



Methods of Analysis **Policy Analysis**

Stephen Petrina (2021)

Simply stated, policies are value choices among goals for action. They are mechanisms for realizing change but some critics hold that they are by and large for maintaining *status quo*. As goal-directed courses for action, policies serve as guides toward the mitigation of cultural, legal, natural, or social problems. The connotation is “collective public efforts aimed at affecting and protecting the social wellbeing of people” (Adésinà, 2009, p. 38). With due regard for environmental policy, this might also entail the wellbeing of nonhuman creatures and natural things. House and Shull (1988) say the purpose is to make “steering corrections” and adjust as the “weather” requires (p. 2). If forecasting is a way of making clear the array of possible destinations, then policies are ways of holding to chosen courses.

Policy analysis has been integral to policymaking since its early development, marked by Wilson’s (1887) “The Study of Administration.” As he observed and advocated, through the nineteenth century, policy analysis was a subset of the “science of administration” (p. 197). Simultaneously, policy analysis developed as a critical method as it was evident that administrators and policymakers could be overly generous or self-interested in explaining the need and characteristics of their policies. It was increasingly clear through the mid twentieth century that no policies, including economic and military policies, were above critique. Discursive limits of policies— what can and cannot be said— were evident.

“Traditionally, the initial step in policy analysis has been to evaluate the nature of the ‘problem’ which the policy seeks to address” (Suthersanen, 2003, p. 596). For instance, for equity policy analysis, the general problem is the distribution of fairness, justice, and rights (e.g., ‘who gets what?’ or ‘who ought to get what?’) (Guy & McCandless, 2012, pp. 55, 58). The Great Lakes Equity Center (2016, p. 8) recommends four core questions for equity policy analysis: “What is the intent behind this policy? What social constructions does this policy embrace? Who benefits and who does not? What actions will redress the inequities we see in our policy?” To be sure, over the past fifty years, researchers have called educational policies into question for racial inequities, necessitating critical and creative ways of describing the “nature of the problem.”

Traditionally as well, a second step is identification of key stakeholders (e.g., “natural persons, institutions, or legal entities”) (Suthersanen, 2003, p. 596). This step typically assumes a shift from “policy as written” to analysis of “policy as practice,” including the process of policymaking and how policies are experienced. “A policy finds expression through sequences of events,” Shore and Wright (2011) remind us, “it creates new social and semantic spaces, new sets of relations, new political subjects and new webs of meaning” (p. 1). Shore and Wright (2011) criticize the “practitioner approach” to policy analysis and instead outline an “interpretive approach” (pp. 6, 8). Instead of focusing on policymaking, rulemaking, and questions of effects and outcomes of policies, interpretive approaches ask (p. 8): “How do people engage with policy and what do *they* make of it?” “What does policy mean in this context? What work does it do? Whose interests does it promote? What are its social effects? And how does the concept of policy relate to other concepts, norms or institutions within a particular society?”

1. What is Analysis?

- a. Johnson (1933, p. 570): The dictionaries tell us that analysis is the process of separating a thing or a concept into its constituent parts, in order to arrive at the essential or ultimate elements, causes or principles; that it is the tracing of things back to their sources; and that it is designed to clarify and test knowledge. The chemist analyzes a complex substance to determine its precise composition. For the purposes of our discussion I would define scientific analysis as "the process of separating observations, arguments and conclusions into their constituent parts, tracing each part back to its source and testing its validity, for the purpose of clarifying and perfecting knowledge."
- b. Noyes (1940, p. 501): Analysis is the process of breaking down the data into their constituent elements, which thereby become new data. The individual datum at one level becomes analyzed into a compound of unlike data at the next lower level.
- c. Finn (1982, p. 268): the ethical analysis of policies begins by **breaking events down into the constituent parts**, in spite of the fact that some values are global in nature and are incapable of being reduced to parts without distortion.
- d. Montgomery (1987, p. 47): The term *analysis* means the **process of determining the essential features** of a policy and the relations among them, the purpose being to improve the formulation of policy. The qualifier *rational* means that the process of analysis is to be based on logic, rather than on caprice or on cults of religion or personality.

2. What is Policy?

- a. Guthrie (1984, p. 671): A policy is a desired or intended principle of operation. It is pragmatic because it relates means to goals in a consistent manner. A policy may capture past practice, but it is promissory in the sense that it obligates the policymaker to commitments under specified conditions. A policy is distinguished from a program, which is a more highly specified set of actions.... A policy is a goal, but it is more than that. It represents a rule of thought or action that commands the resources and the commitment of the policymaker.
- b. Montgomery (1987, p. 47): By (public) *policy* is to be understood a purposive course of action dealing with matters of public concern in an organized society, the course being sanctioned by public authority.
- c. House & Shull (1988, p. 2): Public policies are elusive and range from decisions to declare war to the way civil servants should interact with the public. What is policy for today may not be in vogue tomorrow. Although it is often confusing, this endless flux is the way our public sector runs. In fact, the purpose of public policy is to make "steering corrections for the ship of state" and to change them as the "weather" requires. In spite of the fact that hundreds of policies are formulated and modified every day, the government remains relatively stable because most policy changes are relatively insignificant compared to the existing institutions and operations they attempt to adjust. Most individual public policies have little direct effect on how the majority of us live. On the other hand, the direct and secondary impact of many individual policies and the combined impact of the multitudinous decisions made by all the public sector decision makers have profound impacts on the way we approach daily living.

- d. Law (2008, p. 26): A ‘policy’ is best described as: ‘a definitive course or method of action selected (as by a government, institution, group or individual) from among alternatives and in the light of given conditions to guide and [usually] determine present or future decisions’ [*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (Merriam Chicago 1971) p. 1754.]. As such a policy is a ‘blueprint’ or guiding principle to bring about a desired state of affairs.
 - e. Adésínà (2009, p. 38): collective public efforts aimed at affecting and protecting the social wellbeing of people.
 - f. Shore & Wright (2011, pp. 1-2): policies are not simply external, generalised or constraining forces, nor are they confined to texts. Rather, they are productive, performative and continually contested. A policy finds expression through sequences of events; it creates new social and semantic spaces, new sets of relations, new political subjects and new webs of meaning. Identifying and analysing these policy worlds is the central aim of this volume. In stating this, we are adamant that the term ‘policy worlds’ does not imply essentialised or bounded entities; rather, we see policies as windows onto political processes in which actors, agents, concepts and technologies interact in different sites, creating or consolidating new rationalities of governance and regimes of knowledge and power.
3. What is Policy Analysis?
- a. Ukeles (1977, p. 223): Policy analysis can be defined as the systematic investigation of alternative policy options and the assembly and integration of the evidence for and against each option. It involves a problem-solving approach, the collection and interpretation of information, and some attempt to predict the consequences of alternative courses of action.
 - b. House & Shull (1988, p. 3): Formulation of public policies that deal with complex and far-reaching issues is normally supported by analysis of the source of the issue, criteria for setting the policy, alternative decisions that might be made, the impact of these decisions, and the institutions and groups affected. This activity is commonly called *policy analysis*, and the people performing the activity are known as *policy analysts*. Ukeles [1977, p. 223] defines policy analysis as "the systematic investigation of alternative policy options and the assembly and integration of the evidence for and against each option." The role of the analyst in this process is not always clear, however.
4. Conventional Procedures in Policy Analysis
- a. Dryzek (1982, pp. 315, 320-321):
 - i. The steps in a piece of advocacy research are therefore:
 1. Choose a client;
 2. Establish the strategic interest of that client;
 3. Identify the policy option(s) that best serve(s) this strategic interest;
 4. Seek evidence and arguments in support of the option(s) identified.
 - ii. both ends-based and means-based arguments are possible. An example of ends-based reasoning is the construction of a society according to principles of justice; for a means-based argument, see how scarce resources should be distributed in an overpopulated world. Policy analysis can be approached in this manner; the steps would be:
 1. Identify a moral framework;

2. Interpret the policy problem at hand in the light of this framework;
 3. Develop a set of principles for the conduct of public policy in this problem area.
- b. May & Cho (1989, p. 210): As policy analysis caught hold in the mid-1960s, critics attacked the weaknesses of the "rational model" and its application.' Many accused policy analysts of:
1. Reducing complex problems to limited parts by restricting the definition of problems or limiting consequences of interest;
 2. Focusing on ends while excluding attention to means and historical context;
 3. Promoting a false sense of value neutrality which masks the inherently normative nature of policy analysis; and,
 4. Embodying an elite model of policy making for which the desires of analysts can be easily substituted for judgments of elected officials.
- ii. Nothing is inherent about the policy analysis framework— problem, objectives, criteria, alternatives, evaluation, recommendation— that leads to the type of policy restriction evidenced by these critics. Despite what these critics suggest, policy analysis is neither an ideology nor a science. It is a logic, or some would label it an argument, that weaves together the results of different "hard" methods and "soft" sensitivities. As such, the above set of criticisms concern the application of the policy analysis framework in balancing various sensitivities, rather than the framework itself.
- c. Suthersanen (2003, p. 596): Traditionally, the initial step in policy analysis has been to evaluate the nature of the 'problem' which the policy seeks to address. This process includes identification of the key stakeholders within the policy area—that is to say, different institutions and interests which have a stake in the operation of policy. Stakeholders can be natural persons, groups or legal entities. Stakeholder analysis also involves the analysis of the policy preferences of each stakeholder and evaluation of the extent of their leverage in influencing policy content.
- d. Coglianesi (2004, p. 386): Merely stating that a problem exists, however, is but the first step in policy analysis. The researcher next defines the problem as precisely as possible, measures the extent of the problem, and identifies trends in the problem. Is the problem getting worse or better? Most importantly, the researcher examines the causes of the problem because knowing the underlying causes will help in identifying solutions. By understanding the problem better, the policy analyst is able to specify criteria by which alternative solutions to the problem can be assessed.
- e. Szostak (2005, p. 862): key steps in policy analysis have been outlined: analysts should evaluate goals in terms of diverse ethical criteria, suggest solutions grounded in multiple theories, evaluate these using multiple methods, and explore the widest possible range of side effects on a "map" of the phenomena of interest to human scientists (this last step may itself require the repetition of previous steps with respect to these side effects).
- f. Shore & Wright (2011, pp. 4-5): This 'practitioner perspective' typically casts policy in terms of 'authoritative instrumentalism' - that is, it assumes that there are 'objective entities' out there called 'policies' that are the result of decisions made by some rational authority (e.g., a government, committee, management board or chief

- executive) and which reorganise bureaucratic action to solve particular 'problems' and produce a 'known' (or desired) outcome. In this conventional account, the work of policy consists of *analysing* the problem and appraising the range of possible responses, *selecting* a response on sound and rational grounds, *implementing* the chosen course of action, evaluating whether the action produced the desired outcome and, in the light of that, *revising* the policy to be more effective in future.
- g. Martens, McNutt, & Rayner (2015, pp. 4-5): A policy mix is rarely created *de nova*, but more often by adding new goals, instruments and settings to existing ones. The successful introduction of new goals, instruments or settings into an existing policy arrangement depends on the fit between the new elements and the logic of the established regime (Howlett and Rayner, 2007). Therefore, the first step in the analysis of policy mixes is to isolate and identify the components that make up a particular mix. We follow the approach developed by Howlett and Cashore (2007), which builds on the familiar distinction between goals, instruments and settings and distinguishes between elements that focus on policy goals and those that focus on policy means (Howlett, 2009; Kern and Howlett, 2009). This approach is displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Policy Component Taxonomy

		Policy Content		
		<i>High-level Abstraction</i>	<i>Program-level Operationalization</i>	<i>Specific On-the-Ground Measures</i>
Policy Focus	<i>Policy Ends or Aims</i>	GOALS What general types of ideas govern policy development?	OBJECTIVES What does policy formally aim to address?	SETTINGS What are the specific on-the-ground requirements of policy?
	<i>Policy Means or Tools</i>	LOGIC What general norms guide implementation preferences?	MECHANISMS What specific types of instruments are utilized?	CALIBRATIONS What are the specific ways in which the instrument is used?

Source: Florian Kern and Michael Howlett (2009).

5.