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Coronavirus policy in the UK: assessing evidence-informed policy analysis in real time

Abstract. In March 2020, the coronavirus prompted policy change in the UK at a speed and scale only seen during wartime. Throughout, UK ministers emphasised their reliance on science and expertise to make the right choices at the right time, while their critics argued that ministers ignored key evidence and acted too little too late. Lessons from this debate should have a positive effect on future action, but only if based on a systematic analysis of policymaking as the problem emerged in real time (*we should not confuse hindsight with foresight*). To that end, I combine insights from policy analysis guides, policy theories, and critical policy analysis to assess and widen this debate. I use the classic 5-step policy analysis structure - define the problem, identify solutions, identify trade-offs, predict and compare, and recommend choices - to identify the politics of policymaking. What appears to be a simple problem and process actually exposes the need to act despite high ambiguity and uncertainty, using trial-and-error strategies to adapt to new manifestations of the problem, and producing highly unequal consequences for social groups. Lessons for the future will only have value if we take these policymaking dynamics and unequal socioeconomic effects into account.

Introduction: how should we characterise the UK government response?

On the 23rd March 2020, the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson declared: ‘From this evening I must give the British people a very simple instruction – you must stay at home’ (Johnson, 2020a). He announced measures to help limit the spread of coronavirus, including *police powers to support public health*, such as to disperse gatherings of more than two people (unless they live together), close events and shops, and limit outdoor exercise to once per day (at a distance of two metres from others). These new actions add to *budgetary measures* to subsidise businesses and workers during their economic inactivity, change social security rules, facilitate mortgage holidays and prohibit evictions for unpaid rent, the *almost-complete closure* of schools, colleges, Universities, and airports, *new regulations* on behaviour, including on mental health-related detention and at-home abortion, and the *major expansion of healthcare capacity* via investment in vaccination research and intensive care technology and a consolidation of national, private, and new health service capacity. Overall, the coronavirus prompted policy change, towards state intervention, at a speed and magnitude that seemed unimaginable before 2020.

Yet, many have criticised the UK government’s response as *slow and insufficient*. Criticisms include that UK ministers and their advisors did not: take the coronavirus seriously enough in relation to existing evidence (when its devastating effect was increasingly apparent in China in January and Italy from February); act as quickly as some countries to test for infection to limit its spread, introduce measures to close schools and businesses, and regulate social behaviour (such as South Korea); or introduce strict-enough measures to stop people coming into contact with each other in streets, parks, and public transport. They blame UK ministers for pursuing a mitigation strategy, based on reducing the impact of the virus until the population developed ‘herd immunity’, rather than a suppression strategy to contain its spread before a vaccination could be developed (e.g. Sridhar, 2020).

In contrast, scientific advisers to UK ministers have emphasised the need to gather evidence continuously to model the epidemic and identify key points at which to intervene, to reduce the size of the peak of population illness *and* manage the spread of the virus over the longer term (e.g. Vallance on Sky News, 2020). Throughout, they emphasised the need for individual behavioural change (hand washing and social distancing, such as by keeping a minimum two-metre distance from each other), supplemented by government action when required, in a liberal democracy in which direct imposition is unusual and, according to UK ministers, unsustainable in the long term (Johnson, 2020b; see also Vallance, 2020 describing initial measures as ‘actually quite extreme’). In each case, the UK government and its critics are relying on different beliefs or assumptions about the nature of the policy problem and the ability of a central government to solve it.

To some extent, we can relate these debates to the general limits to policymaking identified in policy studies (summarised in Cairney, 2016; 2020a; Cairney et al, 2019). First, *policymakers must ignore almost all evidence*. The amount of policy relevant information is infinite, and capacity is finite. So, individuals and governments need ways to filter out almost all of it. Individuals combine cognition and emotion to help them make choices efficiently, and governments have equivalent rules to prioritise only some information. They include: define a problem and a feasible response, seek information that is available, understandable, and actionable, and identify credible sources of information and advice (such as from specific experts). Second, *policymakers have a limited understanding, and even less control, of their policymaking environments*. No single centre of government has the power to control policy outcomes. Rather, there are many policymakers and influencers spread across a political system, and most choices in government are made in subsystems, with their own rules and networks, over which ministers have limited knowledge and influence. Further, the social and economic context, and events such as an epidemic, often appear to be largely out of their control. Third, even though they lack full knowledge and control, *governments must still make choices*, and their choices produce unequal impacts on different social groups.

However, to make more sense of current developments in the UK, we need to understand how UK policymakers *address* these limitations in practice, to see events through their eyes, reflect on external criticism about the relative speed and scale of the government’s response, and widen the scope of debate. A theory-informed and real-time account of the policy problem, and the government’s response, helps us avoid the kinds of hindsight bias that downplay uncertainty and encourage after-the-fact wisdom. We want governments to learn from crises, such as the coronavirus, in a way that could actually help them in the future, which requires us to identify the uncertain, contested, and political context they face at the time of action (see Dunlop, 2017) and the unequal consequences of their choices.

To that end, I combine insights from policy analysis guides, policy theories, and critical policy analysis to analyse the UK government’s initial coronavirus policy. I use the lens of common (5-step) ways to structure policy analysis advice: define the problem, identify solutions, identify trade-offs between each solution, predict and compare their effects, and recommend or make choices. I do not use these steps to suggest that there can be a ‘rational’ or straightforward way to *make* government policy. On the contrary, I use them (1) *explain* policymaking by categorising the limits to modern government in a complex policymaking environment where policy problems are contested, and (2) *highlight political choices*, which have profoundly unequal effects on the population, but are often hidden by the language of

ministers more-or-less guided by science. I use this lens to identify (a) the policy instruments adopted by the UK government, and (b) the ways in which ministers and expert advisors have defended them in the public record, primarily via verbatim transcripts of TV press conferences and radio interviews (right now, there is no feasible or defensible way to conduct elite interviews). This approach helps to assess criticism of UK government policymaking and hold ministers to account in a more meaningful way than current trials by social media. Ministerial responses may be deficient in important ways, but we need careful and systematic analysis to help us separate well-informed criticism from a rush to judgement.

Three ways to assess the use of evidence-informed policy advice

Policy analysis comes with guidebooks that look simple and technical, only to be revealed as highly complex and political. These guides help us understand what analysts and policymakers need to do (their *functional requirement*), while policy theories help us gauge their ability to do it (their *actual capacity*), and critical policy analysis helps reveal the contested nature of expert and advisor-informed policy choices (their *unequal impact*). Overall, these approaches can underpin a framework to assess the ways in which the UK government has used evidence selectively to analyse coronavirus-related policy problems, modified its approach continuously to reflect new information and political pressures, and exercised power to propose solutions with profoundly unequal consequences on the UK population.

Policy analysis texts recommend pragmatic ways to ‘do’ policy analysis, based on the simplified assumption that one person or organisation conducts all steps:

1. Define a policy problem identified by your client.
2. Gather evidence efficiently to identify technically and politically feasible solutions.
3. Use value-based criteria and political goals to compare solutions.
4. Predict the outcome of each solution.
5. Make a concise recommendation to your client (Bardach and Patashnik, 2020; Meltzer and Schwartz, 2019; Mintrom, 2012; Weimer and Vining, 2017; Dunn, 2017 also recommends monitoring and evaluating choices).

This advice reflects a useful contemporary story about policy analysis: it once resembled a club with a small number of analysts inside government giving technical advice about policy, but now there are many analysts inside and outside of government, competing to define policy problems and assign value to their evidence and solutions (Radin, 2019; Brans et al, 2017). As such, the role of policy analysis is best seen as a series of styles that vary markedly by context (Hassenteufel and Zittoun, 2017), or a collection of activities that include research, policy design, argumentation, strategic advice, consultation, and mediation between political actors (Mayer et al, 2013: 43-50). In that context, Enserink et al (2013) compare ideal-type ‘rational’ policy analysis with analysis in the real world of uncertainty and complexity (Table 1).

Table 1: Policy analysis in the ‘rational’ and real worlds

	The old story of ‘rational’ policy analysis	New policy analysis for the real world
Number of actors	Centralised process with few actors inside government	Multi-centric process, with many policymakers and influencers, inside and outside government

Role of knowledge	Translating science into policy	A competition to frame issues and assess policy-relevant knowledge
Finding solutions	An 'optimal' solution from one perspective	A negotiated solution based on many perspectives (in which optimality is contested)
Relevant skills	Analysing a policy problem and solution with one metric (e.g. cost benefit analysis)	Developing new skills including stakeholder analysis, network management, collaboration, mediation or conflict resolution

Source: adapted from text in Enserink et al (2013: 17-34).

Yet, this story does not go far enough to explain (1) policymaking constraints associated with bounded rationality and complexity and (2) the contested nature of analysis.

First, policy theories draw on studies of cognition and psychology to explain why policymakers must find ways to ignore most evidence, since there is an almost infinite amount of information and a finite ability to process it (Baumgartner, 2017). They use two cognitive shortcuts, often described provocatively as 'rational' (such as using well-established rules to identify high quality sources of information) and 'irrational' (such as using gut instinct, emotion, and beliefs) (Cairney and Kwiatkowski, 2017). These shortcuts help explain the relationship between policymakers and the analysts and experts on whom they rely. Policymakers define a problem and a feasible response, seek information that is available, understandable (*in relation to their own current knowledge*), and actionable, and identify credible sources of advice. Their choice of experts relates strongly to the ways in which they frame the problem, and the priority they set for each frame. For example, they rely primarily on epidemiologists if concerned about the spread of disease, economists if concerned about an epidemic's impact on the economy, and others (perhaps including legal experts and behavioral scientists) if their focus is on how to coerce or encourage behavioral change. Further, their willingness and ability to listen to, understand, and act on the advice by scientific experts depends strongly on their current beliefs about acceptable policies and their desire to avoid blame for the problem or reputational damage in relation to their choices (Boin et al, 2009).

These dynamics take place in a policymaking environment in which no single 'centre' has the power to turn advice into outcomes (Cairney et al, 2019). There are many policymakers and influencers spread across a political system, and most public policy is made or delivered in many venues, with their own rules and networks, over which senior elected policymakers have limited knowledge and influence. The social and economic context, and events, are also largely out of their control. This context helps explain a tendency to engage in trial-and-error policymaking, particularly during periods of crisis in which the problem changes as policy progresses. It is characterized by a continuous process of adaptation: acting on advice despite high uncertainty about the current state of the problem and the likely impact of policy, gathering more information, and reflecting continuously on new events and policy impacts. For example, this advice may come from epidemiological models used to predict the spread and impact of disease, information from the experiences of other countries, economic data, and a wide range of other policy-relevant information, such as measures of the disproportionate impact of any policy on different social groups. Further, the coronavirus presents an extreme example of a problem with cross-cutting effects, prompting the UK government to change policy in multiple sectors, with no ability to predict the overall impact. Such problems prompt governments to

adapt continuously to respond to uncertainty about the impact of their solutions. This process takes place in a Westminster system in which ministers are trying to project a sense of central control and maintain an image of governing competence, prompting ministers to describe step-by-step, science-informed policy, and their critics to describe U-turns.

Second, insights from critical policy analysis helps us identify the contested nature of all steps in policy analysis. Policy actors exercise power and compete with others to determine: how to define problems in a way that assigns blame to some and support to others (Bacchi, 2009); whose evidence counts when defining problems, producing solutions, and predicting their unequal impact (Smith, 2012; Doucet, 2019); who should interpret the meaning of political values, rank their importance, and therefore rank the importance of each population (Stone, 2012); and, the extent to which new solutions should reinforce or challenge a status quo that already harms marginalised populations (Michener, 2019; Schneider and Ingram, 1997). In that context, pragmatic policy analysis focusing on what seems politically feasible may be seen as realistic to some but a prolonging of the status quo and reinforcement of inequalities to others. Insights from critical policy analysis help us widen the debate about the governing competence of UK ministers, from (a) a highly visible focus on listening to the right experts and acting quickly to protect the whole population, to (b) a less visible focus on questioning who count as experts and assessing the unequal impacts of policy change on target populations.

Table 2 identifies the policy analysis steps associated with ‘how to’ guides, then uses policy process and critical approaches to widen discussion of those steps. To describe several forms of step-by-step advice is to provide several standards to assess the current substance and direction of UK policy. These standards are crucial to challenge a too-simple focus on the extent to which the UK response was ‘evidence-based’ or quick enough.

Table 2 New perspectives on 5-step policy analysis

	Policy analysis	Policy process	Critical policy analysis
Step 1	Define a policy problem identified by your client	Incorporate a policymaker’s willingness and ability to understand and solve the policy problem	Challenge dominant ways to frame issues.
Step 2	Identify technically and politically feasible solutions	Identify the mix of policy instruments already being used, and why	Use inclusive ways to generate knowledge and perspectives on solutions
Step 3	Use values* and political goals to compare solutions	Identify how actors cooperate or compete to define and rank values.	Co-produce the rules to produce and evaluate solutions
Step 4	Predict the outcome of each feasible solution	Emphasise uncertainty about the disproportionate effect of your solution on the existing policy mix	Identify the impact on marginalised groups, such as via gender and race analysis
Step 5	Make a recommendation to your client	Recommend how to adapt to policymaking systems. In the absence of uncertainty, how often do you act? In the absence of centralisation, how can you deliver this instrument?	Co-produce your recommendations with many stakeholders, to make sure that you anticipate and respect their reaction to your proposals.

Source: adapted from Cairney (2020b). *Commonly described values include efficiency, equity, individual freedom, security, democracy, and human dignity.

Wider perspectives highlight the need to consider how (1) the scientific or expert analysis of policy problems relates to (2) the cognitive and environmental limits to policy analysis and action, and (3) the politics of choice, to determine whose knowledge counts as policy-relevant, and whose interests determine the final outcome. The latter provides a crucial way to interpret, for example, (a) a very strong ministerial rhetorical focus on the use of the best science to guide decisions, with (b) the potential to depoliticise key choices about which experts are relevant and how their advice contributes to the choice to save some people and let others die.

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