



Compared to What? The Multiple Meanings of Comparative Policy Analysis

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ABSTRACT *What is comparative public policy? How can it contribute to better public policy? These questions seem fundamental to the mission of the Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis. Some scholars have addressed the first question, which usually places comparative policy analysis in an institutional context, emphasizing comparisons across countries. However, fewer scholars have addressed the second, which lies at the heart of the comparative enterprise. As a result, the boundaries of this analytic effort are unclear and attempts to evaluate work that is defined as “comparative” are sometimes controversial. In this essay, we first sketch the history of the development of policy analysis in the United States. This historical review provides a sense of how comparative analysis fits into the development of the field, how the field has ignored some opportunities to think about comparative analysis, and offers some insight into how comparative policy analysis can contribute to better public policy. It then turns to possible avenues for comparison to identify the opportunities and limitations of the comparative approach.*

Keywords: comparative public policy; policy process; comparative analysis; comparison; policy transfer

Introduction

The *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* (JCPA) is now celebrating its 20th anniversary. The journal has taken its place in a rather crowded field of periodicals and has managed to survive and grow with a title that seems to evoke interest yet escape clear definition. Actually the term “comparative” is deceptively simple. While a majority of readers of the journal tend to associate “comparative” with analyses that involve more than one country, it is clear that the term – and, most importantly, the field of comparative policy analysis – is extraordinarily complex.

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More than ten years before the first JCPA issue saw the light of day, Arthur Cyr and Peter deLeon (1975) edited an issue of *Policy Sciences* that focused on comparative policy analysis. In their introductory article to the issue, Cyr and deLeon offered advice to those who sought to analyze public policy issues from a cross-national perspective. They used the specific articles in the issue to emphasize three factors that they ascribed to the relative dearth of comparative studies. First, they argued that comparative research is particularly difficult to conceptualize, organize, and implement. Second, they found that the seeming replacement of the field of public administration with public policy confused the issue. And third, they linked the lack of attention to comparative work to the professional training orientation of public policy programs.

Cyr and deLeon offered alternative arguments that they thought would lure their colleagues to undertake comparative studies. They found that such efforts hold considerable promise for both the academician and the policy maker and could uncover specific policy payoffs for the student of similar programs in several countries. Anticipating a more globalized society, they thought that such information could assist in the development of beneficial interdependencies between countries.

The JCPA has emphasized the comparison of similar policies in multiple countries. Table 1, based on a review of abstracts of articles appearing up to Volume 19, Issue 2, shows that half of the articles published involved multi-country comparisons.¹ Indeed, the proportion has increased from 45 per cent for the first ten volumes to 56 per cent subsequently. As the proportion of single-country studies has remained constant at 30 per cent, the increase in multi-country articles has come at the expense of theoretical or other types of articles. Similar to research into comparative public administration (Fitzpatrick et al. 2011), the majority of the multi-country articles employ qualitative methods; most of the large-*n* studies use existing data sets.

While Cyr and deLeon's concerns continue today, a number of additional questions have been raised that have contributed to an even more complex definitional situation. We suggest that at least three questions should be asked before approaching a comparative policy analysis. First, why do you want to do a comparison? Are you looking for new ideas or do you have an expectation of finding a solution that can be applied in diverse settings? Do you think that the person you want to advise is looking for new ideas or are you searching for new ways of enriching the research and theory on the topic? Are you looking for ways to move along the stages of the policy process – e.g. to move from an adopted policy to implementation?

Second, what do you want to compare? Are you assuming that there will almost always be a number of topics available for comparison? Comparing countries is not the only possible focus of this topic. Federalist systems, as well as unitary systems that delegate some policy making to local or regional bodies, allow one to compare activity that comes

Table 1. Number (%) of JCPA articles by type

	Volumes 1–10	Volumes 11–19.2	Total
Theory and other	43 (26)	27 (14)	70 (20)
Single country	49 (30)	57 (30)	106 (30)
Multiple countries	74 (45)	106 (56)	180 (50)
Total	166	190	356

from separate subnational governments to try to determine whether one is more effective in achieving desired goals than another. One could also compare policy responses to problems in different industrial sectors with an eye toward borrowing promising alternatives across sectoral lines.

Third, what do you think will emerge from your comparison? Are you assuming that the insights that come from your comparative analysis will be new and of interest to the political actor you are advising? Do you expect that your findings would inform alternatives or recommendations? Are you looking for ways to expand the research on a topic and contribute to knowledge through production of articles or other publications?

The articles that have appeared in JCPA over the years suggest that there are many ways to answer these questions. Some of the work that is defined as “comparative” is broad and embedded in the very structure and values found in different governmental systems. Thus, one might expect that findings would emerge in democratic systems that are different from those inferred from autocratic systems. Or that shared power systems would create different information than those with parliamentary systems.

Other work is narrow and focuses on technical issues related to the detailed implementation of a policy. And both broad and narrow approaches usually exist in a constantly changing context and environment. These contributions also suggest that there is not a clear set of expectations about the field of policy analysis itself. The lack of universal agreement about the goals and techniques in policy analysis as a broad field makes it difficult to figure out what adding “comparative” to the quest actually means.

This article proceeds from an acceptance of this diversity to attempt to focus on these issues through two lenses. The first is a historical lens that draws on the experience of the policy field within the United States over time to illustrate the development of what is now called “comparative analysis”. The second conceptual lens focuses on the different things that we may want to compare and how they can contribute to better public policy. Neither lens provides a clear pathway to effectiveness but rather each contributes to an attempt to map the development and alternatives that might be helpful to policy analysts who wish to contribute to or benefit from comparative work.

“Comparative” in US Policy Analysis

Policy analysis as a modern profession arose in the latter part of the twentieth century in the United States. Its evolution can be traced through three phases (Radin 2017b).²

The Beginnings

While the development of a formal field called “policy analysis” emerged in the United States in the 1960s, it is clear that this field was both ancient and new. As Herbert Goldhamer (1978) noted in *The Adviser*, advising decision makers and rulers was an ancient art. But it was the growth of democratic governmental forms that actually led to the modern version of that relationship. Originally, the parliamentary system in the British Commonwealth built in the advising relationship by assuming that top-level elite bureaucrats would play the advising role. And lawyers played that role in the United States in the period during and after the New Deal. The field that we have called policy analysis actually emerged in the United States after World War II. The activity in the early years of policy analysis was based in the Department of Defense, where new analytic techniques

developed by statisticians and operations researchers during World War II showed that it was possible to apply principles of rationality to strategic decision making (Hitch 1953; Radin 2013). These principles seemed to be so obvious to these early analysts that they ignored the possibility of using them as a way to compare different decision processes. Interestingly, the initial use of operations research by the US military during World War II was comparative in origin, motivated by observation of British success in its use during the Battle of Britain (Fortun and Schweber 1993).

The optimism that emerged from the early practitioners identified top officials of the federal government as the clients for the analysis (especially the Secretary of Defense), highlighted analysis of possible new policies (e.g. formulation of policies), was linked to the budget process undertaken by the Executive Branch (rather than the Congress), was undertaken by individuals who were disproportionately trained as economists, and employed techniques of operations research, cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit analysis, and program budgeting and systems analysis (PPBS). Like Machiavelli, these advisors focused rather narrowly on the authority of the “prince”.

It was not always clear that the agenda of the analysts corresponded to the more complex agendas of their clients, which stayed within the early confines of the authority of the top officials but reflected more complex sets of goals. Top officials sought to control the fragmented and diffuse organizational program units that were theoretically viewed as under their control. They attempted to improve efficiency in the way that resources were allocated and programs implemented. And they also believed that an increased use of knowledge and information would produce better decisions (Radin 2013). Although decision makers acknowledged the importance of the shared powers system in the United States (particularly the struggle for control by the executive branch over the Congress), that acknowledgement was rarely made explicit in the work they commissioned from their analytic staffs. It was possible to compare approaches to policy problems across institutions explicitly, but this was rarely done. This was an example of failure to use comparative analysis techniques.

Although others beyond the Defense Department were also concerned about similar agenda items, the early experience of the field stayed largely in the defense arena until Lyndon Johnson became president. Israeli defense analyst Yehezkel Dror joined some Americans in conceptualizing the field and American economist Alice Rivlin connected with some former Department of Defense analysts (all known as the Whizz Kids) to apply the concepts and techniques to areas related to poverty and social policy (Radin 2013, p. 17). But it was rare for analysts to compare the use of the techniques in defense to those in poverty and social policy areas or to compare the experience with the techniques in Israel or other countries with that in the US.

By 1965, President Johnson ordered the Bureau of the Budget (the forerunner of the current Office of Management and Budget) to issue a directive to all federal departments and agencies calling on them to embark on the PPBS route and establish central analytic offices that would present budgets using the PPBS format. Johnson’s action introduced a new set of dynamics. It shifted the expectations from a set of analytic procedures in a single sector (defense) to a realization that the very structure of the US system (shared powers) meant that cabinet officials and the executive branch did not have the unified powers found in a parliamentary system. One can view this transfer of PPBS from defense to domestic policy as an example of comparative public policy. The failure to consider the differences between these sectors meant that PPBS could not achieve the same success in

the domestic applications as it had in defense (Wildavsky 1969). Making an intergovernmental comparison, the Ford Foundation funded efforts to implement PPBS in a number of states and local government (Hatry 1971). The critiques of the diffusion of PPBS only scratched the surface; more explicitly, comparative research might have identified more positive findings about how to organize more effective analytical offices.

Policy Analysis Grows and Diversifies

Despite the failings of PPBS, it seems to have opened the door for the rapid spread of policy analysis across the domestic federal agencies. Within a decade policy analysis units could be found throughout the federal government. Where the policy analysis staffs had once been found only at the top reaches of the federal agencies, they were now found throughout the federal structures, located at specific program units and reflecting the diverse perspectives of those in the federal agencies. Those who were concerned about specialized program elements did not always garner the attention of generalist appointees at the top of the organization. Where the original units had enjoyed a monopoly on analytic activity (and the deference that followed that monopoly), frequently they were being challenged by staff who were unwilling to defer to the centralized unit in the offices of the cabinet department's secretary or agency head (Radin 2013, p. 33).

While the separate bureaucratic locations of multiple analytic approaches might have been treated as a potential source for comparative approaches to policy problems, there was little attention to that potential. Instead, policy analysis units in a number of federal agencies became highly fragmented. Staff of these units were familiar with the techniques and language of the original units and were likely to provide competing policy advice that was packaged in the language and form of policy analysis. Further, the analytic activities undertaken by these units took on the coloration of the agencies and policy issues they addressed. These staff members stayed in offices with responsibility for specific programs and took on the characteristics of policy area specialists.

The diffusion of the practice of policy analysis led to its transformation. Although some analysts continued to concentrate on the formulation of new policies, others considered implementation and evaluation. The original focus on technical and political skills continued (Meltsner 1976), but analysts were also chosen for their organizational, evaluation, and issue-specific skills and knowledge. Clients also diversified: while some analysts continued to work directly for those officials at the top reaches of the organization, others focused on more complex institutional processes and organizational maintenance that frequently involved multiple actors (Radin 2016).

Analysts who focused on domestic policies found themselves in environments where the federal role in policy implementation was limited. The discretion underlying the activities of states and localities in a federal system was crucial in the implementation process and these non-federal actors varied tremendously in both their administrative capacities and the way they interpreted their authority and responsibility. Despite an explosion of academic literature on the "implementation problem" (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Bardach 1977; Sabatier 1986), policy analysts rarely focused on the differences between the activities of non-federal actors and how their different types of capabilities and discretion contributed to variation in outcomes.

In addition, policy analysts were increasingly found in a wide variety of settings, including think tanks, which trace their origins to the philanthropically supported

Progressive Era Municipal Bureaus, specialized units serving state and local legislatures, congressional committees, and interest groups. The variable cultures of the agencies and differences in policy issues had an impact on the way that policy analysis was undertaken. Agencies with scientifically trained staff were often attracted to more technical analytical approaches, while agencies that were supported by strong interest groups were likely to be more sensitive to maintaining their support.

Through the remainder of the twentieth century policy analysis did seem to be moving toward a professional identity. It had its own professional association, Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM), journals (including JCPA), a range of university-based professional schools, and individual practitioners (largely in federal government agencies) who identified themselves as policy analysts (Radin 2013, pp. 26–27). During this growth period, while some analysts continued to identify with the analytical technician role that emerged with the new profession in the 1970s and 1980s, others sought ways to accommodate new techniques and values within the burgeoning field. By the end of the twentieth century the optimism that had surrounded the early years of the field was muted. Few analysts were searching for techniques that would allow them to devise a comparative perspective on these developments within the US context. At this point it appeared that the policy analysis field took at least two forms: one focused on the practice of policy analysis while the second emphasized the academic and research side of the enterprise.

There were attempts to move discussion about the field of policy analysis beyond experiences within the United States. British academics Brian Hogwood and Lewis Gunn expressed their concerns in *Policy Analysis for the Real World*:

Although our primary interest was in producing policy analysis materials for British students, our experience has made us aware of the limitations of much American literature for American students, particularly those who have previously thought of policy analysis as merely American politics rehashed, or as arcane mathematical techniques . . . Much of the literature about particular techniques concentrates on technical points and assumes that the “optimal” decision will automatically be taken and enforced by a single, authoritative decision maker. (Hogwood and Gunn 1984, pp. v–vi)

The appearance of the JCPA in 1998 was almost a voice in the wilderness. It defined itself as “the only explicitly comparative journal of policy analytic studies” that sought to stimulate the growth of an international community of scholars who research the challenges and benefits of global inter- and intra-policy making. While its definition of “comparative” was not narrow – the journal “aims to capture differences or similarities in policy issues as well as the role of comparative policy analysis both within and between social units” – it did seem to rely on the definition found in the political science community; that is, comparative meant focusing on experiences in at least two countries. It was not always clear what the journal expected from its authors and a fairly wide range of articles appeared within it.

Facing Globalization

The advent of the twenty-first century suggested that the growing interest and concerns about globalization generated new interest in something defined as comparative policy

analysis across the world. A range of developments included a broad scope of subjects: types of policy issues, diverse relationships between analysts and clients, types of analysis required, time frames imposed, the stage of the policy process where it occurs, where in the system it occurs (e.g. inside or outside of government), the structure of government involved, placement of analysis in central agencies versus program offices, career or political staff, skill sets required, and the boundaries between policy analysis and public management.

Activity emerged in practice settings, sometimes as the renaming of existing data and planning offices to call them policy analysis organizations. In some settings career staff who traditionally acted as advisors to the government became the core of the policy analysis enterprise. The demise of the Soviet Union provided the impetus in some nations for a unit that would provide advice on alternatives to previous approaches. In some other settings, policy analysis units were established within autocratic governments that provided an impression of openness (Radin 2017a, p. 57).

Training in policy analysis spread widely outside the United States. But while teachers and researchers seemed to be using the same English terms, they often defined them in quite different ways – cultural differences seemed to blur concepts. Such adaption is certainly necessary for preparing policy analysts to function effectively in their national contexts. Nonetheless, it does pose a barrier to comparative policy research when concepts take on different meanings in different countries.

Does the US Experience Help Answer Questions about Comparison?

The US experience with comparative analysis does not tell a clear story. At times opportunities for comparative analysis were present but analysts did not pursue them. There were other times when analysts identified similarities that were either quite dissimilar or operated in very different contexts that diminished the lessons from comparison (Radin 2017b). To increase the chances that we will have answers to these questions in the future, we turn to the question: what aspects of public policy can be usefully compared?

We begin this discussion by acknowledging the differences between policy analysis as a profession and disciplinary research. This dichotomy sets the scene for our expectations about comparative analysis. There are limitations in both areas but there appear to be more opportunities for the researcher than for the analyst. We identify the primary dimensions of comparison and their possibilities and limitations as they attempt to contribute to the development of better public policy.

Policy Analysis as Profession Rather than Discipline

Unlike many academic disciplines, the policy analysis field does not operate as an independent and separate effort. As many have noted, policy analysis involves a conversation between an analyst and a decision maker or actors in a decision-making process. As the previous discussion suggests, that relationship has changed significantly over the years. Yet the literature about the field has rarely focused on the client role. Instead, attention has been concentrated on the methodologies and theories employed by the analyst. Growing complexity of policy problems and the development of multiple analytical approaches have led to tensions between the analyst and the client. Indeed, it is not always clear what it means to be a client of policy analysis (Radin 2016; Vining and

Weimer 2017). Is the decision maker someone who has authority or influence on a particular policy question? Is the client someone who is affected by the policy decision? Are there multiple players within a network involved in various decision-making processes?

The occasional incompatibility between professional responsibility to a particular client and conventional analytical practice may result in an inadequate differentiation between the two (Radin 2016, 2017a). Analysts may forget that they have not been provided with an opportunity to influence decisions and believe that their technical expertise should be the sole basis for decisions. And the complexity of policy problems leads them to focus on existing research sources. They may ignore the political and organizational context in which decisions are made, e.g. ignoring the limitations of already decided policies on implementation possibilities. In reaction, decision makers may view the analyst as insensitive to the constraints they experience and why they need analysis to justify – not to change – their already determined decisions.

It is not clear whether there is a natural interest in comparative work among clients. Clients are sometimes so focused on the difficulties of surviving in their own environment that they are skeptical of looking at other approaches, be they in the neighboring state or in another country. If they do look elsewhere for ideas, it might be as a result of a personal relationship with others in their field or some other somewhat idiosyncratic interest. As a result, there might be skepticism when an analyst suggests an alternative that seems to have emerged from another planet. As the policy analyst must serve the client, lack of client interest in comparison to dampen any interest in comparison on the part of the analyst.

Possible Avenues for Comparative Policy Research

Policy analysts fundamentally address the question: compared to what? Beyond the immediate and narrow focus on comparing alternatives to current policy, policy analysts can potentially improve their contributions through a number of broader comparisons. That is, they can potentially gain useful ideas, information, and insights from research or experience drawn from other contexts. Scholars who seek to inform policy analysts about alternatives, ways of assessing them, or simply frameworks for conceptually ordering a complex world can also gain from comparison. But what are the avenues for comparison? We focus on several categories: policy process research, policy-relevant research, policy ideas, policy research, and policy transfer.

Harold Lasswell (1971) famously distinguished between knowledge of and knowledge in the policy process (Weimer 2008). Both are important but our primary concern is knowledge in the policy process. That is, how can analysis improve the content of public policy? Nonetheless, effective comparison often requires knowledge of policy processes and the context that defines them. That is, how do political processes affect the choice, content, and implementation of public policies?

Table 2 sketches avenues for improving public policy in terms of knowledge of, and knowledge in, the policy process as well as how directly the avenue contributes to actual changes in public policy. We begin with knowledge of the policy process. At the most general level, *political science*, broadly defined to include political economy and political sociology, offers comparisons of different governance regimes that facilitate understanding of the policy process. Although studies of specific institutions or political phenomena can usefully inform policy analysts especially in their predictions of political feasibility, we do

Table 2. Comparative avenues for improving public policy

	Knowledge of the policy process	Knowledge in the policy process
General research	Political science	Policy-relevant research Policy ideas
Policy-focused research	Policy process research	Policy research
Professional practice	Policy analysis methods	Policy transfer

not explicitly consider this avenue here. We do consider *policy process research*, which usually looks across the institutions of governance within countries and introduces concern about how policy processes shape policy content. We also consider *policy analysis methods*, which help professional analysts systematically design and assess policy alternatives. We then consider what we define as knowledge *in* the policy process. At the most general level, science in many disciplines produces *policy-relevant research* that can inform policy design, often crystalized as *policy ideas*, and analysis. *Policy research* focuses more explicitly on public policy problems and alternatives for addressing them. It is often a key resource for informing *policy transfer*, the adaption of policy alternatives to specific applications. One can think of policy transfer as the potential payoff to society from better policy resulting from knowledge in the policy process. We discuss policy process research, policy-relevant research, policy ideas, policy research, policy analysis methods, and policy transfer as possible comparative avenues for improving public policy.

Policy Process Research

The comparative study of political systems can be traced all the way back to Aristotle's assessment of the constitutions of city states. The comparative cross-national study of contemporary policy processes poses two challenges. First, modern government is very complex and diverse. Understanding policy-making processes typically requires detailed knowledge of both formal and informal institutions. Few scholars can competently develop such knowledge for more than a few countries. Second, delving beneath the surface of policy adoption into the substantive content and implementation of policy places yet more demands on researchers. The challenge is finding ways of coordinating the creation of knowledge by multiple researchers, each with deep understanding of the social and political circumstances of one or perhaps a few countries.

Three approaches to meeting this challenge have been pursued. First, common conceptual frameworks can coordinate research by individual scholars. For example, Elinor Ostrom (1990) demonstrated truly comparative research on governance of common property resources. Researchers have employed the broader framing of her approach, institutional rational choice (Kiser and Ostrom 1982), to frame natural resource issues in a variety of settings. Similarly, the advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1988; Real-Doto 2009) has been used to frame long-term policy change in different contexts.

Beyond these widely recognized policy processes frameworks, a systematic framework for at least identifying relevant features of policy systems would potentially be useful in helping to make research more comparable. For example, assessment of the attributes of intra- and inter-organizational property rights relevant to policy issues as suggested in the first issue of the JCPA is one way of increasing the chances that decentralized research

efforts would facilitate useful comparison (Vining and Weimer 1998). Although a common framework is desirable, it is unlikely that any particular one will always best facilitate useful comparison. Also, commitment to a particular framework may shift effort away from learning about the substance of policy issues to the assessment of the framework itself. It is not clear how far a highly theoretical approach takes us: witness the extensive development and empirical testing of punctuated equilibrium theory (Jones and Baumgartner 2005) with almost no payoff in terms practical implications for policy analysts beyond that analysts should expect punctuations (Weimer and Vining 2017, p. 268).

Second, project organizers can recruit experts with country- or sector-specific expertise to do parallel assessments of policy processes. For example, projects have recruited country experts to do comparative studies of the changes in property rights systems in post-communist countries (Weimer 1997) and assisted reproductive policies in Canada and European countries (Bleiklie et al. 2004). One of the most ambitious efforts recruited experts to assess governance of the steel, health, and financial sectors in European countries (Bovens et al. 2001). These projects draw on the depth of knowledge of the recruits to provide broader cross-national comparison. Success depends on substantial effort being devoted to the use of common frameworks and the development of common approaches so that the collections become more than the sum of their parts.

Third, comparison of policy processes, including the role of policy analysis, can be facilitated by recruiting experts within specific countries to follow a template through which they address a common set of topics. This is the approach followed by the International Library of Policy Analysis edited by Iris Geva-May and Michael Howlett and published by the University of Bristol's Policy Press in association with the International Comparative Policy Association and JCPA. The series already covers a dozen countries with more volumes planned. The similar structures of the volumes allow for the identification of similarities and differences across countries (Radin 2017b). One can imagine that as these volumes accumulate, they will provide "data" for more systematic cross-national assessments of the role of policy analysis in policy processes.

Policy-Relevant Research

Turning to knowledge in the policy process, researchers in many fields make contributions to knowledge potentially relevant to public policy. Although they may be driven by a desire to contribute to a better society, these researchers often do not relate their findings to specific public policies. For example, better understanding of the link between early childhood nutrition and subsequent cognitive development creates knowledge that could be used to inform policy design whether or not the researchers themselves seek to do so. Such research may be relatively context free, providing generalization but little guidance on application across different political, economic, and social systems. The internationalization of science facilitates broad dissemination of findings. The challenge for policy researchers is translating the knowledge into policies that can be applied in specific contexts.

Policy Ideas

General approaches to specific policy problems, or even concepts of governance more generally, often diffuse with limited assessment. Nonetheless, such ideas, often based in disciplinary theories, can be highly influential in shaping policy. For example, the

Keynesian perspective on macroeconomics achieved dominance among developed countries following World War II (Hall 1989). Ideas based on general theories with clearly hypothesized cause and effect are more likely to diffuse within epistemic communities (Strang and Meyer 1993); ideas that can be framed relatively simply may be more likely to gain public support for their application (Kangas et al. 2014). International organizations and transnational networks increasingly appear to be playing a role in the diffusion of policy ideas (Stone 2004; Lee and Strang 2006).

The abstraction of policy ideas offers both advantages and disadvantages. Even more so than general findings from policy research, novel policy ideas do not come with information that informs detailed policy designs. Indeed, they may diffuse widely well before evidence about their impacts can be gathered and interpreted. Consequently, analysts often have to create policies consistent with the ideas from scratch. However, by requiring explicit policy design to fit the local context, efforts to employ them may help analysts avoid complacency about appropriate fit that may arise when borrowing working policies from other contexts.

Policy Research

Extant policy research seeks to inform public policies by providing evidence relevant to the framing of public policy problems or their solutions. As inherently empirical, it is context specific. For example, it may explore the causes and consequences of teen pregnancy in a particular community. Or it may evaluate a particular intervention intended to reduce the likelihood of pregnant teens in a particular school district dropping out of school before they earn high school diplomas. Assuming internal validity, such findings can usually be reasonably assumed to predict the consequences of continuation of policies in the particular contexts in which they were evaluated, although changing circumstances could intervene to undercut even these predictions. Predictions about the consequences of expanding, shrinking, or incrementally modifying policies in the studied context are likely to be less reliable.

Comparative approaches to policy research can be thought of as increasing the external validity of research by expanding the contexts in which the same, or very similar, policies are evaluated. Although policy research is often observational rather than experimental, researchers may nonetheless be able to increase external validity through the judicious choice of contexts to compare (Cook 2014). However, because policies are often complex bundles of rules and incentives, identifying contexts that offer a favorable tradeoff between internal and external validity may be difficult.

External validity aside, two features of policy research as it is commonly practiced tend to hinder its usefulness to policy analysts (Weimer 2009). First, policy researchers often take a narrow approach to policy impacts, focusing on maximizing the internal validity of inferences about the primary impact of the policy. Policy researchers in academia are often driven in this direction by a desire to publish in disciplinary journals that frequently favor narrow findings produced by novel methods over the more comprehensive assessment produced by more mundane approaches. Although policy analysts want more confident inferences about primary impacts, they also want to know the full range of impacts, even those that were not the focus of evaluative research.

Second, policy research often ignores the costs, broadly defined, of policies. What resources would be needed to implement the policy successfully in a similar context? How were they combined? Answering these questions takes on even greater importance as analysts seek to use the findings to predict the consequences of the policy in less similar

contexts. However, gathering such information is itself costly and often excluded from publications.

Policy Analysis Methods

The most basic framework for structuring policy analysis in response to a perceived policy problem includes the identification of relevant goals, the specification of policy alternatives, the systematic prediction and valuation of the impacts of alternatives in terms of goals, and a recommendation based on an explicit comparison of the impacts of the alternatives. Often the predictions employ social science theory and empirical methods. Usually analysts must argue for appropriate valuation metrics, though the protocols of cost–benefit analysis provide commonly accepted ways to assess impacts in terms of economic efficiency. Professional training in policy analysts can be thought of as developing the collection of craft skills for applying this framework.

On the surface, these craft skills would seem to be universal in the sense of applying in any public policy context. However, their execution is actually quite contextual (Weimer 2012). For example, analysts addressing the same policy problem in different countries might very well place different weights on goals or even select different sets of goals because of constitutional or cultural differences. Further, the choice of policy alternatives may also reflect such differences, as well as differences in experience with and public acceptability of various types of policy instruments. Even predicting impacts with generic tools, such as economic theory and statistical methods, require context-specific information to apply theory effectively and interpret empirical findings. Of course, assessing the likelihood of successful implementation is inherently contextual, usually requiring the identification of specific actors who must make contributions to implementation success. For all these reasons, an effective analyst in one country would not necessarily be effective in some other country without explicit attention to how context shapes the use of the universal craft skills.

The importance of context for the effective practice of policy analysis has implications for the training of new policy analysts. Along with the universal craft skills, neophyte analysts should also learn about how to assess and adapt to the contexts in which they are likely to practice. Such learning, like that in other crafts, usually requires hands-on experience to gain tacit knowledge. With a plethora of potential clients and a relatively transparent political system, programs in the United States can usually provide experience through client-oriented projects. Comparable experience may be more difficult to provide in countries with more closed and less transparent political systems. The appropriate professional ethics, in terms of duties to both client and society, may also differ, and, if not carefully considered, expose novice analysts to personal risk.

Policy Transfer

A fundamental task of policy analysts is the identification and crafting of viable and potentially desirable alternatives to current policies. Doing so almost always involves some comparison, if only implicitly through the observation of a single policy implemented in a different context. The process has been called “systematic pinching” (Schneider and Ingram 1988) and “tinkering” (May 1981): analysts identify a working model in some other context, identify its essential elements, and modify the essential elements to craft additional alternatives (Weimer

1993). At one extreme, a novel policy that has not been formally evaluated provides the starting point; at the other extreme, a policy has been implemented and formally evaluated in many contexts. With a fortunate bounty of evaluations of a policy, analysts may benefit from meta-analyses that integrate findings across evaluations to arrive at effect sizes that can be used to predict policy impacts. One example is the approach taken by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to support cost–benefit analyses of social programs based on US evaluations (Lee et al. 2012), an approach being promoted across US states by the Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative. Another example is the systematic reviews compiled by the Campbell Collaboration, which often include evaluations from many countries (Shadish et al. 2005).

At least three meanings of comparative pinching seem relevant to the work of policy analysts: comparing policies across countries, sub-national governments, or industrial sectors. By far the most common interpretation of comparative policy involves multiple countries. However, the most practical comparisons often involve assessing policies in different contexts within the same country. Less attention has been given to comparing across industrial sectors.

In the overview for a recent issue of the JCPA focusing on comparative studies, Ted Marmor (forthcoming) reviews the opportunities and challenges to cross-national policy comparisons. He notes that cross-national comparisons may allow analysts to understand their own circumstances more clearly by putting them into a broader perspective. Comparisons may also serve as “quasi-experiments” for making inferences about what might work in one’s own context. Against these opportunities, however, he cautions against both “naïve transplantation” of what appear to be best practices and the opposite “fallacy of comparative difference”, which rejects the value of comparison if there are any cross-national differences; as such differences are ubiquitous, the fallacy precludes any cross-national learning about policy.

Marmor offers four rules for cross-national comparisons. First, the purpose of the comparison should be clear. Comparisons of policy-making processes seek different information than comparisons of the operations of actual policies. Second, as policy contexts differ across industrial sectors even within the same country, careful consideration has to be given to the nature of the sector in making comparisons. Third, operational definitions – rather than marketing labels – are needed to facilitate meaningful comparisons. Fourth, “[there] is the need to understand the country-specific constellation of dominant values, political institutions, and the role of organized interests in the policy domain when assessing the chances of failure or success of given reform proposals” (Marmor forthcoming, p. 3). Taken together, the third and fourth rules point to the fundamental problem faced by policy analysts seeking to learn about policy designs or their likely impacts from cross-national policy comparisons: the myriad potentially meaningful differences between countries as well as inevitable differences in the details of even nominally similar policies. Indeed, in the face of differing contexts, it would be surprising if nominally similar policies were not modified to accommodate them, whether by initial intention or adaptive response.

One approach to reducing the number of differences across contexts is to make comparisons across sub-national rather than national governments (Snyder 2001). Doing so has long been common in the United States where states have been famously called the “laboratories of democracy”. The use of comparative case studies has been a common methodology in this situation (Agranoff and Radin 1991). The opportunity for subnational comparisons seems most obvious in federal systems in which the sub-national units have formal authority over some issues. Nonetheless, unitary governments often create

differences in the content or timing of policy because they decentralize some decisions to regional or local administrative units. The sweet spot would seem to be a very comparable context with some policy variation. Further, analysts are likely to be better able to follow Marmor's rules when pinching from parallel sub-units than across national borders because of the greater similarity in contexts. Further, closer proximity may enable them to observe policies on site or learn about them through national policy networks.

Borrowing policies across industrial sectors within a country eliminates cross-national differences but introduces contextual differences because of variation in the issues that the policies address. A policy instrument that works well in one context may not do so in another. For example, a public-private partnership may work well when the private firm and government share profit maximization as the primary goal, future costs are fairly certain, and the costs of monitoring the quality of output are low. However, if the government does not have profit maximization as its primary goal, future costs are highly uncertain, or if the quality of output is costly to monitor, then it may not work well or even end catastrophically with the private partner ending the partnership through bankruptcy (Vining and Weimer 2016). As policy analysts often substantively specialize, not only may they not know where to look for promising policies in other sectors, but they may have difficulty identifying key factors in the apparent success of the policies they decide to consider borrowing.

Conclusion

Although policy analysts are most directly concerned about what we have labeled policy transfer, policy scholars usually contribute to this process indirectly through their policy research. Helping analysts understand differences in policy processes can potentially enable them to identify more relevant sources for policy transfers and the political differences that may be relevant to transfer. Comparative policy research, which links policy content and context to outcomes, can point analysts to potential policy transfers. Its usefulness usually depends on careful consideration of the context in which the studied policy operates. JCPA authors can make more valuable contributions to good public policy by clarifying what they are comparing and providing information relevant to policy transfer.

How can editors and reviewers increase the chances that a retrospective on the JCPA done 10 or 20 years from now will laud its contributions to better public policy? First, they should continue to provide a home for research that compares policy outcomes across countries – half of JCPA articles fall into this category. Although such research can contribute to theory, its inherent value is as a resource for policy transfer.

Second, they should encourage research that makes comparisons across sub-national governments, a category of research currently relatively scarce in JCPA. By holding national constitutional and some aspects of culture constant, they offer the possibility of more confident inferences about policy impacts. JCPA has had a few articles that make sub-national comparisons across countries with respect to urban problems. In some circumstances, such comparisons might provide some of the internal validity of sub-national comparisons with possibly greater external validity in terms of the countries included.

Third, they should encourage research on policy processes that recognizes the role of the policy analyst. Contributions to understanding policy processes can easily find homes in disciplinary journals, especially in political science. However, these contributions often do not identify a role for policy analysis. Providing an understanding of when and how

policy analysis can make a difference would potentially help guide the application of policy analysis where it would have the greatest impact.

Notes

1. The review only included items published as articles and only included symposia introductions if they were published in the article section. It is based on a review of abstracts with follow-up reading of the articles if the content was not clear. The classification into theory (and other), single-country, and multi-country articles involved some discretion. For example, articles that focused on international organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development or the European Union were classified as multi-country. Single-country articles included a few that made sub-national comparisons and one that compared policy issues.
2. Because the formal field called “policy analysis” emerged from US experience, we are using that experience to illustrate possibilities that might have emerged earlier as “comparative analysis”.

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