Epistemic Pluralism in Public Policy: The Critical Theory and Neuroscience Perspectives

Abstract

In this paper, it is argued that public policy theory and practice require both variety and versatility in order to adapt to the manifold situations that public sector work can pose. Currently, several academics and professionals reduce public policy to some amalgamation of the disciplines of economics, political science, and business. However, additional outlying perspectives, such as the critical, neuroscience, psychoanalytic, post-structural, feminist, and post-traditional theories (among others), can also offer much benefit to the comprehension of public policy. Looking at public policy analysis and action through this larger group of disciplines can be phrased as epistemic pluralism. In this realm, the term epistemic concerns knowledge or ways of knowing, while pluralism concerns an approach that considers a variety of perspectives. This epistemic pluralism approach, though often unsung, offers considerable relevance and utility to public policy theory and practice. For instance, scholars and practitioners alike can utilize such a tactic to better understand political arrangements and human behavior. This paper will consider the lack of epistemic pluralism in academia and policymaking processes, and analyze practical implications through the critical theory and neuroscience perspectives. The critical theory perspective is deliberated as a way to challenge the obviousness of policy systems, as well as uncover the limitations in how human beings operate within particular structures and relations with each other. The neuroscience perspective focuses on the brain and behavior and is considered as it has prominent established truths concerning human nature that have not yet been connected with public policymaking.

Introduction

It is perplexing that public policy, despite positing itself as an integrative discipline, suffers from a lack of perspectives in theory and practice. Most orthodox texts of the policy sciences describe...
a system of agenda-setting, policy implementation, and evaluation, often acting within the political status quo and considering behavior through a rational or public choice lens. Why such one-dimensionality? Should students and policymakers not employ alternative perspectives to better comprehend how systems work and people act?

Epistemic pluralism is an exemplary method that employs multiple approaches to knowing. Working in direct opposition to reductionism, it is inherently apprehensive of an over-reliance on a single theory or lone approach, and, thus, stresses that numerous approaches to knowledge are needed to seek an enhanced truth.

Consider an example from the economics discipline. Decades ago, the neoclassical approach attained dominance in the minds of scholars in explaining social and economic phenomena. More recently, however, economists have considered alternative approaches such as those seen in the development of behavioral economics. Notably, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) confront assumptions of human rationality by incorporating psychology concepts into the economics discipline via prospect theory, which claims that decision-making is more largely based on risk-aversion than rationality or expected utility. Such promotion of pluralism in economics has allowed specialists to think critically of reliance upon any one approach to economic knowledge.

Despite progress in multidisciplinary research, several academic subjects remain apprehensive to evolve beyond their disciplinary walls. In public policy, using epistemic pluralism to consider alternative approaches can be momentous in pushing the discipline to new places.

Background

The applicative aims of the epistemic pluralism approach center on putting public policy in perspective, both in academia and in policymaking practice. Not only does this approach enhance disciplinary vocabulary, measures, and models, but it also provides imperative practitioner and research-oriented benefits by increasing the realm of knowledge.

While university-level public policy programs frequently claim to encompass a multidisciplinary approach, this remains largely unfulfilled, particularly considering the discipline’s historical identity struggles for distinction and independence (Vigoda, 2003). Similarly, some government entities have partnered with multi-disciplinary organizations to improve policymaking processes via nudge theory, or
indirect suggestions toward behavioral alternatives (e.g., UK’s Behavioural Insights Team; US’s Social and Behavioral Sciences Initiative); however, such an approach remains unconventional (John, 2014). Accordingly, public policy scholars and practitioners should encourage various ways of harvesting knowledge and be tentative of placing full support in one, sole method.

### Literature Review

Public policy is often construed as governmental activities to mitigate societal problems. Mainstream policy texts habitually describe an agenda-setting process (Gandy Jr., 1982) that is clouded by value conflicts and power struggles (Birkland, 2011; Moran, Rein, & Goodin, 2006). Policymakers must consider what resources are available to achieve a solution (Fischer, 1995) and determine which agency or organization is accountable for policy enactment (Peters, 1999). Evaluation measures help conclude if a policy was justified, considering its expenses and remunerations (Nagel, 2002).

While these generalized steps help discern the overall policy process, there is limited literature that advocates a more encompassing, multidisciplinary method. Scholars have noted the hindrance of an entirely multidisciplinary approach due to the structure of disciplinary knowledge (e.g., Cartwright, 1999), as values and uncertainties are unexpressed, and foundational issues are disregarded (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993). However, some have been successful in delineating the epistemic pluralism technique and the utility it offers to their respective disciplines (e.g., Spender, 1998; Teffo, 2011; Turkle & Papert, 1992). In public policy, epistemic pluralism is a rarely found methodology, though Dryzek and Niemeyer (2006), Farmer (2008, 2010, 2012), Waldo (1984), and Whetsell (2012) have advocated such approaches. Further, Cors (2014) suggests a cloud-based tool to organize the multiple public policy perspectives for students and practitioners to use.

One outlying perspective to consider is critical theory. Critical theory aims “to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244) and contest the simplicity of the world. Marcuse (1964, p. 16) suggests that human life is moving toward a “pacification of existence” as critical thought becomes continuously ignored to yield way to the status quo. This brings forth an annihilation of discourse, imagination, and culture into what Marcuse (1964) terms the dominant order. Against this environment, Marcuse endorses the “great refusal” (Marcuse, 1964, p. xxxvi) as a suitable process of a critical-thought rebellion against socially accepted standards. The critical theory approach has often been used in research (e.g., Causevic & Lynch, 2011; Holmes & Warelow, 2008;
The neuroscience perspective is another intriguing approach, looking at all aspects of the nervous system, particularly the brain. It is concerned with emotions, behaving, thinking, moving, and feeling (Kandel & Squire, 2001). It is through neuroscience that investigators seek to interpret how the brain influences behavior, as its 100 billion neurons form more than 100 trillion connections with other neurons (Farmer, 2010). Since each of these connections can be either active or inactive at any moment in time (Adams, 1990), the intricacy of the brain is truly incomprehensible. Further, neuroplasticity describes how brain functions are neither confined to a set location nor do they remain fixed (Shaw & McEachern, 2001). The neuroscience approach has also been used in literature, particularly in law (e.g., Goodenough & Prehn, 2004; Müller, 2010).

Practical Implications

Critical Theory Perspective

Public policy scholars and practitioners ought to consider critical theory as a way to uncover the assumptions that hinder a full awareness of how policy processes work. Consider the example of the consumer. Consumers are thought of as having a wide-ranging scope in decision-making, but is this true? Should consumers not use critical theory to question the social structure of corporatism and consumerism, and how they fulfill their needs for goods and services?

Ultimately, critical theory aims to guide humans toward emancipation from dominating principles about policymaking systems. Scholars and practitioners need to get beyond constraining ideologies and false consciousness. They should use creativity and imagination to be analytical of common beliefs and develop critical actions. Critical theory needs to be involved in public policy as a way “to free citizens and administrators from reified, theoretical preconceptions and institutional constraints, allowing them to recreate themselves and the institutional arrangements” (Box, 2005, p. 91).

The critical theory approach empowers persons to think critically and question the status quo that pervades the public policy discipline. This can be done via a reflective evaluation of society and policymaking norms, identifying means of change, and developing attainable goals toward meaningful transformation. Within this process, critical theory allows the discovery of alternative approaches. The perspective of critical theory can help society advance beyond archetypical policymaking activities.
Neuroscience Perspective

The neuroscience perspective shows how our brains play a fundamental role in reasoning, speaking, and logical processes. Researchers study the chemical substances that carry messages in the nervous system from one neuron to another and how this dictates behavior. Certainly, an understanding of human behavior is crucial in shaping public policy. Would a deeper understanding of the many drivers that guide behaviors (e.g., cognitive, motivational, emotional, etc.) not assist in policy-making decisions?

Adding depth beyond timeworn ways of thinking about the behavior of a citizenry can influence public policy for societal progress. Though costly and not universally available (Marik, Rakusin, & Sandhu, 1997), brain scans and imaging could help evaluate the appropriateness of persons for certain jobs, predict voting likelihoods and consumer purchases, and explain humans’ inclinations and distastes. Why are policymakers and school districts not pushing music in younger levels of school, when it is shown to enhance brain functions, learning, and attitude (Vitale, 2011)? Why are 18 year-olds tried under the law as adults, despite the fact that their frontal cortex is not completely developed until their early twenties (Steinberg, 2009)? These education policy and law examples merely provide a glimpse of neuroscience’s serious implications for public policy.

Though we have just scratched the surface of this fascinatingly complex subject, we should continue to promote further brain-related examination of how people are driven. This will almost certainly show that human behavior diverges from what academics assume in models. Considering the neuroscience perspective on this quest for epistemic pluralism can have a powerful effect on policy theory and practice.

Conclusion

Is it clear that public policy is simply a combination of economics, politics, and business? Why not consider alternative perspectives? What about other viewpoints not even discussed here? Utilizing epistemic pluralism, public policy is a unique interconnection between a seemingly never-ending variety of disciplines. It has been argued that the utilization of the critical theory and neuroscience perspectives offer a viable approach for superior public policy comprehension by emancipating one-dimensionality and considering the role of the brain. However, only considering these two alternate perspectives is a lamentable oversight. Public policy is not a system that relies solely on one approach, nor should it be reduced to one simplistic method. Employing epistemic pluralism is an intriguing method to fully grasp public policy theory and implement it in the real world.
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References


