policy theory is essentially handicapping how the New England Patriots would do against Manchester United in Indy car racing” (Meier 2009, 6).

Rather than bemoan this state of affairs, the ad hoc approach embraces it, and indeed, there is good reason to recommend an ad hoc approach to the study of public policy. For one thing, it provides policy scholars with a license to beg, borrow, or steal from the full range of conceptual frameworks developed across the social sciences. It also relieves policy scholars of the pressure to shoehorn conceptual frameworks into an ill-fitting and messy reality. Analytic case studies can provide a wealth of information and detail about a particular policy or process, even if they are ad hoc in the sense that they have no grand conceptual framework proposing causal links to empirically verify. A good example is Pressman and Wildavsky’s (1973) classic study of implementation, which has shaped virtually all of the implementation studies that followed. The big problem here is that ad hoc frameworks have extremely limited value; it is, unsurprisingly, difficult to build cumulative and generalizable knowledge from what are essentially descriptive studies (implementation studies have struggled with this problem). Using the ad hoc approach, policy scholars are destined to be forever reinventing the wheel, finding that what works in one circumstance is trapped there—the causal assumptions hold only for a particular place in a particular slice of time.

Such limitations, coupled with the policy field’s supposed penchant for poaching theories rather than for producing them, have done much to sully the reputation of policy scholarship, especially in fields such as political science. Policy scholars are viewed as theory takers rather than theory makers. They swipe whatever is useful for them but rarely return a greater, more generalizable understanding of the world they study. In the eyes of many, this consigns the field of policy studies—whatever that field may or may not be—to a social science discipline of the second or third rank. It is hard to overstate this point: a central problem, perhaps *the* central problem, of policy studies is its perceived inability to contribute to a more general understanding of the human condition.

This is a long-standing argument that continues to have wide currency and leads to no small amount of hand-wringing among policy scholars. Indeed, flagellating ourselves for our theory—or lack thereof—is a long-standing tradition in policy studies. Public policy “is an intellectual jungle swallowing up with unbounded voracity almost anything, but which it cannot give disciplined—by which I mean theoretically enlightened—attention” (Eulau 1977, 421). The policy studies literature, at least the political science end of it, “is remarkably devoid of theory” (Stone 1988, 3), with policy scholars making, at best, “modest

contributions to developing reasonably clear, and empirically verified theories” (Sabatier 1991a, 145). This inability to provide coherent explanations of how policy is formulated, adopted, implemented, and evaluated leads to policy studies being “regarded by many political scientists, economists and sociologists as second-best research” (Dresang 1983, ix).

Some argue that the attempt to produce generalizable theories of public policy is not only pointless but hopeless. Political scientists seem to have all but given up on trying to construct systematic explanatory frameworks for policy implementation (Saetren 2005 and Hupe 2014; see Chapter 8 for a full discussion of implementation research). Though everyone agrees that implementation is a critical factor in determining policy success or failure, the sheer complexity of the subject seems to defy general explanation. After spending forty years struggling to distill parsimonious, systematic patterns in implementation, political scientists found themselves making little progress from the initial observations of Pressman and Wildavsky’s (1973) classic study. Many political scientists seem content to let the study of implementation return to its origins—numerous case studies, some of them very good, but not adding up to a comprehensive and general understanding of what’s happening and why (deLeon 1999a).

Some scholars of public policy see the general failure of the project to construct “scientific” theories of public policy as a good thing, a hard lesson that has finally been learned. From this perspective, the lack of good theory exposes notions of a positivist “science” of policy theory for what they actually are—that is, Lasswellian pipe dreams. As Deborah Stone put it, the scientific approach to public policy that has occupied the attention of so many social scientists is, in effect, a mission to rescue “public policy from the irrationalities and indignities of politics” (2002, 7). The problem, of course, is that public policy is very political and not particularly scientific, so nobody should be surprised that science isn’t much help in explaining the political world. Rather than pursue the “rationalistic” project (Stone’s term) of building scientific theories, it’s better to recognize the value-laden realities of public policy and embrace normative theories as the gyroscope of policy studies (deLeon 1997; Stone 2002; Fischer 2003; Clemons and McBeth 2008). Normative theories (e.g., discourse theory, social constructivism) may not reveal universal truths—they assume there may not be any to reveal—but they can get us closer to understanding the different perspectives that underlie conflict in public policy arenas. This unabashedly political approach to organizing the study of public policy, argue its advocates, is more illuminating and ultimately more practical than quixotically tilting at scientific windmills.

There is considerable merit to such criticisms of the scientific approach (typically called post-positivist or post-empiricist). Yet as we shall see, it is not

clear that post-positivism can separate itself from the dichotomous choice laid down by Sabatier. Post-positivism may reject science, but it's not clear it can duck charges of being ad hoc. We shall return to this debate in some depth in later chapters. For now let us say that it is our view that much of the criticism of the scientific approach to policy theory is overblown, at least in the sense that it highlights problems unique to policy studies. The general failure of policy studies to produce generalizable theories to explain the world and unify the field is shared by a number of other social science disciplines. Public administration, for example, has long agonized over its lack of intellectual coherence (Frederickson et al. 2012). And political scientists who criticize policy studies for its theoretical failings can in turn be held accountable for throwing stones from glass houses. The last time we checked, our home discipline (both authors are political scientists) had no unifying conceptual framework, an observation that can be verified by a glance through any major political science journal. Policy scholars, as we intend to convincingly demonstrate in what follows, have constructed a remarkable array of conceptual frameworks, some of which have been disseminated within and across social science disciplines and are usefully employed to bring order to the study and understanding of the policy realm.²

Economics is a social science with a central, unifying conceptual framework and a well-developed set of methods to operationalize that framework and test its central claims. Notably, that framework has come to dominate considerable areas of public administration, political science, and policy studies (usually under the rubric of public choice). Such successful, if highly incomplete, colonization of other disciplines demonstrates the power of good theory. Because economic models spring from a largely coherent, general view of how the world works, they are applicable to a wide range of human interaction, even if it does not directly involve the exchange of goods and services.

It is exactly with this sort of operation that policy scholars are supposed to have done such a poor job. Beginning in the next chapter, we intend to make the argument that the study of public policy has actually done a lot more in this area than it is given credit for. For now, however, we freely concede that the field of policy studies has nothing remotely close to a general theory of policy comparable to mainstream models of economics.³ Although it doesn't have *a* theory (singular), we claim that it has produced functional theories (plural) within a wide-ranging set of policy orientations such as policy process, policy evaluation, policy analysis, and policy design. Within each of these orientations are core research questions that have prompted the construction of robust conceptual frameworks that usefully guide the search for answers. Those frameworks can be pragmatically mined by advocates and others who are less interested in theory and more interested in making an impact in the real world of a particular

policy issue. The real question for us is whether these policy orientations constitute a core foundation for a coherent field or are so different in terms of questions, frameworks, and methods that they are best considered as adjuncts to other scholarly enterprises rather than an independent discipline.

Conclusion

Is there such a thing as a field or discipline of public policy studies? There is no doubt a strong claim for answering this question in the negative. After a half-century of trying, policy scholars have yet to produce a general definition of the concept supposedly at the heart of their study, let alone a universal causal theory that incorporates this concept. Public policy has never been defined with a degree of specificity that clearly separates what a public policy scholar is studying from what, say, a political scientist or economist is studying. Indeed, judging by the relevant extant scholarship, coming up with such a definition may be impossible.⁴

Despite the lack of agreement on what public policy scholars are studying, there seems to be no lack of interest in the study of public policy. Graduate programs, academic societies, and professional careers are supposedly dedicated to the specialist field of policy studies. Yet even a cursory inspection of these activities reveals more differences than similarities: different questions, methods used to produce answers, audiences, and purposes. How do we make sense of this? What, if anything, connects all of this activity? Does it really add up to an independent and coherent field of study?

One way to bring the field of public policy into focus is to view it in the plural rather than the singular sense. Within a range of different orientations toward the study of public policy, it is possible to identify a rough and ready coherence. This starts with a central research question (or questions) and a set of associated explanatory frameworks built to guide the systematic search for answers to these questions. An example of how this can be done is provided in Table 1.1, which describes a series of different policy orientations, their representative research questions, and related frameworks.⁵

We can tackle the field(s) of public policy by taking these various orientations on their own merits. The questions they pursue are undoubtedly important, and the frameworks generated to answer them orient research toward conclusions that can have important, real-world consequences. But is it possible to go further than this, to somehow connect these pieces into a larger picture of a coherent field that can take its place as a social science in its own right?

Most policy orientations can be traced to a common root, that of the policy sciences. Lasswell formulated the policy sciences as an independent field of

TABLE 1.1 Fields of Policy Study

<i>Field of Policy Study</i>	<i>Representative Research Questions</i>	<i>Representative Conceptual Frameworks</i>	<i>Methodological Approach and Examples</i>	<i>Representative Disciplines</i>
Policy and politics	Does politics cause policy, or policy cause politics?	Policy typologies Stages heuristic	Quantitative and qualitative classification (typology and taxonomy) Statistical analysis Case studies	Political science
Policy process	Why does government pay attention to some problems and not others? How are policy options formulated? Why does policy change?	Bounded rationality (and extensions) Multiple streams (garbage can models) Punctuated equilibrium Advocacy coalitions Diffusion theory Systems theory	Quantitative	Political science Economics/behavioral economics Psychology
Policy analysis	What should we do? What options exist to address a particular problem? What policy option should be chosen?	Welfare economics/utilitarianism Behavioral economics	Quantitative/formal/qualitative Cost analysis Forecasting Risk assessment Delphi technique	Political science Economics Public administration Policy specific subfields (education, health, etc.)

(continues)

TABLE 1.1 Fields of Policy Study (continued)

<i>Field of Policy Study</i>	<i>Representative Research Questions</i>	<i>Representative Conceptual Frameworks</i>	<i>Methodological Approach and Examples</i>	<i>Representative Disciplines</i>
Policy evaluation	What have we done? What impact did a particular program or policy have?	Program theory Research design frameworks Narrative policy frameworks	Quantitative/qualitative analysis Statistics Expert judgment	Political science Economics Public administration Policy specific subfields (education, health, etc.)
Policy design	How do people perceive problems and policies? How do policies distribute power, and why? Whose values are represented by policy? How does policy socially construct particular groups? Is there common ground to different policy stories and perspectives?	Discourse theory Hermeneutics	Qualitative analysis Text analysis	Political science Philosophy/theory Sociology
Policymakers and policymaking institutions	Who makes policy decisions? How do policymakers decide what to do? Why do they make the decisions they do?	Public choice Incrementalism	Formal theory Quantitative analysis	Political science Economics Public administration
Policy implementation	Why did a policy fail (or succeed)? How was a policy decision translated into action?	Bounded rationality Ad hoc Public management/governance theories	Quantitative analysis Qualitative analysis	Political science Economics Public administration Policy specific subfields

study, but that vision simply collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions. Stitching the various orientations together into a coherent, independent field requires what neither Lasswell nor anyone else thus far has managed to supply: general theories of public policy that are not bounded by space or time. Deservedly or not, public policy scholarship has gained a reputation for doing a poor job of constructing original theories, instead preferring to borrow bits and pieces from others when it proves useful or convenient to do so. In what follows we hope to achieve two primary goals. First, we seek to provide the reader with a guided tour of the particular fields of public policy studies as exemplified in Table 1.1. In particular, we want to illuminate the key research questions and the conceptual frameworks formulated to address them. In doing this we have the explicit aim of countering the oft-made argument that those who study public policy have done little original work in theory. Second, we intend to equip readers with the tools necessary to make up their own minds about the present and future of the field (singular) of policy studies. Within particular orientations to studying public policy, we are fairly confident we can make a case for coherence. But is there any possibility that these orientations can be joined together into a comprehensive picture of an academic discipline? In other words, is there such a thing as a field of public policy studies?

Notes

1. The exceptions, though, are notable. Lasswell is the preeminent example of a policy scientist who moved easily between academia and government. In a more contemporary context, there is a handful of policy scholars whose work and willingness to advocate solutions to particular problems have had an enormous impact on shaping real-world policy. Examples are James Q. Wilson (crime), John Chubb and Terry Moe (education), and Milton Friedman (everything from the best way to staff the US military to creating the basic economic policies of the entire country of Chile). See Pielke (2004) for a broader discussion of the pros and cons of a pure Lasswellian framework of the policy sciences.

2. Most chapters in this book hammer on this theme, so it is not being pursued in-depth here. This contrarian claim, though, can be backed by a few examples (all discussed in-depth elsewhere in the book): policy typologies, punctuated equilibrium, and the advocacy coalition framework. Although there are some notable black holes of theory in the policy world (e.g., implementation), other areas (e.g., policy process) encompass a number of systematic, comprehensive, and empirically testable frameworks. And policy scholars are constantly trying new theoretical lights to illuminate even the black holes. As discussed in Chapter 7, public management scholarship has recently reinvigorated implementation theory.

3. Except, of course, when that model *is* mainstream economics. Public choice, for example, applies the fundamental assumptions of economics (e.g., utility maximization, individual rationality) to the political world. Such approaches have been enormously influential in explaining “why government does what it does” (e.g., Buchanan and Tullock 1962; Niskanen 1971).

4. Over the years a number of our graduate students for whom English is not a native language have pushed us particularly hard to clearly distinguish politics from policy and have mostly been less than satisfied with our answers. Several of these students have stated that in their native languages there is no equivalent word for the concept of policy as it is employed in the political science policy literature.

5. Please note that this is intended to be a descriptive rather than an exhaustive table.

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