

How can policy theory have an impact on policymaking? The role of theory-led academic–practitioner discussions

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Abstract

Policymakers and academics often hold different assumptions about the policymaking world based on their different experiences. Academics may enjoy enough distance from the policy process to develop a breadth of knowledge and produce generalisable conclusions across governments, while policymakers/ practitioners such as civil servants may develop in-depth expertise when developing policy for a number of years. In turn, both may learn from each other about how to understand the policymaking world. Academic–practitioner seminars and short training courses can help further that aim. Yet, there is a major barrier to such conversations: academics and practitioners may have their own language to understand policymaking, and a meaningful conversation may require considerable translation. The article explores this topic in four main ways. First, it considers the extent to which academic–practitioner discussions still use simple concepts, such as the policy cycle, rejected by policy scholars in favour of concepts explaining policymaking complexity. Second, it identifies a series of relatively simple key tenets, from policy theories designed to explain complexity, to explore the extent to which modern theories can provide straightforward insights to policy practitioners. Third, it considers how those insights, based largely on what governments do, can be used to recommend what they should do. Fourth, it considers how to engage directly with policymakers to encourage intelligent and reflexive policymaking.

Keywords

academic–practitioner discussions, complexity theory, multi-level governance, policy cycles and stages, policy theory, punctuated equilibrium

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What is the relationship between the academic and the policymaker or practitioner?¹ Do academics merely study the policy process or do they also have an impact on it? These are always important questions to ask, to the extent that they seem timeless. They are also timely in countries, such as the UK, that have begun to link university funding to a particular idea of “impact”, in which we demonstrate the effect of academic research on audiences beyond the university (Flinders, 2013a). Although it is difficult, if not almost impossible, to demonstrate a causal link between particular pieces of research and real world outcomes (John, 2013), this does not stop funding bodies asking academics to try. There is now a financial and prestige-driven incentive for universities to demonstrate impact in a narrow and measurable way.

The impact agenda also provides some impetus for academics to consider alternative, broader ways in which they can express the value of their insights to audiences such as government (Brooks, 2013). Indeed, the aim of this article is to identify the ways in which policy theories can be used to guide general behaviour rather than produce individual examples of impact in particular case studies. This is an equally valid understanding of academic impact, even if it is less measurable. Governments may welcome insights from policy theory and research through forums such as academic–practitioner seminars and policy training seminars to civil servants. In this case, the academic seeks ways to demonstrate that policy theories can have an effect on the way that policy practitioners think about policymaking.

To focus on the general value of policy theory, this article makes an analytical distinction between (a) theories, such as punctuated equilibrium theory and the advocacy coalition framework, designed to provide scientific analysis of policy processes; and (b), policy analysis, designed to be applied more readily to the real world. The distinction is difficult to maintain in practice, but it allows us to put to one side a separate argument about post-war policymaking, in which the role of the policy analyst has diminished over time, following greater competition within government and a diminished sense of optimism regarding the policy analysts’ ability to solve problems through objective scientific analysis (Lerner and Lasswell, 1951; Parsons, 1995: 16–28; Radin, 2000: 15, 34; Howard, 2005: 4; Lasswell, 1970; Cairney, 2012a: 5; John, 1998: 32–33).

This article focuses on the analytically separate process of scientific policy theory development, which is not as devoted, directly, to policy analysis and which has often been one step removed from political practice. The role of the policy scholar has not necessarily diminished within government in the same way. Rather, there is generally a barrier between the academic and practitioner. With policy theory, scholars seek to explain and generalise a complex policy process. While they have developed useful ways to describe and explain policymaking, many of the concepts have been directed at an academic, not practitioner, audience. Applications to the real world are possible, but also more difficult, because policy theory has its own language that is not easily translated to practitioners. This could reflect what Flinders (2013b) describes as a tendency in the social sciences to speak only to each other and disengage from the real world – or Chris Weible (in correspondence) describes as the consequence of developing sophisticated policy science methods and concepts that require intense training to be fully understood. Regardless of the explanation, the problem is the same: unless policy theorists and

practitioners have the motive and opportunity to converse regularly, academics may lack the ability to translate their insights to policymakers, while practitioners may rely on more accessible sources of advice.

The main consequence for academic–practitioner discussions is that practitioners may still rely on concepts that are increasingly rejected by academics. Scholars have shifted their focus from policy cycles and ordered stages towards theories that recognise the messy and unpredictable nature of politics and policymaking. The problem may be that this shift in academic thinking may not be reflected in academic policy advice and the models that governments use to organise policymaking (Cairney, 2012c). Despite recognition by scholars (and, in my experience, civil servants) that policymaking does not operate in discrete stages, there is often still a residual attachment to stages-based policy-making models in policy training seminars and in government itself – largely because the concepts are simple and help give clear, ordered advice about how to act.

New theories and concepts discussed by policy scholars may be more realistic but less amenable to policy advice because they are written for an academic audience, in a way that may require considerable translation. Further, it is tough to sell the idea of messy policymaking, in which it is difficult to link policy outcomes to specific individuals or organisations. This is particularly the case in Westminster systems where practitioners may feel obliged to uphold the idea of accountability to the public via ministers and parliament. This Westminster idea is based on the understanding that power is concentrated at the centre of government, and that a small group of policymakers at the centre can make policy in a series of discrete steps. To challenge this idea empirically is also to challenge its normative value, because centralised power underpins the democratic image of many political systems.

To examine these issues, this article relates my attempts, in a series of steps, to turn abstract policy theory into something useful for practitioners. The first step is to identify a potential disconnect between the starting points for academic–practitioner discussions and policy theories. In the former, we may still use concepts developed to aid policy-making – such as the policy cycle, the ideal of comprehensive rationality and the top-down approach to implementation – because they aid discussion. In the latter, we have generally moved on from these descriptions of the world, to reflect the policy process' complexity and our need for new theories to help explain it. The second is to consider how to make those more realistic, but specialist, scientific concepts as meaningful to practitioners. The article considers the extent to which modern theories can provide straightforward insights to policy practitioners by condensing and articulating its key tenets. The third is to consider how insights from those tenets, based largely on what governments do, can be used to recommend what they should do. This article contrasts how they might be used by a top-down minded government with how they might be used by scholars to recommend action. It focuses in particular on complexity theory as an approach that combines policy theory with practical recommendations. A final step is to consider how we can engage with policymakers to discuss those insights. The article draws on my experience of teaching civil servants in policy training seminars, using these theories to identify complex policymaking systems and encourage reflexivity about how to adapt to, and operate within, them. The article performs a dual role:

explaining the policy process in a straightforward way, and acting as a resource for civil servants engaged in policy training seminars.

The value of old concepts to academic–practitioner discussions

Policymaking concepts, often rejected by academics, may still be used by practitioners, because they represent clear and simple starting points for discussion. Take, for example, the ideal-type of comprehensive rationality in which elected policymakers translate their values into policy in a straightforward manner. They have a clear, coherent and rank-ordered set of policy preferences that organisations carry out in a ‘logical, reasoned and neutral way’ (John, 1998: 33). There are clear-cut and ordered stages to the process – aims are identified, the means to achieve those aims are produced and one is selected – and analysis of the policymaking context is comprehensive. The stages or policy cycles approach is, to some extent, an offshoot of that idea. The suggestion is that stages can be used to organise policymaking; policymakers should divide the process into a series of stages to ensure policy success: identify policymaker aims, identify policies to achieve those aims, select a policy measure, ensure that the selection is legitimised by the population or its legislature, identify the necessary resources, implement and then evaluate the policy (Cairney, 2012a: 6). The notion is simple and the consequent advice to policy practitioners is straightforward: the ideal-type is also an ideal; get as close to it as possible.

This simplicity may extend to individual stages. For example, top-down studies of implementation are based on the simple point that decisions made by policymakers may not be carried out successfully. Instead, we can identify an implementation gap that represents the difference between the expectations of policymakers and the actual policy outcome (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973, 1979; Wildavsky and Majone, 1978; deLeon, 1999: 314–315; Hill and Hupe, 2009: 11; Hood, 1976: 6; Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 197–198; Sabatier, 1986: 23–24; Jordan and Richardson, 1987: 234–241; Birkland, 2005: 191; Cairney, 2009: 357; compare with more bottom-up focused studies and critiques – Barrett and Fudge, 1981; Hjern and Porter, 1981; Hjern, 1982; Lipsky, 1980). The aim is to highlight the conditions that have to be met to get as close to perfect implementation success as possible:

1. The policy’s objectives are clear, consistent and well communicated and understood.
2. The policy will work as intended when implemented.
3. The required resources are committed to the programme.
4. Policy is implemented by skilful and compliant officials.
5. Dependency relationships are minimal.
6. Support from influential groups is maintained.
7. Conditions beyond the control of policymakers do not significantly undermine the process.

This attractiveness of simple concepts presents a dual problem. First, the stages approach may be employed despite its analytical and empirical problems (identified

by, for example, Sabatier, 1986; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Second, it is difficult to describe a more meaningful analytical model, and give advice on how to act, to policy-makers in the same straightforward way.

Consequently, academic–practitioner discussions often start with stages. For many years, the academic approach in many introductory textbooks was to maintain a focus on stages as a way to introduce the discipline and arrange book chapters, and some books (such as Hogwood and Gunn, 1984; Brewer and DeLeon, 1983; Hill, 2005; Wu et al., 2010) are more wedded to the stages format than others (such as Cairney, 2012a; John, 2012; Sabatier, 2007). The practitioner approach, in many cases, is to draw on stages and cycles to present and/or organise their work. For example UK departments such as the Cabinet Office (1999) have maintained versions of this idea, and the Scottish Government’s (2009) *Review of Policymaking* identifies five UK government models of policymaking, all based on the policy cycles theme.

Further, when academics and practitioners get together, the policy cycle is often used to introduce practitioners to policy analysis – even if it is simply to start a debate before seeking more useful or realistic concepts. The most prominent modern example is the *Australian Policy Handbook* (Althaus et al., 2007, is the 4th edition), which promises to provide ‘a particular sequence practitioners can use to comprehend and implement the policy task’ (2007: xi). The *Handbook* provoked some debate in the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* (Everett, 2003; Bridgman and Davis, 2003; Colebatch, 2005; Howard, 2005) and inspired an edited collection which argued that ‘effective participation in the policy process calls for a clear understanding of complexity and ambiguity’ (Colebatch, 2006: paperback cover).

The debate prompted Althaus et al. (2007: xi) to stress that the stages approach was useful as a starting point for working with civil servants. This argument has some merit and, in my experience, an initial focus on cycles with civil servants prompts them to tell you all the ways in which it gets policymaking wrong. In other words, it is clear enough to begin a sensible discussion on how to make policy. However, if this approach is not presented as a description of what really happens, we need something that does.

Modern policy theory has moved on from those concepts

Early discussions of comprehensive rationality produced Simon’s (1947, 1976: xxviii) concept of ‘bounded rationality’ and Lindblom’s (1959, 1979) identification of incrementalism, both of which still underpin much of modern policy scholarship. Lindblom has helped us move on from the idea that comprehensive rationality and stage-based decision making are ideals to aspire to, towards the understanding that they are ideal-types used to describe how policymaking really works – by comparing the ideal-type with a very different reality. Comprehensive rationality is used to explain why policymaking cannot be comprehensively rational, while the stages approach is now often identified to show us why it is difficult or impossible to separate policymaking into stages (Sabatier, 2007: 7; Cairney, 2012a: 6, 41).

Further, our object of study has changed and new approaches have developed to conceptualise that new world (Cairney, 2012a: 42). Modern accounts do not support the

simple idea of top-down decision making pursued by a sole central actor (Cairney, 2012b). Rather, they describe action by many people and organisations within a complex policy process. We have witnessed what Hecló (1978: 94) describes as an end to the ‘clubby days’ of U.S. politics and Jordan (1981: 96–100) links, in countries such as the UK, to a shift from corporatism towards a more fragmented system with many more policy participants. A rise in governmental responsibilities not only mobilised more groups but also stretched the government’s resources, producing its increased reliance on outside advice. This rise in activity from multiple sources, combined with the reduced exclusivity of policy analysis, often caused issues that were once ‘quietly managed by a small group of insiders’ to become ‘controversial and politicized’ (Hecló, 1978: 105).

Further, our focus has shifted from the idea of one policy-making centre to multiple centres or sources of authority; power has dispersed from a single central actor towards many organisations and sources of authority and influence. The policy environment now seems more complex and potentially unstable, populated by more fragmented governments and many participants with different values, perceptions and preferences (Sabatier, 2007: 3–4). Policymaking systems are increasingly described as ‘complex systems’ (Cairney, 2012d).

How do we make modern theories as useful to academic–practitioner discussions?

The academic literature, quite rightly, conceptualises this difference between orderly images of policymaking and the messy and often unpredictable real world. However, this should not necessarily come at the expense of the relationship between academics and those people involved in that real world. It should be possible to translate modern insights and use them as the basis for a meaningful conversation with policy practitioners about how to make policy.

To that end, this section describes some key tenets of public policy studies (Cairney, 2012b, 2012d), in a way that may be more readily understood by a non-academic audience, before the next section considers the extent to which these tenets can provide meaningful advice for policy practitioners.

Bounded rationality and punctuated equilibrium theory. Policymakers can only pay attention to a small number of the issues for which they are responsible. So, they ignore most and promote a few to the top of their agenda. For every issue to which ministers (and senior civil servants) pay attention, they must ignore (say) 99 others. The tendency to focus on that one issue, producing the most potential for major policymaking instability and policy change, draws our attention away from the 99 issues in which we might expect relative stability and continuity (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993/2009).

Bounded rationality and incrementalism. The cognitive ability of policymakers, and their ability to gather information, is limited, and so they tend to rely on trial-and-error strategies when developing policy. Policymakers pursue radical policy change rarely. Rather, they attempt to build on past policies because considerable effort has been

invested in seeking an agreed position among a wide range of interests (Lindblom, 1959, 1979). Top-down policymaking is often politically expensive and a drain on the resources of time-constrained policymakers. Consequently, it does not (or cannot) represent the “normal” policymaking style in most political systems (Richardson et al., 1982: 10).

Policy succession. The size of the state is such that any new policy is likely to be a revision of an old one, often following a degree of policy failure. Policy often represents ‘its own cause’ (Wildavsky, 1980: 62) and new policies are often pursued to address the problems caused by the old (Hogwood and Peters, 1983).

Inheritance before choice. Political parties make a difference but they also inherit massive commitments. Most policy decisions are based on legislation that already exists and most public expenditure is devoted to activities that continue by routine. New governments reject some commitments but accept and deliver most (Rose, 1990).

(Multi-level) governance. There is often no single, central decision maker or decision-making organisation (Rhodes, 1997; Kooiman, 1993). Instead, there are multiple centres of authority and strong central government is increasingly replaced by bargaining government and the type of mutual adjustments associated with incrementalism.

Institutionalism and path dependence. Events and decisions made in the past contributed to the formation of institutions that influence current practices. When commitment to a policy has been established and resources devoted to it, over time it produces ‘increasing returns’ (Pierson, 2000). Institutions may remain stable for long periods of time. They represent the rules that encourage or oblige certain types of policy-making behaviour. They may be formal, as when enshrined in statute, or informal, and often only understood within policy-making organisations (Ostrom, 2007).

Street level bureaucracy. Although legislation is made at the top, it is influenced heavily by the street-level bureaucrats who deliver it. Since they are subject to an immense range of (often unclear) requirements laid down by regulations at the top, they are powerless to implement them all successfully. Instead, they establish routines to satisfy a proportion of central government objectives while preserving a sense of professional autonomy necessary to maintain morale. So, radical policy change at the top may translate into routine decision making at the bottom (Lipsky, 1980).

The advocacy coalition framework. Most policy change is minor, not radical. The most frequent policy changes follow attempts by coalitions of actors to adapt to their policy environments and engage in policy learning. Such policy learning takes place through the lens of deeply held policy beliefs, which effectively place limits on the consideration of new policies. Major changes are less frequent and follow shocks to subsystems – prompted by, for example, the election of a new government or major socioeconomic change, which affect the status of competing coalitions within subsystems (Weible et al., 2009).

The role of ideas. Ideas can undermine policy change if paradigms or monopolies of understanding inhibit new ways of thinking and exclude certain actors, or institutional rules and norms appear to constrain behaviour. Or, new ideas, enshrined in policy solutions used to solve problems, can be used to promote change. These ideas are often transferred from other governments within or across countries (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996, 2000; Rose, 1993, 2005). Change is most notable during policy failures, punctuations or shocks that produce major transformations in the way that policymakers think and act (Cairney, 2012a: 228–232), but this is a rare occurrence compared to the more routine process in which actors reinterpret rules and follow them selectively (2012a: 81–84).

Multiple streams analysis. Radical policy change may happen only when a window of opportunity opens and three independent streams come together. In most cases policy does not change radically if a policy problem does not receive enough attention, an adequate idea or solution is not available and/or policymakers are not receptive to the idea (or they lack the motive and opportunity to do something with it; Kingdon, 1984, 1995; Lieberman, 2002).

The logic of subgovernments and consultation. Regular changes of government do not cause wholesale shifts in policy because most decisions are beyond the reach of elected policymakers such as government ministers. The sheer size of government necessitates breaking policy down into more manageable issues involving a smaller number of knowledgeable participants. Most policy is conducted through small and specialist policy communities that process technical issues at a level of government not particularly visible to the public or parliament, and with minimal ministerial or senior civil service involvement. These arrangements exist because there is a logic to devolving decisions and consulting with certain affected interests. Ministers rely on their officials for information and advice. For specialist issues, those officials rely on specialist organisations. Organisations trade that information or advice, and other resources such as the ability to implement or deliver a large group membership, for access to, and influence within, government (Jordan and Maloney, 1997).

Policy-making systems are complex systems. We can explain policy-related behaviour and outcomes in terms of the whole policy-making system rather than the sum of its parts. Policy-making systems may have the same basic properties as other complex systems that we find when we study a wide range of systems in nature. Most notably, complexity theories identify the ways in which policy-making systems often appear to produce unpredictable outcomes that seem impossible to control. A key term is emergence, which results from the interaction between practitioners and their local environments, in the apparent absence of central government control (Blackman, 2001; Bovaird, 2008: 320; Cairney, 2012a: 124–125; Geyer and Rihani, 2010; Geyer, 2012; Kernick, 2006; Little, 2012; Mitchell, 2009: x; Mitleton-Kelly, 2003: 25–26; Teisman and Klijn, 2008).

How can these insights be used? How would a top-down government proceed?

Many of these tenets help us describe and explain what policymakers actually do rather than what they should do. In fact, different policymakers could arrive at radically different conclusions, about what they should do, from these insights. Put in simple binary terms, they may seek to change that policymaking context, or to work within it.

Taking the example of the UK, and focusing on the aims of elected policymakers, consider the response of a (rather stylized and exaggerated) “Thatcherite” or top-down-minded government to these perceived constraints: remain sceptical about the idea that top-down policymaking is politically expensive; draw up a clear list of policy priorities; reform political and administrative structures, and modes of service delivery, to challenge the idea of multiple centres of authority; reform legislative frameworks governing street-level bureaucrats or choose new organisations to deliver policy; challenge cosy policy community relationships; and so on.

In this context, the immediate value of the literature is that it suggests that top-down interventions produce partial successes or outright failures. For example, the degree of implementation of Thatcherite policies varied markedly (Marsh and Rhodes, 1992) and they contributed to the hollowing out of the state, or a reduction in the ability of central government to control policymaking processes, organisations and outcomes (Rhodes, 1997).

The early literature on the UK Labour government (led by Prime Ministers Tony Blair from 1997–2007 and Gordon Brown from 2007–2010) suggested that it was more able to recognise these constraints to government and more willing to work within them – but only for a short period. Labour’s first response to the issue of governance was the modernisation agenda to address cross-cutting policy issues (such as child poverty, which required cross-departmental cooperation) and to seek policy and policymaking solutions based on trust in other organisations and networks between groups and government. This approach was replaced by a more straightforward top-down style in Labour’s second term of office, following frustration with a lack of progress on joined-up government at the centre. Cross-cutting targets coordinated from No. 10 were transferred to the Treasury and more strongly linked with the control of expenditure (Cairney, 2009: 359; Richards and Smith, 2004: 106).

According to much of the academic analysis, the experience of the Thatcher and Blair governments suggests that governments either fail in their attempts to reshape their environment and/or make decisions that contribute to their lack of central government control.² For example, Bevir and Rhodes (2003: 6) argue that while ‘the British executive can act decisively’ and ‘the centre coordinates and implements policies as intended at least some of the time’, on the whole, ‘to adopt a command operating code builds failure into the design of the policy’ (compare with Marsh, 2008, 2012). This insight seems to be heeded rarely by elected policymakers in the UK, with the exception of devolved governments.³

How would academics recommend that you proceed?

There is often a strong tendency to advise policymakers about how to work within the constraints they identify and warn against thoughtless attempts to change them. This

image of policymaking may represent an important contrast to the idea of comprehensive rationality and early representations of policy cycles, in which we imagine a policymaker much less constrained by his or her policymaking environment. Such negative conclusions do not represent the only advice that we can take from these tenets of public policy studies. However, they reinforce a sense in which the literature has, for decades, provided concepts such as bounded rationality and identified rather limited policymaker power. Indeed, it is interesting to note just how consistent a message we can find, over time, when policy scholars make relatively direct recommendations about policymaking.

For example, Lindblom (1979: 518) used a discussion of bounded rationality to recommend that policymakers be realistic about their aims and ideals, pursuing 'strategic analysis' as a way to get away from 'grossly incomplete analysis' but stopping well short of the ideal of 'synoptic analysis'. He compared the aim of synoptic analysis to the aim of 'flying without mechanical assistance' and described 'impossible feats of synopsis' as 'a bootless, unproductive ideal' (1979: 518) and as a 'futile attempt at superhuman comprehensiveness' (Lindblom, 1959: 88). A better alternative is to accept one's limitations and seek to 'employ in an informed and thoughtful way a variety of simplifying stratagems, like skilfully sequenced trial and error' (1979: 518).

This is a recommendation that still stands up to scrutiny, and conversations with civil servants in policy training seminars suggest that it translates well (although note that bureaucrats face different pressures than elected policymakers and may be open to different ideas). Indeed, it has an intuitive quality, as civil servants have faced the realisation that their ability to research most possibilities is severely limited – and that this ability will diminish in an era of austerity and reduced civil service numbers.

Our aim, in this context, may be to go beyond this intuitive conclusion to explore which short cuts (or heuristics or rules of thumb) they employ and the extent to which they should seek to modify their routines. In other words, we want to know the standard operating procedures of government departments: where are they most likely to seek information and which groups or individuals are they most likely to consult on a regular basis or speak to first when they need advice? This is an area that is difficult to explore, since it requires people to reflect, in a meaningful way, on their ways of working. If they take for granted these ways of working, they may be very difficult to describe, and practitioners may be reluctant to describe them if there is the potential to expose forms of behaviour that may be interpreted differently by outsiders (or simply if it is difficult to describe their routines without straying into the privileged arena of interaction with, and advice to, ministers). However, this is still a key area to pursue, since reduced resources, associated with economic austerity, will oblige civil servants to change their research and consultation practices – involving either a simple reduction in effort consistent with staffing cuts, or new ways to gather information to deal with a new situation.

A second aspect of Lindblom's work that stands the test of time⁴ is the idea of incrementalism as a trial and error strategy:

Making policy is at best a very rough process. Neither social scientists, nor politicians, nor public administrators yet know enough about the social world to avoid repeated error in predicting the consequences of policy moves. A wise policy-maker consequently expects that

his policies will achieve only part of what he hopes and at the same time will produce unanticipated consequences he would have preferred to avoid. If he proceeds through a succession of incremental changes, he avoids serious lasting mistakes. (Lindblom, 1959: 86)

This is an argument that has come full circle in recent years following the increasing attention to complex systems and complexity theory in policy studies, which has both a scholarly and practitioner-advice aspect (Cairney, 2012d). Note the impression it gives about the unpredictability of large political systems and, perhaps, the inability of policy-makers to exert control or for their policies to have the desired effect. Consequently, the policy advice that generally derives from complexity theory – learn from experience, use trial and error, adapt to your environment – is similar to the advice provided by Lindblom (1959: 86; Cairney, 2012a: 128; Quirk, 2007: 369; compare with Little, 2012: 7–8).

In general, complexity theory may represent a rejection of top-down control, in a way that is also reminiscent of a focus on bottom-up policymaking and contemporary discussions of ‘multi-level governance’ (Cairney, 2012a: 37–38). For example, Geyer and Rihani (2010: 7, 32–34) recommend that ‘soft management methods . . . replace the outwardly forceful but practically blunt traditional hierarchical hard management methods’. This may involve giving implementing organisations more freedom to learn from their experience and adapt to their environment (Sanderson, 2009: 708; Haynes, 2008: 326). We can also identify proposals to address the inevitability that policies will produce unintended consequences, and be subject to the effects of action elsewhere. Sanderson (2009: 706) suggests that the implication of complexity is that we do not know exactly how any policy measure will make a difference. Therefore, policymakers should be careful when making an intervention. This suggests a greater use of “‘trial and error’ policymaking’ and learning from pilot projects (2009: 707; see also Sanderson, 2006: 118). Little (2012: 16) suggests that we go further, to accept the inevitability of a degree of error when we design policies, so that we can encourage ways to adapt quickly, rather than merely use the language of failure in retrospect to justify abandoning a policy. Geyer (2012: 32) suggests that we challenge fundamentally the way that governments, such as the UK, have tried to measure and control policy outcomes.

Overall, this focus on complexity may represent a long term trend away from the idea of (a) a single policymaker at the centre of government, able to make important changes to the world with the aid of science and policy analysis; to (b) a range of policymakers in multiple venues seeking to adapt to, and influence, their policy environments using limited information. It may represent a more realistic vision of policy analysis, but it may also be a tougher sell to policymakers and practitioners.

How can these insights be used by academics in discussion with practitioners?

This sort of advice may find a wide audience in the academic world, but not necessarily much attention from practitioners if couched in an esoteric language that takes too long to learn without the promise of a return from such an investment. For example, the broad recommendations developed in the complexity theory literature may be too abstract, including: encourage systemic emergence; encourage co-evolution with the social

ecosystem; and shift from strategic planning to strategic management. Or, many specific points – support the production of new ideas and ways of working in complex systems, encourage subsystems within organisations to communicate with each other, give delivery organisations the freedom to manage – may seem banal to public managers, particularly when compared to a policy cycles approach broken down into discrete stages. Room (2011) makes one of the most notable academic attempts to provide a new toolkit for agile policymakers, arguing that existing approaches are based on a too-simple understanding of the policy environment. Yet, the instructions are still often vague, including ‘map the landscape’ (‘is it stable or turbulent?’) and ‘model the struggle’ (‘what would drive the race in a different direction’).

The best hope for complexity research, and public policy theory more generally, may be to develop such toolkits in cooperation with practitioners such as civil servants, since that interaction can produce a language common to both audiences. This is an approach pursued by UK think tanks such as the Institute for Government, which is staffed partly by former civil servants, and which argues that ‘the development of policy skills . . . needs to be embedded into practice. [Governments need] to ensure that there are continual efforts to develop analytic skills so policymakers can be competent consumers of research, or are able to conduct an organisational analysis, or understand concepts from complexity science like emergence and feedback loops’ (Hallsworth and Rutter, 2011: 30). Hallsworth and Rutter’s (2011: 18) recommendations appear to be grounded in their regular discussions with practitioners, arguing for example that ‘greater awareness of complexity will encourage more informal, inquiring attempts to understand how the policy is being realised – rather than simple performance monitoring’. The report is part of a small series which draws on academic analysis and interactions with practitioners to make recommendations on policymaking (Hallsworth, 2011; Hallsworth et al., 2011).

Crucially, the Institute for Government recognises that practitioners are unlikely to pick up on these recommendations simply because they are written, published and launched. Rather, the aim is to maintain an academic–practitioner link, to allow both to exchange ideas on a regular basis. Regular discussions may not necessarily help develop detailed or universal toolkits, but the interaction may produce new ways of thinking – using the literature’s insights as the way to begin a conversation; to turn abstract concepts into meaningful conclusions.

This is largely my experience of policy training seminars with civil servants. It is the discussions, beginning with limitations of cycles and exploring policy theory alternatives, that make the difference, not the reading materials. Further, while one aim of those discussions is to develop a greater appreciation of complexity, another is to encourage ‘intelligent policymaking’ (Sanderson, 2009). First, civil servants may consider ‘complexity thinking’, which is about recognising their limited ability to gather evidence of, and influence, complex policymaking systems – hence complexity theory’s focus on trial and error, adaptability to changing circumstances and learning, as practitioners update their knowledge constantly through experimentation and evaluation (2009: 706). Second, this approach requires civil servants to use their discretion and initiative, in the absence of a (policy stages–style) blueprint for action to control policy processes and outcomes.

In such cases, we may move from academic-led discussions of complexity to practitioner-centred discussions on reflexivity, to 'reflect on their own practice and assumptions' when thinking about new, messier theories of how the policy process works and how they might deal with 'complexity, ambiguity and indeterminacy' (Quinn, 2013: 6). In broad terms, reflection may be recommended as a way to help civil servants 'become critical thinkers and moral practitioners' (Cunliffe, 2009: 408), particularly when their task is to manage the reduction of public service provision (Broussine and Ahmad, 2013: 19; Knassmüller and Meyer, 2013: 82). This process is described in rather different ways in the broad learning literature, from reflection on an objective reality to reflexivity based on challenging established ways to describe a constructed reality (Mezirow, 1990; Brockbank and McGill, 2007; Edwards et al., 2002; Broussine and Ahmad, 2013: 22). It also differs markedly according to levels of experience and familiarity with organisational routines, from the newcomer to the expert and/ or line manager (Knassmüller and Meyer, 2013: 88–89).

In my experience, reflective learning is about the academic and significantly experienced civil servant working together to make sense of theories and empirical studies, primarily by relating them to lived, professional experience. This often involves reflective learning based on challenging one's assumptions, and habitual or routine ways of working, in three main ways. First, through discussions between policymakers and academics who often hold different assumptions about the policy-making world based on their different experiences. For example, academics may enjoy enough distance from the policy process to develop a breadth of knowledge and produce generalisable conclusions across governments, while policymakers such as civil servants may develop a unique level of in-depth expertise when developing policy for a number of years. Second, through discussions with civil servants' peers who describe different experiences or make sense of them in different ways – often because they come from different policy areas with different frames of reference and ways of working. Third, discussions of economic austerity and government crises, combined with theories of complexity, help challenge the 'certainties and assumptions that traditionally underpinned the work of public servants' (Quinn, 2013: 7).

This takes place in the context of an external policy-making environment in which civil servants have to justify their activities with regard to other 'stories' (Rhodes, 2013: 486), such as the narrative of accountability to the public via ministers and parliament in a Westminster system. These courses also operate alongside a wider learning environment in which practitioners are encouraged to use management techniques to exert a degree of control over their policy-making tasks (or they simply have little time in which to reflect on what they are doing; Broussine and Ahmad, 2013: 23). In that context, critical reflection is crucial, to think through the contradictions involved when civil servants accept that policy-making systems are difficult (or impossible) to control but often have to operate on the assumption that they are in control. We may not be able to produce a toolkit or blueprint for action to address this disconnect. However, the broader understanding of the issues, provided by policy scholarship, may help build the confidence of practitioners to address them – particularly when they learn from the literature that the issues they face are universal, rather than a consequence of the pathologies of particular political systems.

Conclusion

The article discusses how, in series of steps, to turn state of the art policy theories, designed to produce a scientific account of policymaking (and often with no direct, real world applications) into a language that policymakers can understand without academic training, and academics can use in discussions with policymakers to influence how they think about policymaking. These theories have developed because our object of study has changed remarkably since the clubby days of politics, and modern policy theories try to describe and explain complex policy-making systems. This is a scientific enterprise that has its own language and set of assumptions. This language may not be shared by practitioners, who develop their own perspectives and/or rely on scholarly concepts that have generally been rejected by policy scholars. Consequently, academics with a policy theory background can often struggle to engage with policy practitioners on the subject of good policymaking in a way that both can understand. In that context, the article simplifies a series of tenets of modern public policy studies, to use to provide advice to policymakers.

One potential problem is that the insights from policy studies can produce very different lessons. For example, academics may use them to warn policymakers about ignoring the constraints in which they operate – relating to the cognitive abilities and time available to policymakers, their inherited commitments, and the multi-level and complex system in which they operate. Alternatively, elected top-down governments may be tempted to use them to guide their attempts to do better next time and seek to change their policy-making context. In such cases, the value of academic analysis is to identify the problematic outcomes from attempts to do just that. One key lesson from policy studies is that policymaking is, to a considerable degree, outwith the control of policymakers.

An unelected and more permanent government audience, such as civil servants, may be more receptive to academic advice, as long as discussions are conducted in an environment conducive to the exchange of ideas. I have had generally good experiences when engaged with civil servants and other practitioners in Chatham house –style seminars (which protect the anonymity of participants) or dedicated policy training seminars. However, practitioners are relatively guarded when on duty and more likely to refer to a Westminster model of the policy system and their place within it – partly because they must find ways to reinforce that narrative to the public.

If this is a representative experience in the UK, we are identifying a very long-term type of influence in which we engage in a rather broad way with civil servants in non-threatening atmospheres and accept our status as outsiders in the day-to-day life of policymaking. The impact of these exchanges is not, despite the requirement of UK funding bodies, immediate or easily measured. However, academic–practitioner seminars and policy training workshops provide a bridge between the longer term influence provided by postgraduate training and the more direct and measurable impact on day-to-day decision making. Used in the right way, policy studies provide a rich source of evidence, explanations and pragmatic advice.

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Notes

1. "Policymaker" and "practitioner" are used interchangeably, to reflect the different ways in which groups such as civil servants may perceive themselves.
2. According to this narrative, examples include (during the Thatcher era) privatization; contracting-out; the use of quangos to remove delivery functions from local authorities; quasi-markets in the National Health Service; separated policy and management functions in the civil service (producing service delivery fragmentation, reduced communication between senior and junior levels of government and obscuring accountability); and (during the Blair era) devolving power to UK territories and English regions; granting independence to the Bank of England; extending the influence of the EU through the social chapter; furthering quasi-markets in health; relying more on political advisers than civil servants/groups involved in implementation; and further fragmenting service delivery with an emphasis on voluntary sector provision of public services (see Rhodes, 1994, 1997; Richards and Smith, 2004; Cairney, 2009: 359).
3. 'Successive Scottish Governments have appeared to be much more open to this sort of advice (or, at least, they have engaged in behaviour consistent with it)' (Cairney, 2012c: 10).
4. Unless we focus on the androcentric language.

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