

# IDEAS, POLITICS, AND PUBLIC POLICY

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■ **Abstract** Scholars have become acutely interested in how behavior driven by ideas rather than self-interest determines policy-making outcomes. This review examines the literature on this subject. It differentiates among the types of ideas that may affect policy making (i.e., cognitive paradigms, world views, norms, frames, and policy programs) and identifies some of the persistent difficulties associated with studying how ideas shape policy. In particular, studies often do a poor job pinpointing the causal mechanisms that link ideas to policy-making outcomes. More attention needs to be paid to articulating the causal processes through which ideas exert effects. Suggestions for future scholarship that might improve this situation are offered. These include identifying the actors who seek to influence policy making with their ideas, ascertaining the institutional conditions under which these actors have more or less influence, and understanding how political discourse affects the degree to which policy ideas are communicated and translated into practice.

## INTRODUCTION

Political sociology and political science have focused on how the pursuit of self-interest affects politics and policy making in advanced capitalist societies. This has been true for pluralist, elite, neo-Marxist, historical institutionalist, and rational choice theories. Scholars have paid far less attention to how ideas, that is, theories, conceptual models, norms, world views, frames, principled beliefs, and the like, rather than self-interests, affect policy making. This is surprising given Max Weber's (1946:280) famous dictum that ideas have profound effects on the course of events, serving like switchmen who direct interest-based action down one track or another. Indeed, an earlier review of the literature on public policy domains lamented the fact that little was known about the relative importance of ideas for policy making (Burstein 1991:332–34), and that although ideas occasionally received attention in empirical analysis (e.g., Furner & Supple 1990, Reich 1988), they were rarely theorized (Friedland & Alford 1991:237). This began to change in the 1990s, often in reaction to rational choice theory (Jacobsen 1995, Thelen & Steinmo 1992), as researchers began to examine more carefully how ideas affect policy making. Today, even some rational choice theorists have conceded that ideas matter (Knight & North 1997, Levi 1997, North 1990, Ostrom 1990:33–35),

in part because they recognize that what actors believe may be just as important as what they want (Vanberg & Buchanan 1989:51).

This review takes stock of the new literature on ideas and policy making. It identifies different types of ideas that have received attention in policy research, discusses how they affect policy making, and addresses some of the more important problems social scientists need to solve in studying them. In particular, this review shows that scholars need to better specify the causal mechanisms by which ideas of various sorts affect policy making, and it suggests some ways in which this might be better done. The literature reviewed here is distinct from the more general work on culture and politics in that it focuses squarely on public policy making rather than social movements, revolutions, democratization, political development, and other political phenomena (e.g., Berezin 1997, Brint 1994b, Somers 1995). The literature also differs from the long-standing debate between idealist and materialist theories, which assumed that either ideas or interests affected public policy, but not both (J. Hall 1993). The new literature is more open to the possibility of interplay between ideas and interests (e.g., Blyth 2002). For instance, as discussed below, several researchers now contend that the ideas that actors hold affect how they define their interests in the first place.

## TYPES OF IDEAS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON POLICY MAKING

### Cognitive Paradigms and World Views

In recent extensions of the older literature on national political cultures (e.g., Almond & Verba 1963, Webber & Wildavsky 1986), scholars argue that the taken-for-granted world views of policy makers constrain the range of policy choices they are likely to consider when formulating economic, welfare, national security, and other public policies. More specifically, we may speak of cognitive paradigms, taken-for-granted descriptions and theoretical analyses that specify cause and effect relationships, that reside in the background of policy debates and that limit the range of alternatives policy makers are likely to perceive as useful (Block 1996, 1990, Heilbroner & Milberg 1995). Studies suggest that paradigms vary significantly across countries (Berman 1998, Dobbin 1994, P. Hall 1989a,b, Ziegler 1997) and over time (P. Hall 1993, 1992, Hay 2001; McNamara 1998) in ways that yield nationally specific policy responses to common policy problems.

For instance, Esping-Andersen (1999) argues that different assumptions about the tasks families perform for their members affected the range of welfare state programs created after the Second World War in Europe. In Southern Europe's Catholic countries, policy makers took for granted that the family would perform certain tasks for itself, such as providing childcare. Hence, policy makers did not provide daycare or maternity-leave programs because they assumed that families would not need them. In Scandinavian countries with different family systems, policy makers made no such assumption and supplied extensive childcare programs.

According to Esping-Andersen, until policy makers can manage to break out of these paradigms, it will be hard for them to reform their welfare programs in order to better cope with the economic, social, and demographic challenges of the twenty-first century. In other words, taken-for-granted paradigms constrain the range of policies that policy makers are likely to consider.

Two problems have pervaded much of this literature. First, it is not clear how old paradigms give way to new ones and thus how policy undergoes fundamental change (Blyth 1997, 1998). Recently, research has addressed this issue by arguing that paradigm shifts occur when policy makers suddenly find themselves faced with unusual political economic problems for which the current paradigm offers no clear-cut solutions (Dobbin 1993, P. Hall 1993, Hay 2001). For example, McNamara (1998) showed that policy makers faced new economic uncertainties during the 1970s—persistent inflation coupled with sluggish economic growth and high unemployment. This put severe pressure on fixed exchange rates and led to the collapse of Keynesianism as the guiding paradigm for monetary policy. A new set of paradigmatic ideas, monetarism, replaced Keynesianism after policy makers were convinced that they provided a more coherent explanation of the stagflation crisis. The fact that Germany had used monetarism and achieved comparatively healthy economic results was pivotal. McNamara suggested, in convincing policy makers in other countries of the new paradigm's utility. Thus, when shocks, crises, and other disturbances create policy problems for which prevailing paradigms provide little guidance, policy makers search for new ones that help them envision new policy solutions, especially if they believe that there is evidence that the new one will work.

Second, although the language of constraint is often invoked, the literature on cognitive paradigms often fails to specify just how paradigms constrain policy makers' perceptions of their options. Why is it so difficult for policy makers to break out of an old paradigm even when evidence accumulates that it no longer provides the best policy guidance, and especially since a variety of policy paradigms are often available at any given moment (Kingdon 1984:ch. 6)? At least two sorts of responses are possible (Woods 1995). Psychologists might argue that certain ideas are adopted when they involve heuristic devices, metaphors, and analogies that render complex situations manageable or justify actions after the fact. Sociologists would be more inclined to suggest that these ideas become important if they assign blame for poor performance, provide a vision for the future, create group solidarity, help build political coalitions, or further other political purposes. This is a complex issue that is dealt with in greater detail below.

## Normative Frameworks

Normative ideas consist of taken-for-granted assumptions about values, attitudes, identities, and other "collectively shared expectations" (Katzenstein 1996a:7). These also lie in the background of policy debates but constrain action by limiting the range of alternatives that elites are likely to perceive as acceptable and legitimate rather than useful means to an end. Policy makers' values, norms, and

principled beliefs may affect their position on public policies by helping them decide which policies are the most appropriate—an especially important consideration when, as is frequently the case, there is no conclusive evidence about which policy option is most likely to work best (Lipset 1996, Rein & Winship 1997, Schön & Rein 1994). In this sense, policy makers operate according to a logic of moral or social appropriateness, not a logic of consequentiality (March & Olsen 1989, Suchman 1997).

Normative differences may account for cross-national variation in macroeconomic policy (Smith 1992), foreign policy (Rohrlich 1987), and national security policy (Katzenstein 1993, Wendt 1992). They may also explain important cross-national variations in party politics. Berman (1998) maintained that during the early twentieth century social democratic parties resisted forming cross-class coalitions in Germany, but not in Sweden, because German Marxists valued a pure worker's party and the revolutionary overthrow of bourgeois parliamentary democracy, whereas their Swedish counterparts valued a more encompassing people's party and a parliamentary route to socialism. Occasionally, intractable policy controversies within and between parties can be traced to the opposing taken-for-granted values of key policy makers (e.g., Schön & Rein 1994).

Normative beliefs may be so strong that they override the self-interests of policy makers (Derthick & Quirk 1985, Quirk 1990). For instance, Skrentny (1996) suggested that U.S. policy makers—most of whom were white males—passed affirmative action legislation, which granted privileges to minorities and women, because they perceived that it was the appropriate thing to do in a Cold War moral climate where national and international audiences viewed the continued repression of minorities as illegitimate. Policy makers did so, he maintained, even though a majority of the public favored color-blind policies over those that granted preferential treatment to minorities. As a result, normative beliefs trumped self-interests as is demonstrated by policy makers passing legislation that favored social groups other than their own, and also by risking their electoral fortunes in the process.

Identities may also affect policy making. Identities are the historically constructed ideas that individuals or organizations have about who they are vis-à-vis others. Of course, studies of nationalism have long recognized the significance of identity politics (e.g., J. Hall 1998, Hutchinson & Smith 1994). Research on identities is especially important insofar as it helps us better understand how actors define their policy interests (J. Hall 1993, Jepperson et al. 1996, Piore 1995, Thelen & Steinmo 1992, Wendt 1992). As a result, this work helps fill a crucial void in our knowledge about the policy-making process. For instance, the identities of labor unions vary cross-nationally and have affected which policies unions have accepted or resisted in national debates over how best to manage global competition during the late twentieth century. The identity of Swedish unions was based historically on their ability to engage employers' associations in centralized, solidaristic wage bargaining, so they saw it in their interest to fight employers' attempts during the 1980s to decentralize this system. In contrast, the identity of Italian unions was constituted through a long history of protecting cost-of-living adjustments, which

they fought to preserve when employers moved to rescind them (Locke & Thelen 1995). Similarly, shifts in working-class identity within a particular country may trigger shifts in working-class politics. Hattam (1993) showed that U.S. workers prior to the Civil War viewed themselves as partners with employers and sought equal protection through the legislature and courts to organize collectively just as employers were permitted to do. After the war, however, they repudiated this Republican identity, redefined themselves as a class in conflict with employers, and abandoned legislative reform in favor of business unionism—direct confrontations with employers via strikes and other forms of protest. The point is that the identities of political actors shape how they perceive their interests and therefore which policies and institutions they favor.

As with cognitive paradigms, scholars do not always specify clearly the causal mechanisms whereby normative frameworks affect policy making. Sometimes, this creates problems. Skrentny (1996:9) explained that “legitimacy imperatives” underlie political action and that they “enable, shape, and constrain” politics, but he did not explain why, for instance, U.S. policy makers were so sensitive in the first place to international perceptions regarding racial inequality, or why that sensitivity only seemed to have policy-making effects after the 1960s (but see Skrentny 1998). Nor do studies always identify the sources of normative change. Hattam (1993) never explained what caused the identity shift within the American working-class upon which subsequent political changes depended. More work is needed to understand how normative beliefs and political identities are formed and affect policy making (e.g., Wendt 1992).

## World Culture

Whereas some studies invoke cognitive paradigms and normative frameworks to account for differences in public policy, others do so to explain similarities. Sociologists argue that a Western political culture diffused around the world and homogenized national political institutions and policy-making apparatuses (e.g., Meyer 1994, Meyer et al. 1987, Meyer et al. 1997a, Boli & Thomas 1999, Thomas et al. 1987). By world culture these writers mean transnational cognitive paradigms, normative frameworks, or both (Jepperson et al. 1996, Katzenstein 1996a:6)—a signal that the analytic distinction between normative and cognitive ideas is often blurred in empirical work. For instance, Meyer and his colleagues (1997b) suggested that nation states created environmental ministries after the Second World War as a result of an increasing international scientific discourse that drew attention to the fact that the earth is a fragile ecosystem. The diffusion of this world environmental culture was facilitated by the development of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to pressing governments to protect the environment, and by the creation of formal organizational arenas by the United Nations where these issues could be discussed by members of the international community.

This approach has been adopted in the field of international relations to explain policies that are difficult to understand within conventional realist or interest-based

frameworks (e.g., Katzenstein 1996b, Finnemore 1996, Woods 1995). For example, Eyre & Suchman (1996) showed that countries of vastly different sizes and security needs have adopted similar highly technical weapons systems. They argue that this is due to the fact that weapons spread not as a technical response to perceived military threats, but as a symbolic response to international norms that associate sophisticated militaries and weapons systems with nation states that are modern, independent, and socially legitimate within the community of nations. Hence, tiny countries will buy a few fighter jets that do not appreciably augment their defensive capabilities in order to conform to international norms regarding the appropriate military practices of modern nation states. Similarly, others suggested that countries with nuclear or chemical weapons generally refuse to deploy them in combat, even when the possibility of retaliation in kind is nil and their use could ensure victory, because military policy is guided by international norms that mitigate against their deployment (Price & Tannenwald 1996).

This literature has been criticized on several grounds (Finnemore 1996). First, scholars have characterized it as excessively structuralist insofar as it tends to neglect the importance of agency and actors. As a result, it is often unclear where world culture comes from and who creates it. Even NGOs are often viewed as “enactors” transmitting already existing world culture, rather than actors creating it in the first place (Keck & Sikkink 1998:33). Second, this research tends to document the isomorphic effects of world culture but not the causal mechanisms involved, often because detailed process-tracing case studies are missing (but see Keck & Sikkink 1998, Risse et al. 1999; for a more theoretical attempt, see Strang & Meyer 1993). Indeed, much of the empirical work in this tradition is based on data sets and methodological techniques that make it difficult to determine causal sequences (e.g., Meyer et al. 1997b). Third, this perspective has overlooked—and in some cases denied explicitly—how the diffusion of Western culture often involves conflict, struggle, and powerful state actors who force it on other countries (but see Risse et al. 1999). Finally, world culture is rife with deep internal contradictions (e.g., among norms favoring equality, market-based economic growth, and bureaucratic rationality). These contradictions may constrain isomorphism by triggering attacks on Western norms and values and by undermining the stability of the behavioral convergence described in much of this literature (Mittelman 2000).

## Frames

Rather than concentrating on how ideas produce differences or similarities in policy making either historically or cross-nationally, some researchers, drawing concepts from social movements theory (e.g., Gamson 1992, Snow et al. 1986, Snow & Benford 1992, Swidler 1986, Tarrow 1994), are concerned with explaining how policy makers frame policies in order to make them politically acceptable. By frames they mean normative and sometimes cognitive ideas that are located in the foreground of policy debates. In order for their policy programs to be adopted,

political elites strategically craft frames and use them to legitimize their policies to the public and each other (Anthony et al. 1994, Fligstein & Mara-Drita 1996). For instance, the concept of economic globalization has been used as a frame to justify shifts toward conservative, neoliberal policies during the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Bourdieu 1998, Hirst & Thompson 1996, Krugman 1994a,b, Piven 1995, Piven & Cloward 1996). Students of political advertising, rhetoric, and symbolic politics pay close attention to how ideas affect policy making in this way (e.g., Block 1996, Edelman 1964, Jamieson 1996).

By extension, reframing becomes an integral part of policy change. Reframing U.S. welfare, taxation, and labor market policies in racial terms has contributed to important shifts in these policy areas (e.g., Edsall & Edsall 1991, Weir 1992). Notably, efforts to reform, if not dismantle, U.S. welfare policies during the 1970s and 1980s were led by politicians who reframed means-tested welfare programs as stipends and services that were being provided to African Americans and other minorities, but paid for by allegedly exorbitant taxes on working-class whites. The idea was to frame the issue of welfare reform in such a way as to divide the working class along racial lines and generate support among white voters for reform (Quadagno 1994). Conversely, failure to effectively frame new policy proposals undermines the political viability of these proposals in the first place (Skocpol 1996, 2000, Schmidt 2001, 2000).

Three important problems recur in this literature. First, arguments about the importance of having the proper frame in order to ensure that a policy is adopted often lack empirical or counterfactual comparisons and thus appear to be functionalist so far as causality is concerned (Woods 1995). One way to avoid this problem may be to compare different policy positions and their frames in a single policy debate to determine whether different frames affected which policy received the most support (e.g., Campbell 1998, Strang & Bradburn 2001).

Second, researchers rarely explore the process by which frames are constructed, tested, transformed, and fit to the prevailing normative frameworks and cognitive paradigms residing in the background of policy debates (but see Campbell 1998, 1997, Schmidt 2001, 2000). An interesting exception is Fligstein & Mara-Drita's (1996; see also Fligstein 1997) analysis of the strategies surrounding the development of the single European market (SMP), a project that was intended to reduce trade barriers and harmonize the European economy through passage of hundreds of regulations at the European level. This project had stalled for many reasons, notably concern that the SMP threatened national sovereignty, until the European Commission and especially its president, Jacques Delors, framed it as an effort to simply facilitate the exchange of goods, services, and labor throughout Europe—something that its members were already doing—but in terms vague enough so that national political and business elites could read different interpretations into it to suit their own interests. Once framed in this fashion, the SMP became increasingly acceptable to European politicians. Of course, this sort of analysis requires careful attention to how discourse is crafted and mobilized, a subject to which we return below.

Third, insofar as policy makers act strategically, they may use frames to conceal their true motives from others whom they are trying to persuade. However, it is often difficult empirically to determine when policy makers are expressing their true motives rather than framing their arguments in terms that they believe will conform with what others want to hear. In short, how can researchers know whether policy makers are being truthful rather than manipulative framers (e.g., Campbell 1995)? A few studies have tried to adjudicate between these possibilities by conducting detailed textual analyses of policy debates in order to map the causal arguments presented by participants and then determine whether there are inconsistencies in the logic of these arguments that violate the principle of transitivity. If there are, then they conclude that actors are behaving strategically and trying to frame their arguments in ways that conceal their true motives (Anthony et al. 1994). However, if inconsistent logic might also stem simply from the intricacies of complex policy debate, then we are still left wondering what is going on. Alternatively, some scholars argue that policy makers may not be quite so cautious about concealing their interests. For instance, Hooks and his associates (1998) analyzed the content of speeches and position papers of U.S. Congressional representatives to determine the degree to which they favored military spending in their districts either because it suited the interests of their constituents or because it served some loftier purpose, such as national defense or the advancement of science. It appeared that representatives supported spending in their districts because of the local benefits it entailed, but often framed their support in rhetoric consistent with their party's general ideological philosophies. Thus, the question was not whether materialist or idealistic motivations prevailed, but how the two were blended.

## Programmatic Ideas

Policy changes may also stem from new programmatic ideas. These are precise causal (i.e., cognitive) ideas that facilitate policy making among elites by specifying how to solve particular policy problems. Policy programs are often the dependent variables for political sociologists and political scientists and are centrally located in the foreground of policy debate. In contrast to cognitive paradigms, which provide an overarching understanding of how the world works and, in turn, how political institutions and policy instruments ought to be organized in order to achieve broad policy goals, programmatic ideas are more precise guidelines about how already-existing institutions and instruments should be used in specific situations according to the principles of well-established paradigms (P. Hall 1993). Thus, policy makers adjust fiscal or monetary instruments to achieve macroeconomic goals in ways that have worked in the past, such as when Congress sought to stimulate economic growth after the First World War by reducing income tax progressivity, coverage, and rates—an approach entirely consistent with the dominant supply-side paradigm of the early twentieth century (Campbell & Allen 2001).

Much has been written about how interest-based struggles determine which programs policy makers eventually adopt, but little attention has been paid to how



the character of policy programs per se affects the chances that one will be adopted over another. A few researchers have argued that programmatic ideas expressed in the simplest and strongest terms are the ones policy makers are most likely to embrace, in part because they will be the ones policy makers most easily understand (Campbell 1998, Solow 1989). In other words, the most successful programs provide the clearest road maps out of troublesome or uncertain policy situations (Goldstein 1993, Goldstein & Keohane 1993). As a result, clear policy programs provide powerful weapons in public policy struggles (Blyth 1998, Kingdon 1984). Of course, determining objectively and empirically which programs are simplest or clearest can be difficult.

Others have suggested that programs that provide focal points around which policy makers can most easily build political coalitions are those that policy makers are likely to adopt (Goldstein 1993, Kingdon 1984, Moore 1988). Hence, one reason the Republican Party pursued protectionist trade policy between 1870 and 1930 was that it provided a means for maintaining its fractious party coalition even though a more open trade policy might have better served the interests of most of its members (Goldstein 1993:ch. 3). The importance of ideas as focal points may increase the more equal the power is among contending policy-making actors, and the more uncertain actors are about the consequences of different policies (Garrett & Weingast 1993). However, much more work needs to be done on the subject, perhaps through detailed analyses of particular policy-making episodes where investigators probe the rationales of policy makers and their advisors who advocate the adoption of one program rather than another.

## THE ISSUE OF CAUSAL MECHANISMS

As noted above, one of the most important problems with the literature on ideas and policy making is that the causal mechanisms whereby different types of ideas affect policy making are often poorly specified (Yee 1996). However, scholars have made some progress.

### Actors and Epistemic Communities

One way to explain how ideas affect policy making is to show through careful process tracing how specific actors carried certain ideas into the policy-making fray and used them effectively. These actors are often academics and other intellectuals whose claim to knowledge and expertise enables their voice to be heard above others (Brint 1994a). For example, Skowronek (1982) argued that an intellectual vanguard of university-trained professionals, economists, and other progressive thinkers were among America's most valuable state-building resources during the early twentieth century. They played key roles in the development of a more professional, bureaucratic U.S. state by providing all sorts of new ideas about how to better organize the state and exercise state power. Intellectuals were also important in advancing various programmatic ideas about how to build welfare

states in Europe and North America (Rueschemeyer & Skocpol 1996). Similarly, think tanks, research institutes, and university academics—notably economists—have affected industrial and macroeconomic policy making (Domhoff 1998:ch. 4; Ricci 1993; Stone 1996; Smith 1991, 1989).

At the international level “epistemic communities” are responsible for generating new ideas and disseminating them among national policy makers as well as others in the international community. Epistemic communities are networks of professionals and experts with an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge, who share a set of normative beliefs, causal models, notions of empirical validity, and a common policy enterprise (Haas 1992). Keck & Sikkink (1998) argued that these networks are especially important because their members are often responsible for generating the very ideas that constitute the world culture, discussed earlier, to which sociologists attribute isomorphic effects at the national level. Moreover, Keck & Sikkink specified more carefully than most world culture researchers how these transnational networks mobilize and frame information, and how they convince powerful international actors, such as the World Bank and U.S. government, to press nation states that are reluctant to adopt internationally accepted human rights, environmental, and other policies (see also Risse et al. 1999). As such, their contribution is threefold. First, they delineated several causal mechanisms through which world culture affects national policy makers, thereby injecting a degree of agency into the otherwise structuralist world culture literature. Second, they addressed the important debate over whether a few centralized hegemonic organizations (e.g., McNamara 1998, Pauly 1997) or decentralized networks of organizations and individuals, each of which is rather weak on its own (e.g., Boli & Thomas 1999), are responsible for the diffusion of world culture. For Keck & Sikkink, both matter. Third, they showed that the diffusion of world culture often involves much struggle, conflict, and even repression. Indeed, diffusion is a much more uneven and contested process than much of the literature suggests (see also Mittelman 2000).

### **Institutional Filters and Embeddedness**

Of course, actors do not operate in a vacuum. Many researchers have argued that the formal rules and procedures governing policy making affect which ideas penetrate the policy-making process and are adopted and implemented as policy. In other words, institutions influence the degree to which academics, other intellectuals, and thus new policy ideas can access policy-making arenas. This sort of institutional filtering has affected economic policy (P. Hall 1989a,b), welfare policy (Weir & Skocpol 1985), energy policy (Campbell 1988, Jasper 1990), and national security policy (Risse-Kappan 1994). Studies have paid less attention to the informal channels through which this occurs, but insofar as intellectuals and policy makers travel in the same social circles, social as well as political institutions can act as filters in this sense (Domhoff 1974, Rueschemeyer & Skocpol 1996). For instance, one reason why national unemployment insurance was passed in Britain was that liberal social scientists from Oxford University, who favored

such a program, mingled in the same clubs, associations, and other social venues as London's political elite and urged them to adopt this idea. As a result, when the Liberal Party came to power in the early twentieth century, many of these intellectuals were appointed to key administrative posts where they helped formulate the program, which was passed in 1911 (Schwebber 1996). Indeed, the ways in which idea-producing institutions, such as the professions and universities, are linked to the state helps determine which ideas affect policy making (Ziegler 1997).

Another criticism of the world culture literature is that the diffusion of policy ideas is a more complex and institutionally mediated process than generally acknowledged. When new policy ideas diffuse internationally, they are translated into national practice in unique ways that fit with prevailing national political institutions. Soysal (1994) showed how governments incorporated a new international discourse on postnational personhood and human rights into policy to assist immigrants in various European countries, but tailored it to conform to their pre-existing political norms and institutions. Statist France provided for the national government to handle immigrant affairs, corporatist Sweden provided for the organization of centralized immigrant organizations to participate in national policy bargaining, liberal Britain enacted laws against discrimination and racial inequality that could be deployed on an individual basis through the courts. Similar translation processes are evident as policy models are adopted across subnational governments (Strang & Bradburn 2001). As a result, the process of policy diffusion does not always lead to as much isomorphism or homogenization as this literature often claims (Campbell 2001, Kitschelt et al. 1999).

Finally, some scholars have argued that ideas exert long-term effects on policy making by becoming embedded in the law and institutionalized in administrative procedures, programs, and bureaucracies. They also claim that once programmatic and paradigmatic ideas are institutionalized in these ways they generate constituencies that defend them whenever they come under attack later. Consequently, institutionalized ideas help us understand the prolonged stability or path-dependent nature of public policy (e.g., Goldstein 1993, Goldstein & Keohane 1993, Pierson 1993, 1994, Skocpol 1992).

However provocative these notions about the relationships between ideas and institutions may be, critics charge that they are flawed (Yee 1996, Jacobsen 1995). To begin with, the path-dependent argument suffers because once ideas have become institutionalized in rules, procedures, agencies, and the like, it is no longer clear whether the ideas or the institutions within which they are embedded are more important for future policy-making episodes. Similarly, the actor-centered approach fails to differentiate the effects of ideas themselves from the effects of the actors who bear them. Researchers have found that the status of the actors bearing new ideas affects the odds that policy makers will adopt their ideas (Goldstein 1993:15). In other words, the persuasiveness of ideas is assumed rather than analytically partitioned and empirically demonstrated. In turn, some of these critics suggest that if we are concerned with understanding how ideas themselves affect policy making, then a more fruitful approach is to focus on the nature of political discourse.

## Discourse

Studies have tried to identify how the taken-for-granted paradigms and normative frameworks that reside in the background of policy-making episodes, and of which policy makers are often unaware, constrain policy making, as is often claimed. To do so, they have explored how the structure of political discourse and language shapes how policy ideas are communicated and translated into practice. Typically, they maintain that pre-existing discursive structures (i.e., concepts, metaphors, linguistic codes, rules of logic, etc.) contain cognitive and normative elements that mediate which policy programs policy makers can best perceive, understand, articulate, and as a result, which policy ideas they are likely to adopt (e.g., Alexander & Smith 1993, Block 1990, Bourdieu 1998, Go 1999, Hay 1996, 2001). Block (1996), for instance, argued that a variety of extraordinarily vivid anti-statist images, metaphors, stories, and analogies—notably that of a “vampire state” sucking the blood out of the economy—underpin much policy discourse in the United States and, therefore, effectively impede discussion of alternative policy approaches that might favor increased or different forms of state economic intervention.

However, claiming that discourse has these effects is one thing, empirically proving it is another. Several approaches are available. First, some researchers demonstrated through experiments that political actors are more likely to favor policy interpretations that best conform to their cognitive schema and political beliefs. Because political decisions are made by people who are subject to the limits of bounded rationality, they inevitably use cognitive and normative heuristics and short-cuts to form their opinions (e.g., Lau et al. 1991; for a review see Jones 1999). Thus, following Block (1996), if advocates of a particular policy position can saturate the political landscape with metaphors and other discursive short-cuts well enough so that they become part of people’s taken-for-granted cognitive schema, then people will tend to prefer their position. Second, investigators interviewed policy makers to map their policy preferences and then determine how they interpret the policy consequences of policy-relevant events, such as environmental accidents. Results have suggested that these maps were good predictors of policy makers’ interpretations of both simulated and real events (Bonham et al. 1978, Shapiro et al. 1988). Finally, there are qualitative approaches emphasizing thick historical description and process tracing. These studies use detailed analyses of policy documents, debates, and histories to determine, for instance, how policy makers define problems and crises depending on their normative and cognitive presuppositions (Hay 1996, 2001, Rochefort & Cobb 1994), or the degree to which new policy ideas are blended with these presuppositions to facilitate policy change in different policy-making contexts (Kjaer & Pedersen 2001, Schmidt 2001, 2000). As such, the degree to which discursive structures influence policy is said to be a function of how closely a new policy initiative resembles either the new ideal upon which it is based or the old policy principles already in use. For example, Vogel (1996) showed that neoliberal principles of market deregulation were translated into practice in very different ways across countries depending

in part on the prevailing national policy discourses. Vogel notwithstanding, some have criticized this approach because it fails to specify the processes whereby new ideas are blended with old ones, and it does not test ideational hypotheses against alternatives (Yee 1996:102).

## CONCLUSION

Scholars have tried to synthesize some of the concepts and arguments reviewed here in order to specify the conditions under which different types of ideas matter the most. Some share the view that different types of ideas have different effects at different stages of the policy-making process (e.g., Blyth 2002, 1998, Campbell 1998, Woods 1995). For instance, Goldstein (1993:ch. 1) suggests four stages: Old policy programs are delegitimized when they are perceived to fail for some reason; a search for new ones results when policy entrepreneurs are attracted to programs that appear logical and that conform to their normative frameworks and cognitive paradigms; once identified, new programs are implemented and tested in practice; if policy makers perceive that they work, then they will become institutionalized, often through legal mechanisms, into formal government organizations. Other scholars have argued that policy makers adopt new policies only if they conform to the contingencies of the moment. Peter Hall (1989, see also Kingdon 1984) maintained that in order for new economic policy programs to be embraced, they must simultaneously fulfill three conditions. First, they must be economically viable insofar as they appear to resolve relevant economic problems and be consistent with the nation's economic structure (i.e., its size, degree of trade openness, sophistication of financial system, etc.). Second, they must be administratively viable insofar as they are feasible given the existing set of state capacities. Third, they must be politically viable insofar as they do not fundamentally threaten key interest groups and, conversely, provide the basis for building political coalitions. In either case, this work seeks to better understand the connections between ideas, institutions, and interests and, as a result, constitutes an important part of the latest work in the new institutional analysis in political sociology and political science (Campbell & Pedersen 2001).

Finally, it is important to note that although much of the literature on ideas, politics, and public policy rejects the old idealist notion that ideas rather than interests matter, many researchers still begin by asking under what conditions ideas matter more or less than interests (e.g., Goldstein & Keohane 1993, McDonough 1997). This is certainly an important question, but one that could lead back to the old debate between idealist versus materialist explanations of politics in that it holds open the possibility that under at least some conditions ideas may matter substantially more than interests. A more fruitful approach would ask how ideas and interests interact (Campbell 2002, J. Hall 1993, P. Hall 1993, Jacobsen 1995, Risse et al. 1999, Suchman 1997). Research on how identities influence how actors, such as labor unions, define their interests is one example of how this sort

of question provides insights into important political phenomena (e.g., Locke & Thelen 1985, Hattam 1993). Another illustration is the research on transnational advocacy networks that shows how an interest-based rational actor model can be combined with an idea-based social constructionist model to provide significant insights into the processes whereby new policy programs are spread internationally (Keck & Sikkink 1998, Risse et al. 1999). By asking how ideas and interests connect and affect each other, scholars can avoid the pitfalls of the old idealist versus materialist debate about the nature of public policy making.

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