

What Have We Learned in the Fields of Public Policy and Public Administration That Might Be Relevant to the Coronavirus Pandemic?

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Abstract

The pandemic situation is a classic “wicked problem” issue. It is not clear what its limits are and what frameworks are important to consider in dealing with it. This article focuses on the challenge of labelling the issue itself and finding ways to link and differentiate it from previous policy situations. It also highlights the complexity of the implementation environment of the issue.

Keywords

wicked problem, coronavirus pandemic, process of labeling, implementation, context of problem

Despite the concentrated attention to the Coronavirus Pandemic situation and attempts to advise decision makers and the analysts who work for them, two problems seem to have been ignored that can be gleaned from the public policy and public administration literature.

While defining these problems provides several new approaches to this complex issue, they do not simplify it. It is hard to escape defining this as a classic “wicked problem” (Rittel & Webber, 1973). The first involves the process of labeling the issue itself and linking it to previous policy situations. The second focuses on the dimensions of the issue that relate to the implementation process. This article explores both topics and suggests that there may be some ways of approaching them that is useful.

Labeling the Issue

Most students of public policy begin their analysis deciding whether the issue they are confronting is unique or is similar to some other problem. The coronavirus pandemic—this dramatic life and death issue—is both. It is both different from and similar to what we have experienced in other issues.

While lessons can be drawn from the experience of earlier plagues or virus situations, the 21st century creates many differences as well as similarities between this current situation and the past. As a result, it is hard to evaluate the alternatives that might have been considered when the issue surfaced early in 2020.

We do know that many decision makers bring their familiar patterns to issues that resemble questions that they have confronted in the past. In that sense, it is not surprising that the advice that is given reflects many different perspectives based on geography, racial and ethnic backgrounds, density of population, and other descriptors of the multiple societies affected by this almost mysterious development.

As a result, it is not surprising that some decision makers define their focus on the specifics of tasks related to achieving what they identify as familiar goals. Questions of efficiency, equity, or effectiveness are all likely to emerge and conflict with one another. While this is understandable, we also need to pay attention to the way that similar issues operate in a setting where other often unfamiliar issues and experiences are involved. For example, is there a link between this virus and climate change, between this virus and food safety, or between this virus and travel?

Implementation

Bringing any policy to life is an art form and requires attention to a broad range of issues. When a policy problem is as vast as this one, it can be overwhelming. Students of policy

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call this broad topic implementation. Implementation emerged as a field of study when proponents of the Lyndon Johnson era War on Poverty realized that some of the policies that they had crafted did not achieve the results that they had assumed would emerge from their advice.¹ We learned that the players who had responsibility for designing the policy did not focus on the issues that might appear at implementation—the next stage of the policy process.² Yet inattention to implementation at the formulation or design stage guaranteed problems at implementation.

Implementation is the stage of the policy process that challenges decision makers to understand contradictory principles. They are likely to conclude that issues may differ in some ways from their past experience but, at the same time, have areas of similarity. The implementation approach requires that decision makers and policy planners begin their process by mapping the environment in which the policy will be carried out. Such a conceptual map asks them to define the past and probable stakeholders and even reach for players who don't seem likely to be involved.

Developing this map calls on policy analysts and staff to be creative. Nontraditional processes such as role playing turn out to be an effective way to consider issues that may emerge from important but less visible players. Planners are challenged to view the policy problem as emerging from demands that are somewhat predictable. Yet they often require the development of strategies that touch many other actors who may be required to change their own behaviors.

A process that stimulates the identification of possible issues early in the mapping process has the ability to define a role or at least an interest by a range of players. But at the same time, it is fluid enough to give attention to the uniqueness of the specific situation or crisis and acknowledge that it is likely to require that the stakeholders generate new ideas and approaches. The balance between the two challenges is very difficult to attain. It is likely to be full of contradictions, messy, and hard to explain.

Ignoring the Transition Process, the U.S. Government Structure, and History

The major problem that was built into the coronavirus situation of 2020 was the failure to look at the context in which any policy has to be implemented. Policy issues rarely confront a *tabula rosa* situation. Rather, they are constrained by history and past practices and, as a result, it is important to look at the history of past efforts. In this case, the past was just days away. A significant element in the current situation was the failure by the Trump staff to use the transition process from Obama to Trump as a way to learn about this complex issue. Michael Lewis' book, *The Fifth Risk*, focused on this experience showing that Trump

staff actually failed to look at the materials that were created for them by Obama staff. Obama had appreciated the materials that Bush had left for him and sought to return the "favor." Thus, the Trump staff failed to use materials that had been developed by both of the earlier Presidents (one a Democrat and the other a Republican) for just such a challenge.

Ignoring the experience of the past might be appropriate in some settings (especially if it led to even more difficult situations than the original problem). But large and complex democracies that seek to carry out democratic values are likely to experience problems when they ignore the lessons of history. And history does remind us that the structure of shared powers in the United States is often the element in our system that is also ignored. Yet the debate surrounding the coronavirus issue constantly revolved around attempts to ignore federalism as well as shared powers between the three branches of government. Over and over again the constitutional role of Congress was ignored.

The systems of shared powers found in most democracies are designed to require actors in decision making to share common space and to find new ways to negotiate and craft agreement on approaches. As a result, conflict is frequently inevitable between branches and levels of government. And conflict seems to constantly produce contradictions. It cannot be ignored or eliminated but it must be managed.³ This management task is incredibly complex; it requires that players are willing to create new ways to achieve at least partial success.

Frequently failure to acknowledge the conflict that emerges from the shared powers systems has led to a number of things that might make the task even more difficult than participants assumed. By ignoring both scientific and institutional expertise, the relevant participants lack the ability to create new alternatives. In addition, failing to even consider differences between experience in the private sector and that in the public sector can lead to dead ends.

Instead of generating new possibilities, this process simply fed conflict. When participants use communication techniques that rely on filibustering, defensive behavior, and overpromises, they make it difficult to define even limited shared views. We talk about the importance of creating testing mechanisms but do not differentiate between victims or carriers of the virus. This can limit the utility of new information (even when it is collected).

We all hope that the lessons that might emerge from this experience will generate new areas of creativity and make it clear that we have all suffered as a result of our experience during the months when planet earth seemed to have gone crazy. It is clearly hard to dig ourselves out of this conflict and the management demands it has created.

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Notes

1. The classic work in this area is by Jeffrey T. Pressman and Aaron B. Wildavsky (1973).
2. The various stages of the policy process usually begin with agenda setting, move to formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation.
3. See Beryl A. Radin (2012).

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Author Biography

Beryl A. Radin is an author, researcher, and academic who has now retired from teaching. An elected member of the National Academy of Public Administration, she has written more than a dozen books and many articles on public policy and public management issues. Much of her work has focused on policy analysis, intergovernmental relationships, and federal management change. She is a recipient of the International Research Society for Public Management's Routledge Prize, the John Gaus Award, the H. George Frederickson Award, and the Donald Stone Award.