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The Why and How of Policy Analysis

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The flurry of activity we term public policy analysis is a recent development within the social sciences. Its "newness" has been characterized by Dwight Waldo as resembling a situation where a young person has found a first job and is now seeking a career. Yet, in its period of relative youth, the study of public policy has achieved a great deal and continues to demonstrate considerable promise. Shaped by events from the Great Depression to campus rebellions of the late 1960s and early 1970s, public policy analysis recently began to provide form and direction to the very disciplines which created it. In the process, it is changing not only the university's curriculum, but the methodology and content of certain disciplines as well as career opportunities for many social scientists. Whether this revolution succeeds and what implications it will have on the study of social, economic, and political behavior are matters for study by those concerned with the intellectual development of the "soft" sciences.

Our concern is to discuss the nature of public policy analysis as a field of inquiry rather than speculating on its future. The questions most central to our investigation are *why* do social scientists and others engage in policy analysis and *how* do they accomplish their respective tasks. We suggest that the motivation for doing policy analysis is linked closely to the methods chosen; that is, knowing "why" can tell us a great deal about "how." However, before considering the variety of public policy analysis we need to answer a more fundamental question: What qualities link the many approaches of policy analysis and blend them into the emerging field which is the subject of this symposium?

Defining Public Policy

While attempting to approach the phenomenon called public policy analysis, we must face the fundamental fact of life that we are dealing with a field lacking any agreed upon substantive core. Put briefly, there is no widely accepted definition of public policy which acts as a common link among policy analysts. For some scholars, public policy is government action while for others it includes stated intentions and symbolic acts of public officials. The debate over a definition for "public policy" could fill a symposium itself. For present purposes, we assume that public policies are government actions or statements, although we acknowledge the lack of a definitive boundary for the field.

What this lack of a clearly defined subject matter has produced is a diversity of endeavors, each taking up the label of policy analysis while in fact being quite distinct from one another. As we shall see below, each of these undertakings is based on a different set of motivations which, in turn, produces unique approaches to the study of public policy. But are these different approaches completely unrelated? Is there nothing which ties them together and justifies their sharing the title "public policy analysis"?

One link is found in the fact that all forms of public policy analysis involve the *application* of *problem-solving techniques* to *questions about government actions and statements*. This broadly defined characteristic is descriptive of elementary analyses as well as the most sophisticated. Furthermore, the definition implies several qualities which are common to most policy analysis efforts.

First, public policy analysis is *applied*. By this we mean the policy analyst uses tools and techniques to extract understanding and meaning from known facts rather than attempt merely to gather individual bits of data or create the basic tools of research and analysis. For example, one can know that U.S. casualties in Vietnam totaled more than 300,000. However, awareness of this fact does not provide meaning to what U.S. policy there entailed; nor does it give us insight into why U.S. forces were in Vietnam or what impact that conflict had on American society.

Those are the tasks of analysts who apply their training to such factual knowledge and develop meaningful insights into questions about the Vietnam conflict. The policy analyst would not become too involved in developing theoretical frameworks for their own sake or participating in other forms of basic research. The stress on application orients the policy analyst to more pragmatic concerns unless it is obvious that basic research will have direct payoffs for the policy-related problem at hand.

The distinction between knowing facts and understanding them is basic to analysis. Engineer Moshe Rubenstein has described analysis as a process by which "known transformation processes" (that is, problem-solving techniques) are applied to information "so as to make transparent the obscure or hidden." Economists know about unemployment, but they understand it through the application of macroeconomic analysis techniques. Sociologists know about family roles, but they understand these interactions through the application of socialization theories and conceptualizations of primary group relations. So it is with public policy analysts who

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undertake the application of certain information-processing techniques in order to understand policies, comprehend their consequences, or explain their existence.

A second common quality of policy analysis implied in our definition is that all forms of such policy studies use *problem-solving techniques*. Like other problem solvers, policy analysts have a standard "bag of tricks" which they carry with them everywhere they go. This inventory of commonly applied techniques and modes of analysis include many economic and political models as well as frameworks derived from theories of management, psychology, and organization development. Taken together, these techniques range from the conservative pluralist to the radical Marxist, with the one point in common that they are all tools useful in attempts to approach public policies as problems to be solved. In addition, policy analysts are not unknown for their creativeness when it comes to developing new models or adapting old ones to new uses. This too reflects the fact that what is primary for the study of public policy is not necessarily adherence to a particular model or approach (although this does happen), but rather the search for problem-solving techniques which are useful for answering the questions facing the analyst.

Finally, public policy analysis deals with *questions about public policies* and not merely with policies as a type of social action. In short, public policy analysis is undertaken not simply for the sake of studying policy, but rather in response to some query which has raised a problem for the analyst. The scope of questions policy analysts deal with is wide, covering topics from the mundane ("How many snowplows should the city purchase?") to the critical ("Should we undertake a preemptive attack on the Soviet Union?"). They encompass questions ranging from the descriptive ("What is Carter's economic policy?") and explanatory ("Why did Congress vote for a tax reduction this year?") to the evaluative ("How successful was Nixon's Vietnamization policy?") and the prescriptive ("Which weapons systems would deliver the most offensive capability for the least cost?"). This variety is perhaps basic to the richness and diversity we see when examining the policy studies field.

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It is obvious that the linkage among policy studies we have described here is a very loose one. In fact, what ties many types of public policy analysis together (that is, application, problem-solving techniques, and a responsiveness to questions about public policies) is probably less important for an understanding of the field as it now stands than the differences which separate the multitude of approaches.

Why Policy Analysts Differ

Among social scientists in general and political scientists in particular, the focus of analysis has traditionally been the institutions and processes of public policymaking rather than public policies themselves. Studies which actually focused on public policies—that is, which regarded them as the primary subject of concern—evolved slowly within the social sciences as reactions to several major developments over the past 50 years. The most important of these forces were the Keynesian Revolution in economics during the 1930s and 1940s, the development of what Harold Lasswell labelled "policy sciences" during and immediately after World War II, the adoption of quantitatively sophisticated budgeting techniques by the federal government during the 1960s, and the impact of the campus rebellions of the late 1960s and early 1970s on academic social science.

The Keynesian Revolution was instrumental in not only justifying public sector intervention in the economy, but also in establishing a "foothold" in government for the first professional analysts of public policy. In the U.S. these economic analysts were eventually institutionalized as the Council of Economic Advisors in an attempt to put specialized advice "at the president's elbow."

The creation of the council in 1946 also drew on the acceptance policy analysts achieved during World War II. Many psychologists, sociologists, and public administrators had been mobilized during the war to put the theories of their respective disciplines to work for the war effort. Some of these research directions in the "policy sciences" continued after the war and became institutionalized in private "think tanks" such as RAND and public sector research and development agencies established in a number of departments.

The work of the policy sciences together with some innovations in private corporate management techniques brought new budgeting approaches to the federal government in the 1960s. The program-planning budgeting process introduced by Robert McNamara to the Department of Defense (and mandated in 1965 for all agencies) shifted the focus of most government organizations from operational and personnel concerns to decisions about agency goals and objectives. Public budgeting, in short, went from the realm of the accountant to that of the policy analyst. A fourth major force producing the current interest in public policy analysis emerged from the turmoil of American university campuses during the 1960s and 1970s. Cries of "irrelevance" and accusations that scholars were serving only the "establishment" led to a renewed interest in the real impact of government policies, particularly from a critical, if not radical, viewpoint.

All of these influences plus various improvements in scientific and rational decision-making techniques led to the adoption of policy analysis in many sectors of public life and for many different reasons. As a direct consequence of these developments the number of individuals calling themselves public policy analysts grew in number, until today we have a diverse and growing corps of social scientists who identify

themselves with the field. But what motivates these individuals? What are they trying to accomplish through public policy analysis?

In 1968, political scientist Austin Ranney provided a partial response to that question when he took note of three fundamental reasons for studying public policy: scientific, professional, and political. For the *scientist*, the search for theoretically rich patterns of public policy adoption and impact was the primary objective. For these analysts, the promise of such work was in the possibility that through the application of "scientific rigor" they might produce explanations and "reliable research findings of general relevance" which can then be used by others for beneficial social purposes. Of all policy analysts, the policy "scientist" comes closest to the prototype of a person involved in "basic research," but perhaps the better analogy is the researcher in medical science whose motivation is enhanced by a desire to solve a health-related problem. It is not merely science for the sake of knowledge alone, but science for the sake of knowledge which can be converted by others into useful social activity.

For Ranney, the *professional* policy analyst would be motivated to take on the task of dealing with public policy in order to improve it. This approach can be described as the "application of scientific findings to the solution of practical problems." Policy improvement is the goal, and the application of expert "policy knowledge" is the means. It is this type of activity which has been advocated by Lasswell and, in more recent years, by Yehezkel Dror. The role played by the professional policy analyst relative to the policy scientists described above would be similar to the relationship between a practicing physician and the medical researcher.

The need for policy analysis professionals has received a great deal of attention in recent years. In fact, "applied" policy research has become a major attribute of government programs at all levels in the United States. This occurred through what Alice Rivlin has termed a "quiet revolution" when policy analysis became "part of the decision process" and the policy analyst an accepted "participant at the decision table." The skills which the professional brings to the public sphere include an understanding of the scientific method, substantive issue knowledge about policy matters such as defense or health care, and knowledge about the policy process from the formulation of policies to their implementation and evaluation.

For the *politically* motivated, the function of policy analysis is to provide a basis for advocating a particular policy position which is perceived as correct and politically warranted. The question of whether such an advocacy role is a valid scholarly undertaking is quite controversial, as is evident from the negative comments of Ranney and others regarding those who undertake policy analysis for political reasons. These critical views are closely linked to the ongoing debate among social scientists concerning the need for analytic objectivity. Nevertheless, as Daniel P. Moynihan has pointed out, in the past the role played by scholars working in the public sector was frequently one of providing justification for the policies of those who sought their advice. Social scientists were often called upon to rationalize a given position, and it is not uncommon today to see policy analysts take on such tasks before committees of Congress or as members of some administrative or legislative staff. So despite the misgivings one might have about policy analysts motivated by political reasons, they have played and will continue to play a major role in the field.

The effective implementation of public policy or any other set of goals given to administrators depends upon the policy analytic capabilities of the administrator.

While Ranney's survey of reasons for undertaking public policy analysis touched upon the major motivations of academics, there were at least two other reasons which he failed to mention but which deserve attention here. For one thing, there is a significant number of individuals involved in the design and application of policy implementation procedures who do policy analysis for *administrative* reasons.

It is taken for granted that those who are called upon to carry out a policy ought to comprehend it. Ideally, they should try to understand the policy, the intent of those who passed it, and the various means available for implementing it. Their objective should be to administer the policy both efficiently and with the greatest effectiveness. To accomplish this, they have become policy analysts.

Administrative theorist Herbert A. Simon has taken this point even further by noting that "administrative processes are decisional processes: They consist in segregating certain elements in the decisions of members of the organization, and establishing regular organizational procedures to select and determine these elements and to communicate them to the members concerned." In other words, the effective implementation of public policy or any other set of goals given to administrators depends upon the policy analytic capabilities of the administrator. Understanding a policy, being able to "break it up" into its component parts, and developing appropriate strategies to achieve desired ends—these are the keys to rationality in administrative decision making. As we shall see, these are also the very capabilities the administrative policy analyst develops.

But there is an even more important reason for getting involved in policy analysis—*personal* reasons. Public policy pervades the lives of citizens from the cradle to the grave and beyond through a variety of rules, regulations, taxes, jobs, and political burdens.

The public sector has an immense influence on all members of the society, amounting at the present time to over 22 percent of the gross national product. But that is merely a superficial indicator of its impact. Public policy towards inflation, recession, and the supply of money affects the daily

decisions of private citizens about their quality of life. Meanwhile, regulatory policies of government affecting health, safety, food, banking, and virtually every facet of life are continuing to multiply. Just the impact of public policy on one's life should be reason enough for concern with public policy.

Another component of personal analysis is the right to make choices between policies and/or politicians. As the tax revolt of 1978 made clear, citizens can and do make choices which affect the direction of public policies, at least on the state and local level. Policy analysis for personal reasons involves acquiring the skills to facilitate these choices.

There are, of course, other motivations which provide the impetus for those who become policy analysts. In addition, it goes without saying that few if any analysts are motivated by only one or another of the reasons given here. While the person driven by the scientific search for a theory of economic or health policy may have just that goal as a primary motivation, it is not too far fetched to believe that he or she is also driven by a personally derived urge to correct some public policy which is adversely affecting some acquaintance or family member. Our point is, however, that behind the work of policy analysts lies some basic reasons for undertaking the type of research they do and the training they go through to acquire skills appropriate to their tasks. The question we now turn to is how these motivations influence what different policy analysts do and, as a consequence, what they must learn if they are to be good at their jobs.

Pedagogical and Methodological Implications

If the scientist has analytic goals different from the professional or politically oriented scholar or the administrator or the average citizen, it follows that what he or she regards as the basic methods of policy analysis will differ. It also follows that training for the scientist in policy analysis will differ substantially from training given each of the other groups.

The approach of the policy analyst as scientist is, of course, the scientific method. Through their method, scientists attempt to achieve the ideal state of being "restrained, dispassionate, conservative," and willing "to suspend belief pending more evidence." Their procedures are based on an effort to develop and test general propositions relevant to their concern for the causes and consequences of public policies. As Thomas Dye has noted, their method and outlook is quite different from those of the policymakers who might use their work. As Dye puts it, the scientific policy analyst concentrates on purely analytic questions while the policymaker seeks practical solutions to specific problems. This difference in goals leads the policymaker to be less patient than the scientist who seeks "verifiable knowledge." In keeping with the canons of scientific research, the analyst strives for methodological elegance and seeks replication of his or her work by colleagues. The goal of the policymaker is a policy option which has a high probability of success. To get this option, the policymaker may even favor "competitive research" which is disconcerting to most scientists. Finally, Dye notes that analysts and policymakers tend to use different languages. The analyst uses the technical jargon of the discipline while the policymaker applies the political language of government. These language differences not only complicate working relationships but clearly reflect their respective goals: explanation for the scientist and intervention for the policymaker.

Obviously, the training of the scientific policy analyst will provide heavy doses of research models and techniques which meet the standards of social science research. Even more important, however, would be the stress on the canons of the scientific method and an emphasis on objectivity and nonprescriptive analysis.

Since the orientation of professionals differs, so will the methods and training applied to their work. They are trained not only to understand and respect the scientist's work, but also to translate it into applicable strategies of policy improvement. In fact, professional policy analysis is strategic by nature and is intentionally designed to overcome some of the obstacles which block any significant relationship between policy analysts and policymakers. Professionals deal frequently with problems of policy choice and are called upon to consider questions such as "Will this policy work?" "Which policy is more likely to produce the optimal results?" "What will this action cost and what will be its payoffs?" In this sense the professional policy analyst is a professional policy advisor who brings an analytic expertise to bear upon given public problems.

The training for professionals differs considerably from that of the scientist. They are given training which carries with it an orientation toward working in and for the political and economic system, not outside or against it. This is what Edith Stokey and Richard Zeckhauser term the "philosophical bias" of their type of policy analysis, a bias which other analysts such as Theodore Lowi and Kenneth Dolbeare criticize as "technocratic." Besides this stress on working within the system, the techniques taught to professional policy analysts include benefit-cost analysis, queuing approaches, linear programming, Markov modeling, and decision anal-

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ysis. They might also bring their expertise to bear on the policymaking process itself. It is this type of study which Dror and Lasswell label "policy sciences" and advocate in many recent publications.

Since political policy analysts are interested in making a convincing presentation of a particular policy position, the methods they use will involve the gathering and presentation of relevant material in a way which will accomplish that task.

Thus they might have to call upon the talents of the scientist and the professional in their research, but in each instance the approach would be quite different. For example, while scientists seek "truth" and supposedly allow the evidence to determine the conclusion, politicos focus their attention on the evidence which will support their position; and if the evidence is otherwise, their effort will be to manipulate or discount it to their advantage. They will utilize the methods and techniques of the professional analyst in a similar fashion, trying to show that a certain choice is best for achieving their ends rather than being concerned with whether it is the most effective or efficient.

The training of the political policy analyst is perhaps the most common and oldest, for it is based on the study of rhetoric and exposition. While such talents and the research methodology identified with them are not taught in policy analysis courses, there is little doubt that political policy analysis, as we have defined it, is part of the curriculum of every secondary and postsecondary institution in the country. In addition, through debate teams and other extracurricular activities, this type of policy analysis is not only taught, but often rewarded. One can also point to the adversary training received by law students—training which often shows up on the floors of legislatures and in other policymaking arenas—as a form of instruction in political policy analysis. Thus, despite its being held in relatively low esteem by many other analysts, political policy analysis plays a large and significant role in our society.

Building upon a foundation of analytic approaches taken mainly from professionals and business administration, administrative policy analysis has become increasingly sophisticated in recent years. The period of program budgeting which began in the 1960s assigned to administrators the task of determining the ends as well as the means of public policy. That is, not only were they responsible for mobilizing the appropriate combination of resources for the effective achievement of policy objectives, but they soon became responsible for suggesting (and as Aaron Wildavsky has indicated, selecting) the best objectives to be achieved.

Current training for most public administrators includes techniques such as operations research, microeconomic analysis, gaming, simulation, and, of course, familiarity with data-processing systems. In short, like their professional counterparts, administrative policy analysts have taken on essentially "strategic" tasks. Where they differ from the professionals is that their focus is on policy implementation and public service delivery, while the professional concentrates on basic policy choices and advising functions.

Personal policy analysis is a bit more difficult to pinpoint. It differs from scientific analysis of public policy in seeking available information and clarification rather than new "truths." Like professional policy analysis, the personal approach makes use of many techniques and whatever knowledge is available; yet the objectives differ substantially. Professionals are technicians who work to solve the problems of their clients. Problems confronting individuals as concerned members of their community are not as "technical" as those with which the professional must contend. Where professionals seek to find and supply appropriate knowledge (which is scientifically credible and technically reliable), citizens seek insight and some comprehension which allows them to understand and reflect upon policy debates.

For scientific analysts it is the unexplained and unpredictable which is at the heart of the problem of public policy.

Nor is the personal approach the same as the political. Political policy analysts study public policy so as to maximize the possibility that the values and priorities they represent will be accepted. What they look for are methods by which to rationalize and obtain the adoption of particular policy positions. But while those undertaking policy analysis for personal reasons may value one policy position over another, their primary objective is to understand the problems policies confront and the value of alternative courses of action being considered. And, obviously, personal policy analysis is not the same as administrative policy analysis, at least not unless the citizen is specifically concerned with the efficiency of policy implementation and is seeking to understand policy execution.

Yet, while personal policy analysis is unlike any of the others we have discussed, it uses bits and pieces of approaches from each. Exactly what specific techniques are used by the concerned citizen and with what degree of sophistication depends on the citizen and his or her knowledge of those techniques. What training is involved? If this form of policy analysis were taken seriously by educational institutions, the training would involve a new form of instruction in civics with a stress on providing students with the tools needed for critical and insightful analyses of public policy rather than the more traditional focus on history, current events, and institutional forms. As we have noted previously, some policy analysis training is given to students through courses in rhetoric where policy relevant topics are discussed. In addition, many policy analytic techniques may be picked up indirectly through business courses and the like. Since there are no specific models or techniques which personal policy analysts ought to learn, their training cannot be specified. There is little doubt, however, that a certain amount of analytic training is needed for the personal policy analyst.

The Problem-Solving Link

Having established that the diversity of policy analysis is rooted in differences in motivation and that how the study of public policy is carried out is related to the reasons behind

each study, we turn now to the question of the common link which binds these various types of policy studies together. What brings these analyses together in a single field and under one label is not a defined subject matter, but rather the fact that each version of policy analysis reviewed here involves the application of problem-solving techniques to public policy problems. In other words, for each analyst public policy is problematic, and it is that quality which provides the link.

Public policies are *problems of contention*, of contending with actions of others, with rules and regulations, and with personal choices.

Scientists, for example, regard policies as *theoretic problems*. That is, scientists view public policy, its causes and consequences, as a challenge to the accumulation of knowledge and the development of a scientifically credible and empirically warrantable theory of that phenomenon. Their object is to predict consistent patterns of public policy with some certainty. For scientific analysts it is the unexplained and unpredictable which is at the heart of the problem of public policy. It is a "gap" in social science knowledge which they seek to fill, and the creation of a credible theory is their primary objective.

For professional analysts—that is, those who seek to apply the scientific approach to public problems—policies are *design problems*. They want to apply the credible theoretic knowledge at their disposal to the improvement of current or future policies. Thus they are often involved in the dissemination of relevant information used to facilitate improved policy choices; even more crucial to some professionals are their attempts at helping reorganize the structures and procedures through which public sector decisions are made. For professionals, the problems of public policy design are twofold: which policies are "best" (that is, optimal for the task at hand); and which policymaking mechanism will result in the selection of the optimal choice from among several alternatives? In either case, the problems they contend with ultimately stress the development and organization of a better policymaking system, one which applies rational and scientifically tested knowledge to the making of public sector decisions.

Political policy analysts consider policy statements and actions as *problems of value maximization*. They seek, for either themselves or others, the adoption and institutionalization of a specific set of priorities. At times, this means seeking changes in current policy priorities; at other times it calls for a defense of the status quo. In this view, public policies pose problems as either objectives to be achieved or barriers to be overcome. In both cases, it is a set of values which the political analyst fights for, and the analysis for this purpose reflects that goal.

Administrative policy analysts face problems of a different sort, for as policy implementors their objective is to carry out the designs and priorities given them by legislators or other key decision makers. While, in practice, these analysts deal with design and value maximization problems their primary focus is on public policies as *problems of application*. Ideally, their objective is to efficiently and effectively carry out the programs of government which have been authorized; to carry these out in accord with the intentions of policymakers; and to enforce relevant sanctions and incentives where necessary. Developing the correct organization and procedures for accomplishing these tasks is at the center of the administrative analyst's concern.

While each of these perspectives on public policy problems are important, they are the concern of relatively few individuals. Of greater importance is the fact that public policies must be "lived with"—that each of millions of citizens must contend with public policy statements and actions on a personal level every day. Thus, public policies are *problems of contention*, of contending with actions of others, with rules and regulations, and with personal choices. Individuals deal with these problems in various ways: obedience to law, evasion of regulations, disobedience to objectionable or irrelevant rules, attempts to change the policy through individual or group efforts, and participating in the political process. Whatever course of action is consciously or unconsciously chosen, all citizens must contend with public policies.

What are the implications of this view of public policy analysis? First, it is evident that the field we call public policy analysis is so diverse that it would be impossible to summarize in any single curriculum, text, symposium, or lecture. Yet, for all its diversity, there is a common definable thread which runs through public policy analysis, namely, its existence as problem-solving applied to policy-relevant problems.□

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