

# Policy Networks as Collective Action

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*An important contribution to the policy sciences, and to interorganizational research in particular, has been the introduction of the so-called policy network approach. Despite the fact that this approach has produced a multitude of concepts, it still lacks a theoretical scaffold. In this article it is argued that simply to refer to something called "network theory" is an unsatisfactory solution. It is suggested that one way of advancing the policy network approach is to apply collective action theory and explicitly regard different empirical appearances of network concepts as expressions of collective action. Six tentative building blocks of such a theory are suggested. It is further argued that the policy network approach would benefit from incorporation into a broader analytical framework such as the Institutional Analysis and Development framework. Finally, it is concluded that such an incorporation would advance our ability to understand the processes of policymaking and thus to fulfill one of the old commitments of policy analysis, namely to contribute to the refinement of policymaking processes in society.*

Since the 1950s the policy sciences have searched new ways, influenced by the line of inquiry that Harold Lasswell initiated (Lasswell, 1968). The past 20 years has been a vital period that might be characterized by a re-conceptualization of the phenomenon of policymaking (Dunn & Kelly, 1992). The debate between top-down and bottom-up is an expression of this (Sabatier, 1986a). A major contribution to the field has been the introduction of the so-called *network approach* within policy science (Kenis & Scheider, 1991).

This approach has been developed as an antidote to a more conventional view of the process, *the textbook version* of policymaking (Nakamura, 1987). The question is to what extent this development has advanced the frontier for political research and in what ways. In this article it is argued that, despite the fact that the network approach has produced a multitude of concepts, it still lacks a theoretical scaffold. One way out of this dilemma would be to regard different empirical appearances of the network concepts as expressions of *collective action*. While there is no network theory of policymaking that can explain or predict policy outcomes in contemporary society, policy networks are to be understood as "concrete systems of action" (Crozier & Friedberg, 1980, p. 124) that take part in the ongoing process of establishing order in society. These types of collective action must be explained with reference to adequate theory. Referring to something called "network theory" is hardly a fruitful solution. Here it is argued that the application of collective theory would advance the network approach.

Policy networks should not be looked upon as a kind of deviation from an ideal procedure of policymaking. A fruitful line of inquiry would therefore be to explicitly adopt a theoretical framework that can incorporate collective action *and* be used to scrutinize the outcomes of the activities of different kinds of policy networks. A great thrill for the policy sciences would be to a greater extent treat networks as independent rather than as dependent variables, i.e., not only to describe the features and structure of networks but also to demonstrate to what

extent they have some explanatory power. This, it is argued, would significantly advance the frontier of policy analysis.

The article is organized as follows. First the textbook version of policymaking is compared with the network approach. Second, the shortcomings of the latter approach are discussed. Third, collective action theory is introduced as a possible way of advancing the network approach beyond its multitude of concepts and metaphors. Fourth, it is suggested that the "Bloomington School" of policy analysis provides an analytical framework, the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, that could both encompass the policy network approach, preferably armed with collective action theory, as well as assist our efforts to evaluate the outcomes from different types of policy networks. Finally, some building blocks for a policy network theory of collective action are proposed.

## **Textbook Policymaking**

The "textbook" version of policymaking describes the policy process as an ordered sequence of activities. The *stage model of policymaking* covers this description of the process. According to this model the process can be partitioned and analyzed as a sequence of separate activities: "Agenda setting, problem definition, formulation, implementation, evaluation and termination" (Kelly & Palumbo, 1992, p. 651). This model,<sup>1</sup> which actually reflects a certain image of political governance, is regarded as a "dominant paradigm of the policy process—the stages heuristic" (Sabatier, 1991a, p. 31). In order to make this model a logical reflection of reality, an underlying assumption of political hierarchy is necessary. According to the stage model, policies are created, decided, and implemented, and this will logically require superior and subordinated units, i.e., the presence of a political administrative hierarchy (Carlsson, 1996).

The fact that this is a misspecification of the policy process has been understood for a long period of time (Dunn & Kelly, 1992; Lasswell, 1956; Lindblom, 1965; MacIver, 1947; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Sabatier, 1999; Wildavsky, 1993). In contemporary society, systems of law, i.e., "law making, law enforcing, and law adjudicating," are normally connected to different processes, all of which are supposed to reflect local circumstances such as resource configurations, belief systems, etc. Therefore, "[how] these structures and processes are both differentiated and linked to one other in a more general process of governance is subject to considerable variation in different systems of governance" (V. Ostrom, 1991, p. 108).<sup>2</sup> Hence, in a mixed economy we might anticipate the existence of many types of governance and thus, modes of policymaking.

To summarize, both on theoretical grounds and with reference to empirical findings, the textbook approach is misleading. It refers to a normative view of policymaking rather than reflects how contemporary societies are governed. Presumably the policy network approach will serve as an alternative to this image.

## **A Network Perspective on Policymaking**

The network perspective rejects the rational model of policymaking. Typical of this approach is a reluctance to predict specific outcomes on the basis of policy programs or decisions. The label "policy network," however, is very

general, and will cover such disparate approaches as the *implementation structure approach* (Hjern & Porter, 1983), the *advocacy coalition framework* (Sabatier, 1991b; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993), *interorganization approaches* (Hanf & Scharpf, 1978), and Charles Lindblom's theory of *policymaking systems* (Lindblom, 1965). Can these constructs be understood as representing the same underlying phenomena, are they models, or do they only serve as metaphors for interrelated activities? Without passing judgment in this debate, and for the purpose of this paper, the following statement will suffice: the policy network approach represents "a decentralized concept of social organization and governance" (Kenis & Schneider, 1991, p. 26).

Proponents of the network perspective argue that in order to understand how policies are actually created in society one has to search for *problem-solving structures*, rather than focus on formal, political authorities, their decisions and programs. Whether political decisions, programs, or agencies are relevant for this problem-solving process is consequently an empirical question. According to this view, the formal political skeleton has to prove its importance, not be taken for granted. This is the ultimate departure from the stage model of policymaking, which regards a single political decision or a single policy program as a natural point of departure for the analysis. There are, however, other network concepts that explicitly recognize the primacy of political agencies and decisions.

The approach has also been criticized. For example, the implementation structure approach has been criticized because of its affiliation with bottom-up techniques of data collection. The substance of the critique is that, even though bottom-up research has generated a great number of case studies, these studies have made few contributions to the theory (Sabatier, 1986b). Moreover, it has also been argued that implementation research in general has had a very limited impact on real-life policymaking (Hecllo, 1972; Palumbo, 1987; Wittrock, 1982). This is also the case with other approaches explicitly adopting a policy network perspective. It seems that we still lack good theories of policymaking in contemporary society, but to what extent can the network approach provide a firm foundation for such a development?

## **The Flora and Fauna of Policy Networks**

The term "policy network" can be understood as a broad generic category with a great number of subcategories. Policy networks are "cluster[s] or complexes of organizations connected to each other by resource dependencies and distinguished from other clusters or complexes by breaks in the structure of resource dependencies" (Benson, in Rhodes, 1990, p. 304). The term presupposes the existence of two main features, links and actors, viewed from a horizontal rather than a vertical perspective. But how can a link be understood, and what exactly is an actor? What constitutes the very existence of a policy network? These questions cannot be answered with reference to network characteristics only. Describing cars as consisting of "parts" attached to each other does not have any descriptive or explanatory power. One cannot explain how they work, why there are cars, or how they might affect society.

Viewing policy networks as clusters of *organizations*, as the quotation above indicates, is only one way of defining the phenomenon. "The term 'network' merely denotes, in a suggestive manner, the fact that policymaking includes a large number of public and private actors from different levels and functional areas of government and society" (Hanf & Scharpf, 1978, p. 12). The difference between

this and the previous definition by Benson is that, in the first definition, the nodes of the network are organizations. According to the latter, actors might also be individuals. Whether they "represent" a corporate actor is not part of the definition. This is an empirical question, not an analytical one.

Having this remark in mind, how can the network perspective on policymaking be summarized? Let me suggest the following characteristics. The network perspective can be distinguished by its (a) nonhierarchical way of perceiving the policymaking process, (b) its focus on functional rather than on organizational features, and finally (c) its horizontal scope. Do not these criteria also apply to pure corporatism? No, "the characteristics of corporatism such as the aggregation of interests, licensing of groups, monopoly of representation and regulation of members" (Rhodes, 1990, p. 303) are not typical for policy networks. Obviously, the notion of policy networks captures something other than pure corporatism, and something different from pluralism. Nor can the phenomena it represents be understood within the Marxist or elitist frameworks. How then can these phenomena be understood?

*Policy Networks* can be regarded as a broad generic category.

A policy network is described by its actors, their linkages and its boundary. It includes a relatively stable set of mainly public and private corporate *actors*. The *linkages* between the actors serve as channels for communication and for the exchange of information, expertise, trust and other policy resources. The *boundary* of a given policy network is not in the first place determined by formal institutions but results from a process of mutual recognition dependent on functional relevance and structural embeddedness. Policy networks should be seen as integrated hybrid structures of political governance (Kenis & Schneider, 1991, p. 41–42, italics in original).

This broad category can be divided into numerous subcategories.

*Subgovernments* can be understood as "small groups of political actors, both governmental and non-governmental that specialize in specific issue areas" (Rhodes, 1990, p. 297). *Iron Triangles* represent "a closed and stable relationship between an interest group(s), a governmental agency and a US congressional committee. All participants have compatible goals and their activities are mutually supportive" (Jordan & Schubert, 1992, p. 21).

*Policy Community* serves as a label for "shared experience, common specialist language, staff interchange, and frequency and mode of communication" (Hogwood in Jordan, 1990, p. 327). A policy community is "a special type of stable network which has advantages in encouraging bargaining in policy resolution. In this language the policy network is a statement of shared interests in a policy problem: a policy community exists where there are effective shared 'community' of views on the problem" (Jordan, 1990, p. 327).<sup>3</sup>

These concepts can be compared with *Epistemic Communities*, "network[s] of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area" (Haas, 1992, p. 3), or *Issue Networks*: "shared-knowledge group[s] having to do with some aspect (or, as defined by the network, some problem) of public policy" (Hecl, 1978, p. 103).

Explicitly focusing on the implementation side of the policy process, an *Implementation Structure* is understood as a group of actors trying to solve a

common policy problem. This unit of analysis is not understood by reference to political administrative logic. An implementation structure is defined by its participants (Hjern & Porter, 1983). Finally, constituting relevant parts of political subsystems, *Advocacy Coalitions* are supposed to be important units of analysis in understanding policy change over time. These coalitions consist of

people from a variety of positions (elected and agency officials, interest group leaders, researchers, etc.) who share a particular belief system—that is, a set of basic values, causal assumptions, and problem perceptions—and who show a nontrivial degree of coordinated activity over time (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993, p. 25).

Indeed there are many other network concepts developed within the field of policy sciences (Börzel, 1997; cf. Dowding, 1995; Hill, 1995; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993, Chaps. 1 and 2).

Recently a more postmodern approach to policymaking and public administration has added new concepts, e.g., *Public Energy Field* “the playing field of political discourse; here is where public policy gets created and re-created. [...] *energy* implies that the field is sufficiently charged with meaning and intention” (Fox & Miller, 1995, p. 10). Whether the network label can capture these latter concepts is not obvious. It can be suggested that they belong to a more discourse analytic tradition within political science (Blunden & Dando, 1995; Bogason, 2000; Bogason, 1995; deHaven-Smith, 1990; Fischer, 1993; Hawkeworth, 1992; Roe, 1994; Schram, 1993). Here, they are assumed to represent the same underlying phenomena as the other network constructs do, and thus express a *nonhierarchical view of policymaking*.

Different ways of comparing network constructs have been used (Bogason & Toonen, 2000; Börzel, 1997; Dowding, 1995; Jordan, 1990; Jordan & Schubert, 1992; Rhodes, 1990; Rhodes & Marsh, 1992; van Waarden, 1992; Yishai, 1992). For example, Rhodes and Marsh (1992) distinguish between policy communities and issue networks by using characteristics such as membership and degree of integration. Policy communities are found to be smaller, more integrated, and hierarchical than issue networks. Using the creation of health policy in Israel as an illustration, Yael Yishai (1992) introduces the idea of a sequence of concepts. When the new state of Israel was formed, Yishai argues, no public health policy was yet developed; a *policy curtain* prevailed. In a second phase actors constituted an *iron triangle*, in the third an *issue network*, and in the beginning of the 1970s a *policy community* was formed. Finally, the creation of a health policy has ended up in a situation that Yishai labels an *iron duet*, i.e., a mixture of the three latter network concepts that has formed an “alliance between the state and the experts” (Yishai, 1992, p. 96). Each one of the concepts can thus be described by two variables: *dependence* among actors and the possibility of *exclusion*. For example, issue networks are characterized by a low degree of exclusion and dependence, policy communities by a high degree of dependence but a low degree of excludability, and so forth.

One basic question is to what extent different appearances and notions connected to the network perspective capture the same phenomenon? It is obvious that despite fruitful attempts, as the ones described above, to distinguish between different concepts there are still many overlaps. What is needed for the task is some principles for such a classification, but such principles ought to be derived from some kind of theory. Without theory any observation is relevant as a basis

for comparison. One of the main points of this article is that such a policy network theory is not yet developed. That is why, in their essence, most approaches are still descriptive.

Questioning the fruitfulness of these kinds of descriptive approaches, Keith Dowding advocates a more formal analysis in which properties of networks supposedly can be explained. He concludes that "to promise that network analysis will eventually go beyond demonstrating general features of networks will ultimately lead to disappointment" (Dowding, 1995, p. 158).

However, this is exactly the aim of a policy analysis adopting a network perspective. If policymaking is assumed to be performed by something called networks of actors rather than by formal political units, this is the same as to say that *the creation of politics and its outcome will differ, depending on how a policy area is organized*. Supposedly issue networks will produce other results than policy communities, but such studies are scarce. However, in an excellent study Provan and Milward (1995) demonstrate how the network approach can be used to evaluate network performance (other similar examples are Carlsson, 1993, 1995; Hull & Hjern, 1987; John & Cole, 1995).

If we accept the idea that distinct network concepts distinguish between different ways of producing policy, it might perhaps be interesting to provide a deeper explanation of how these differences come about. All explanations require theory, but the processes of policymaking in society are multifarious, and no single theory captures this complexity. It has been argued that the attempts to develop theories of the policy process based on the network approach have obvious shortcomings. Especially when they try to build bridges to approaches where network features (such as advocacy coalitions, etc.) characterize the State. These attempts

will fail to produce fundamental *theories* of the policy process. They fail because the driving force of explanation, the independent variables, are not network characteristics *per se* but rather characteristics of components within the network. These components explain both the nature of the network *and* the nature of the policy process (Dowding, 1995, p. 137).

One solution to this problem of analysis is to explicitly connect network analysis to the "State" and to establish a "meso-level" theory between micro and macro. This reliance on the state would, presumably, provide the order we search for. According to Dowding, however, even these attempts will fail. Thus, the big hurdle seems to be the image of the State:

A true theory must be generalizable to all objects to which it is supposed to be applicable. It should be able to explain variance between those objects as well as explaining similarities. Too often state theories are about different types of state—thus some states are seen as more pluralist than others, some as more elitist than others, *some as more autonomous than others*. But if this is so then none of the 'theories' is about 'the state'. You cannot have a theory about dogs which only applies to alsatians and not poodles, then study two dogs and conclude that one is more poodle-like and another is more alsatian-like. That is not a theory; it is a system of classification. Any theory of the state must specify how we expect different actors (institutions, people, groups or whatever) to behave *under different institutional arrangement*. Few extant so-called theories of the state do this. (Dowding, 1995, p. 141)

Moreover, the findings from decades of policy research tell us that the state is a fuzzy concept and that

all Western democracies have recourse to systems of governance that always imply multi-organizational arrangements. Something called "the government" or "the state" is either a misnomer or is being used as a proper name to identify some particular entity in a more complex configuration of rulership that exists in such societies (V. Ostrom, 1985, p. 14).

The network approach illustrates and gives support for this observation.

Another way of connecting network analysis to the concept of a rule-ordered society is the idea of "empirical constitutionalism" (Hjern & Hull, 1982). According to this approach the summation of activities performed in a society will create a constitutional base, i.e., rules specifying the terms and conditions of governance would emanate from the activities themselves. Taking these ideas as a prescription of how to perform policy analysis will, however, cause other types of problems. The task of political science is to explain how people's daily activities constitute an order that holds society together, but also to explain how this order can be inheritable. Since day-to-day activities are more fleeting than the underlying rules, which specify the terms and conditions for them, the activities themselves cannot provide a sufficient basis for political theory. This is illustrated by Kiser and Ostrom (1982). If society is looked upon only as a mixture of loosely coupled activities, political science will be trivial, and in the worst case only devoted to the enumeration of activities. Then Paul Sabatier's (and other) criticism will be supported even more by case studies with limited contribution to policymaking theory. The problem seems to be to scrutinize the "rules of the game" (North, 1991), i.e., the kinds of institutional arrangements that exist in a society perceived as messy and occupied by networks and other soft units.

## **Collective Action With Many Faces**

Policy networks are to be understood as *organized entities* that reflect specific types of institutional arrangements, i.e., systems of rules in use (Kiser & Ostrom, 1982, p. 184; North, 1991). This is the same as to say that actual processes of information management establish common rules. The main prerequisite for labeling organized arrangements as institutions is the existence of the possibility of sanctioning infringements.<sup>4</sup> Such possibilities may vary a lot among different networks.

In rare cases policy networks might be regarded as organizations, i.e., systems of "consciously coordinated activities of forces of two or more persons explicitly created to achieve specific ends" (Downs, 1967, p. 24), but this is not how networks are normally conceived. While policy networks should not be understood as organizations, they should nevertheless be perceived as *organized entities*, and thus, collectively acting units. Organizing implies the "division of labor into various tasks to be performed and the coordination of these tasks to accomplish the activity" (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 2). This is what policy networks are all about, i.e., the distributing of tasks among different actors and the creation of an intelligent conformity, or coordination, to guide the activities performed. In other words, the types of "multiactor" joint actions that are achieved through policy networks ought to be regarded as instances of collective action.

Generally, collective action is defined as “actions taken by members of a group to further their common interest” (Bogdanor, 1987, p. 113). This definition, however, narrows the possible appearances of the phenomenon. People can act jointly without common interests, and they can definitely pursue common enterprises outside the realms of formal organizations. Even if we accept the definition, it can be asked whether compatible or complementary interests could also be regarded as “common.” We might also contemplate on what the concept of a “group” really means. Thus, the phenomenon collective action is not a unitary concept. This is captured in Figure 1. The matrix illustrates the relation between formal coordination of actors and the extent to which their interests are common.<sup>5</sup> Coordination is defined as “an intelligent conformity,” i.e., a mutual adjustment in a system of activities (Kaufmann, 1986, p. 221 ff.). However, the aim is not to make a typology of network constructs, but rather to advocate the point that the empirical reality of collective and thus “multiactor” joint action is many-headed.

Box B in Figure 1 the ideal-typical form of collective action, i.e., a group of individuals unified by common interests into a single organization. People join the organization because of their common interests, and the organization provides a high degree of coordination among its members. In his path-breaking book, “The Logic of Collective Action,” Mancur Olson (1971) uses a trade union as a typical example. One might ask if advocacy coalitions, for example, also fall into this category of collective action. Presumably, actors who hold a common view coordinate their activities in order to pursue their interests.

**Figure 1**  
**The Relation Between Degree of Common Interest and Coordination of Actors; Different Instances of Collective Action<sup>a</sup>**

		INTERESTS	
		Divergent	Common
THE EXISTENCE OF FORMAL COORDINATION	Yes	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>
	No	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>

**Source:** <sup>a</sup> Adapted after Meyer and Zucker (1989), p. 99.

In box D we find quite a different form of collective action—people unified by a common interest. But although their interests coincide, formal coordination is lacking. Issue networks have these characteristics; they are loosely coupled and have a low degree of formal coordination. They are, as Rhodes and March (1992) conclude, less integrated and less hierarchical compared with policy communities. Box C can be exemplified by a type of collective action where people with divergent interests might direct their activities in relation to a particular policy problem. For example, Carlsson (1993) has demonstrated how a



mixture of actors with divergent interests, and without being parties to formal coordination, might form implementation structures that significantly affect the creation of local economic policies.<sup>6</sup>

Box A illustrates a form of collective action closely related to the general characteristics of policy networks that was previously discussed. Networks can be strongly integrated and the level of coordination may be significant, but at the same time individual participants in these networks might have quite disparate interests. Their interests might be compatible or complementary but not necessarily common. The coordination of actors, however, can be regarded as fairly high. For example, without directly interacting with each other, two actors can be coordinated by a third actor. This is typical for policy networks (see, for example, Charles Lindblom, 1965, *The Intelligence of Democracy*).

Note, however, that the concept of coordination is quite ambiguous. Luther Gulick, for instance, makes a distinction between coordination "by organization," and coordination "by dominance of an idea" (Gulick, 1937, p. 6). "Meaning, rules and interactive problem-solving" can also serve as sources of "intelligent conformity" among people (Kaufmann, 1986, p. 215). In Figure 1, coordination "by organization" is the definition used. If, however, we reinterpret the matrix, and use *dominance of an idea* as the indicator of coordination, our discussion will turn out differently. Using this definition of coordination, the participants in an issue network, or in an implementation structure, can be said to be coordinated by their common ideas, a shared view on their task, etc.<sup>7</sup>

The conclusion of this discussion is that all instances of collective action possess the qualities of being organized and coordinated, whether the participating actors have common interests or not. Independently of the approach to the process of policymaking, collective action is its basic feature; people act together in order to achieve some desirable outcomes, even if these outcomes are not equally desirable for every individual. Since collective action has many different appearances, so consequently has policymaking. This variety of collective action reflects and captures different types of order that prevail in society. Markets, hierarchies, and networks are not principles that constitute mutually excludable ways of coordinating social life. (Thompson, 1991) The existence of policy networks illustrates this. For example, implementation structures or issue networks might encompass companies, political authorities, as well as NGOs, all of which illustrate different ways of ordering social life. What networks actually capture are problem-specific ways of *organizing* policy areas by different forms of *collective action*. One way for advancing the policy network perspective would therefore be to explicitly refer to collective action theory. How can this be done, and what would be the advantages of such a development?

## **Theories Need Adequate Frameworks**

As we have seen, the policy network approach embodies a multitude of concepts, but concepts have no explanatory power. A *concept* should be conceived as "a regularity in events or objects designated by the same label" (Novak & Gowin, 1990, p. 4), i.e., "a mental device for interpreting a unit in the stream of sensations that we experience" (Robertson, 1994, p. 25). Concepts are "packages of meaning" (Pine, 1985, p. 108). Thus, the processes of *conceptualization* would be the same as "the creation and/or adoption and preservation of symbolic meaning" (Pine, 1985, p. 108). Hence, different network concepts should be understood as devices for designating regularities in a stream of interorganizational

activities. Precisely what configurations these activities might form and what kinds of outcome could be associated with different networks cannot be scrutinized without reference to a coherent theoretical framework.

*Frameworks* are broad conceptualizations of problems under focus. They help us to organize our thinking and thus, our investigations. A framework provides a general list of variables and can serve as a help to generate questions that have to be addressed (Ostrom, Gardner, & Walker, 1994, chap. 2). Frameworks are not theories, however.

With reference to the discussion above it can be underlined that, for example, the *advocacy coalition framework* is a framework, and not a theory, but encompasses a theory of policy change. In the same way it must be emphasized that the "stage model" of policymaking is a heuristic, not in fact a model and definitely not a theory of political governance. The fact that this is frequently forgotten sometimes causes problems. Hence, while *frameworks* should be understood as broad conceptualizations, *heuristics* provide aid to learning, discovery, or problem-solving but are otherwise unjustified. *Models* are precise assumptions about specific relations between variables and their outcomes, while *theories* can be described as deductive systems of hypotheses or propositions.

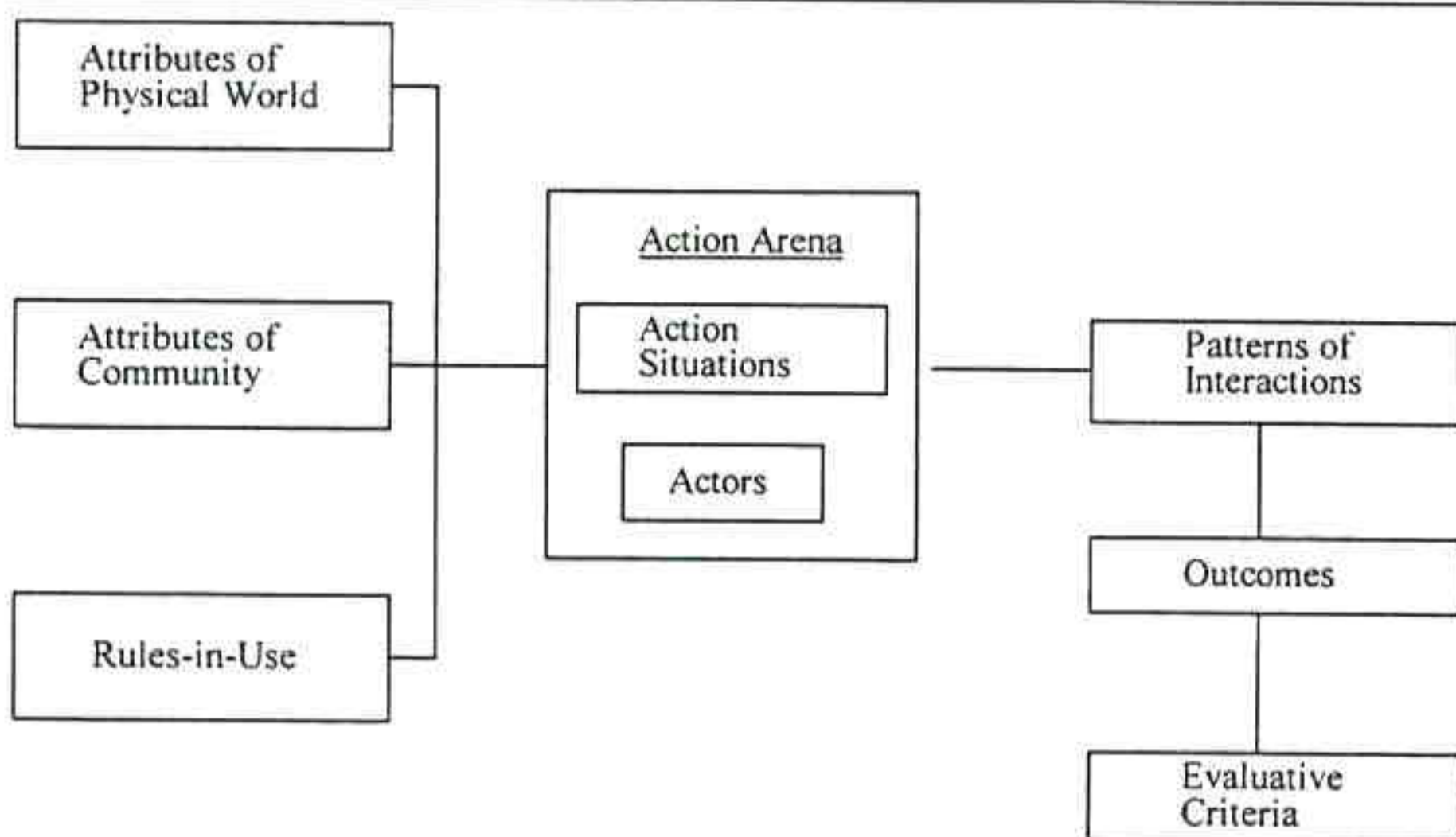
The IAD framework is one of the most distinguished and tested frameworks for policy analysis (Bogason, 1994; Imperial, 1999; Oakerson, 1992; E. Ostrom, 1995; Ostrom, Gardner, & Walker, 1994; Sabatier, 1991b). Can it be used for the purpose outlined in this article? The IAD framework is sufficiently broad to be compatible with a great number of theories; for example, collective action theory, transaction cost theory, game theory, and constitutional choice theory. For a comparison with other frameworks, see Sabatier (1991b, 1999) and Sproule-Jones (1993).

The focal point of the IAD framework is a specific action arena, e.g., irrigation systems, policing, or forestry. Variables describing action arenas can be decomposed into two clusters: (a) an *action situation* involving participants, positions, actions, information, etc.; and (b) variables describing *actors* who have preferences, information-process capabilities, and so forth (Ostrom et al., 1994, p. 29-36). In the IAD framework, action arenas are characterized by three "factors," *attributes of the physical world, attributes of community, and rules-in-use*. In this complexity of relations the problem is to identify patterns of interactions. Activities generate specific outcomes, and the task of the analysts is to assess these outcomes using some evaluation criteria.

Action arenas are assumed to be understood by reference to a focal "problem" (for example, irrigation of rice fields or Medicare) and not primarily by reference to political decisions or programs. Like the network approach, the IAD framework is problem oriented, i.e., it focuses on how individual actors organize in order to solve particular problems. However, whether an action arena is found to be governed partly or solely by political agencies (as the stage model assumes), would thus be the result of empirical observations, not a presumption.

The IAD framework is based on the idea of methodological individualism. However, it is not assumed that the individual is an empty unit without history and culture. Nor does the framework neglect the existence of specific power relations to which individuals or groups of individuals are exposed. For example, the box "attributes of community" in Figure 2 contains a whole set of variables that we use to associate with the notion of "culture," while "rules-in-use" basically cover what is understood as "institutions." Accordingly, the IAD framework provides means and possibilities to conduct multilevel analysis.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 2**  
**The Institutional Analysis and Development Framework**



**Source:** Ostrom et al. 1994, p. 37.

This multilevel approach is quite relevant for the policy network research as well. For example, it can be assumed that specific constellations of incentives and preferences manifest themselves as different types of policy networks while at the same time constraining the actors forming them. To the extent that concepts like issue networks, implementation structures, and policy communities reflect some empirical reality, they can be understood as reflections of such incentive structures. Dowding (1995) stresses that the features of the actors ought to be scrutinized. Presumably this would teach us more about different kinds of policy networks. Why is that?

All actors are constrained by the rules to which they adhere and the resources they command. This is, in fact, what defines them as actors. It is not possible to be an actor in a vacuum (Giddens, 1984). Starting the analysis with the assumption that only corporate actors form policy networks may be misleading. Individuals are the only ones who can dedicate meaning and purpose to their behavior. They are the basis of all corporate entities, and therefore their activities are important to analyze. This is the meaning of methodological individualism as it is reflected in the IAD framework. The approach does not mean that corporate actors are unimportant. Organizations act to the extent to which single individuals act, but these individuals may draw upon rules and resources that exist in their organizations. How this is done is not clarified by enumeration of actors, such as "the Government," "the Bureau of Health," or "the County Board." Understanding networks only as systems of organizations that interact misses this point (Scott, 1994, chap. 2; Wasserman & Galaskiewicz, 1994).

This mode of analysis is the core of methodological individualism, as analysts since Hobbes (1994) have performed it. Via the study of individual attributes, social systems can be analyzed and understood. By focusing individual behavior we can understand how policy networks evolve and are structured but also how these networks create specific outcomes in particular policy areas. An alternative way of performing policy network analysis in society is to keep the discussion on the macrolevel. But by so doing, our understanding of how individual behavior produces system solutions is disregarded. This is the basic problem with the type of policy network analysis that uses policy decisions and programs as the organizing principle.

In adopting the basic features of the IAD framework we presume that participants in a policy network are exposed to a set of incentives that induce them to act in a particular way, but we also assume that their actions are fostered by physical circumstances as well as institutional attributes, rules, and norms. For example, and with reference to the quoted policy network literature, it can be noted that in the introduction of videotex, the German "action arena," differs from the French because the federal structure gives the German industrial actors a greater degree of freedom (Schneider & Werle, 1991, p. 108). In the 1960s, since the resources of the National Medical Association had accumulated, an issue network replaced the Israeli "iron triangle" dealing with the country's health (Yishai, 1992, p. 101). Small firms in Borken County perform differently from those in Paderboren, because implementation structures are dissimilar (Hull & Hjern, 1987). In Franco-Ontario, separate advocacy coalitions (Mawhinney, 1993) reflect different cultural heritages encompassing particular core beliefs guiding people how to act with regard to education policy, and so forth.

This is how the IAD framework might guide the development of policy network theory of collective action. It might help in identifying what kinds of variables should be taken into consideration as well as how they are roughly related. Given a comparative approach, the evaluation criteria that are chosen will inform whether one way of organizing produces "better" outcomes than another, and so forth. In itself, the IAD framework cannot explain the emergence of particular networks or their possible performance. Assumptions of precise relations between single variables cannot and should not be deduced from a framework. Such assumptions require specific models and appropriate theories. This is discussed in the next section. It should be emphasized, however, that the aim is not to deliver a ready-made policy network theory of collective action, but rather to suggest a line of inquiry that possibly might be further developed to advance policy research.

## **Toward a Policy Network Theory of Collective Action**

What should be required by a collective action theory that would make it compatible with the wild flora of network concepts described above? Having the IAD framework in mind one can suggest the following: (a) Such a theory should be "context sensitive," i.e., it should appreciate that networks emerge differently in different settings; (b) The theory should also explain why and how individual actors form specific types of networks; (c) Finally, the theory should be able to explain the outcomes of the network activities, i.e., network performance.

Smelser's (1963) theory of collective behavior<sup>9</sup> provides some components that can be used for such a theory. The theory is based on the assumption that collective behavior emerges when structured social action is under

strain and when means for overcoming problems are inadequate. Collective behavior has a tendency to occur when no organizational solutions are devised for overcoming the focal problem.<sup>10</sup> This idea is quite compatible with the assumption that the emergence of policy networks is problem-driven. Like the IAD framework, our sketchy theory also is built on a bottom-up approach.

Without indicating that the emergence of networks would be a deterministic affair, we will borrow the principal ideas of Smelser's reasoning (point 1-6 below).<sup>11</sup> The first of Smelser's "determinants" for collective action, called "structural conduciveness" is here given the name "contextual factors," and so forth.

1) *Contextual factors*. These constitute the basis of all types of collective action. The term refers to different types of factors such as demography, belief systems, resources, etc. These circumstances will indeed vary between societies, groups, and places. Some qualities in this context will be more conducive for specific types of collective action, and thus for the creation of policy networks; for instance the existence of a local tradition of self-governing. Without elaborating further on this theme, it can be stated that every instance of policymaking is dependent on the milieu, i.e., on local circumstances, and that the context is the starting block for all types of collective action. Robert Putnam together with Leonardi, and Nanetti (1993) have persuasively demonstrated this. Also, Lasswell focuses on the context of the policymaking process (Torgerson, 1985). Thus, different environments are assumed to contain different social and cultural qualities. In IAD framework terminology, one would say that *action arenas* are always different, and that actions are constrained and enabled by different kinds of rules and resources. Culture reduces our choice set (North, 1995), and this fact, combined with, or reflected in, specific sets of rules and resources, provides potential actors with a particular incentive structure. However, as indicated above, theories consist of systems of hypotheses and propositions. Therefore, let the first hypothesis in this sketchy theory be phrased as follows:

*Hypothesis 1: Policy networks emerge and are shaped differently in different contexts.*<sup>12</sup>

2) *Problem definition*. Networks are formed on the basis of some "problem" to be solved. Relevant actors must agree there is a problem, otherwise no collective action will occur and no networks will be formed. Do, for instance, relevant actors in an issue network agree on what type of "issue" there is to be solved? Are they talking about the same problem, and, if so, is it labeled the same by each individual? Thus, the notion "problem" not only refers to the substantial problems people have, but also to needs, challenges, and strains that are dependent on the "determinant" features of the context. This idea is one of the amenities of Smelser's theory; namely that the factors constituting particular instances of collective action are involved in a value-adding process in which one factor affects and adds qualities to another. Depending on how this adding process is shaped, different forms of collective action will emerge. Aaron Wildavsky has stated that "a problem in policy analysis [then] cannot exist apart from a proposed solution, and its solution is part of an organization, a structure of incentives without which there can be no will to act" (Wildavsky, 1993, p. 26).

*Hypothesis 2: Policy networks emerge and are shaped differently depending on the definition of the policy problem to be solved.*

3) *Growth and spread of a generalized belief.* Collective action is based on some understanding among actors concerning which types of actions are regarded as good, bad, acceptable, possible, desirable, etc. Thus, given that resources are not inexhaustible, members of policy networks also have to prioritize, and this requires some type of mutual understanding among those involved in the process of organizing a solution to a policy problem.<sup>13</sup>

*Hypothesis 3: Network coherence and thus, activities performed, are dependent upon the extent that establishment of mutual understanding among actors is achieved.*

4) *Precipitation factors.* Collective action and, accordingly, policymaking are not automatically triggered. The typical way of triggering the activities of policymaking is to make political decisions; for instance, the launching of a policy program, but this mechanism is not so self-evident as it may seem. Policy networks might evolve as a result of particular political decisions, but as empirical studies show, many networks do not have this origin. Consequently, political decision is only one method to trigger collective action, and, moreover, even if political decisions are taken, the result can be that no action will take place. Thus, it can be assumed that more spontaneous ways of thoroughly organizing policy networks reflect how participants perceive problems to be solved.

*Hypothesis 4: Policy networks deliberately shaped by political decisions are less likely to be problem-specific compared with more spontaneous ways of organizing.*

5) *Mobilization of actors.* Since most problem areas are complex, in the sense that no single solution is sufficient, recourse to different types of actors is a necessity. That is basically the reason why we have policy networks.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the mobilization of actors is one of the crucial activities in the process of establishing networks. This can be done in different ways. Some actors might take on the role of formal "mobilizers." For example, those in charge of the fulfillment of a policy program might persuade, or make, other actors contribute to the implementation of the program, thereby creating an implementation network. It is also possible to identify other, more spontaneous, forms of mobilization. People can, as indicated above, organize themselves in order to solve some problem they regard as urgent. Many networks are formed in this way, i.e., without anyone being in charge for the actual mobilization of actors.

*Hypothesis 5: Self-organized policy networks are more likely to contain committed actors.*

6) *Coordination and control.* Every instance of collective action is subject to social control. Within the process of policymaking, political administrative authorities often devise special arrangements in order to execute formal control of activities and resources. The same is true for companies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other organizations that might provide actors for a network. Social control is closely connected to coordination, and some authors actually argue that it is the same phenomenon, basically an intelligent conformity in a system of actions (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 3, fn. 1). Thus, control can be regarded as a mechanism within a single individual, or as emerging from the processes of interaction between individuals (Wirth, 1986, p. 598).

*Hypothesis 6: The existence of control imposes a limit on the development of policy networks, i.e., it affects how fast and how far collective actions evolve.*<sup>15</sup>

To sum up this sketchy description of the six possible components of a tentative policy network theory of collective action, one can note that the first component, contextual factors, captures the fact that networks emerge differently in different settings. Coupled with Smelser's value-adding approach, these contextualities can be conjectured to affect the other components of collective action. However, in order to make the proposed hypotheses testable—indeed there are others—they have to be broken down to variables, and these have to be incorporated into specific models. This is a great task that requires extensive research. However, one of the aims of the theory we are looking for is that it should be helpful in explaining the outcomes of the network activities, i.e., network performance. This can be done in a number of ways. For example, by designing quasi-experimental studies in which different configurations of the six factors constitute specific types of networks found to be associated with differences in network performance, this can be accomplished. This would substantially advance the policy network approach from its predominantly descriptive character.

## **Conclusion**

In all policy areas, whether they be local economy, social service, education, or others, many different types of policy networks are likely to appear. The forms of these networks are determined by many factors. *The network theory of policymaking is not yet developed, but the network approach indicates a fruitful line for political inquiry.* However, the network perspective on policymaking is "straggly." This is reflected in the multitude of concepts that have been developed in order to conceptualize and understand processes of policymaking in contemporary society. In this article three requirements have been identified for making the policy network approach an even more fruitful way of conducting policy research.

The first requirement is that we begin to explicitly change focus from regarding networks as "dependent variables" and start to consider them as something that can be used to explain different outcomes. A second way of advancing the approach is to apply collective action theory. This, however, requires theories that incorporate other actors rather than merely organizations. Smelser's theory of collective behavior is suggested as one example of a theory that contains elements for such a development.

A third requirement is that, irrespective of which theories are used, they should be incorporated into some broader theoretical framework. The "Bloomington School" of policy analysis provides such a construct, namely, the IAD framework. Within this frame of analysis different policy network constructs can be understood as instances of collective action emanating from specific contexts. Each context may be understood in terms of specific incentive structures, norms, rules, and physical attributes that affect particular action arenas.

Meeting these three requirements would significantly advance the policy network approach. To the extent that such a development will also result in the shedding of more light over the outcomes of the policymaking process in terms of network performance, policy research might fulfil one of its old commitments; namely, to contribute to the refinement of real-life processes of policymaking in society.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I deliberately use the term "model," not "heuristic." The reason I emphasize this is a tendency within political science to treat the stage business as if it were a model of political governance. This is discussed later in the paper. See also Carlsson, 1996 for an exhaustive argument.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in Sweden, a nation quite representative for Western democracies, and known for its powerful state apparatus, more than 80 public authorities are eligible to produce statutory rules (Lane et al., 1988, chap. 2)!

<sup>3</sup> See also Campbell, with Baskin, Baumgarten, & Halpem (1989) afterward in the journal *Governance's* special issue on policy communities.

<sup>4</sup> The term "policy" can be defined as "a set of ideas and the practical search for institutional arrangements for their realization" (Hjern, 1987, p. 3). Consequently, this definition indicates conscious *efforts* to establish systems of rules. In empirical settings, however, it is not evident that such institutional arrangements actually are, or will be, established (Carlsson, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Whether the notion "interests" refers to common beliefs or preferences is not essential for the argumentation. The fact that two persons might have the same beliefs but different preferences rather underpins the point that collective action is a phenomenon with many appearances. Nor does the matrix pay any attention to circumstances where single individuals might be "commanded" by their agencies to participate in a policy network.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted, however, that the implementation structure concept also captures the reality that individuals having divergent, complementary, as well as common interests may form arrangements, or fabrics, that affect policy outcomes (see also Hull & Hjern, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Such a reinterpretation might also require a change of the figure. For example, the interest dimension must be more "fine-tuned"; otherwise it could be argued that the two dimensions would collapse into one. However, this problem does not change the substance of the argument.

<sup>8</sup> This has been persuasively demonstrated in the International Forestry and Institutions (IFRI) research program that is now running in several countries around the world (Ostrom & Wertime, 1994). Also in a number of game theoretical experiments that deliberately have been organized with reference to the IAD framework, Elinor Ostrom and her collaborators have employed a similar multi-level approach. The experiments deal with the way individual behavior relates to specific institutional circumstances (Ostrom, Gardner, & Walker, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> The distinction between collective action and collective behavior is not always logical. It is logical only if the former refers to behavior in a biological sense and the latter to "human behavior for which the acting individuals attach a subjective and instrumental meaning" (V. Ostrom, 1997, p. 7). Most writings on collective behavior, however, are applicable to the latter category. This is also the case with Smelser, whose theory is rather a theory of collective action.

<sup>10</sup> Smelser's theory is more developed, and is not primarily constructed for policy analysis. The theory also explains how different types of collective behavior are related to different resources for action; for example, values or norms. Smelser describes how action aimed at reconstructing systems of norms will lead to "norm oriented movements," and so forth.

<sup>11</sup> For an empirical application of this approach, see Carlsson, 1993, 1995.

<sup>12</sup> Note that it is up to the researcher to identify the contextual variables that might have explanatory power, e.g., for explaining the difference in outcomes between two ways of organizing a solution to a policy problem.

<sup>13</sup> This focuses on a very substantial problem, namely the question of rationality, which is often defined as a matter of transitivity. The concept of transitivity can be explained as a logical order of preferences, e.g., A is preferred to B and B to C, and logically A is preferable to C. If people engaged in monetary transactions, for instance, do not act according to rules of transitivity, each one of them can be subjected to "money-pump." Consequently, it is logical to assume that a basic level of understanding among interacting people is essential in order to make joint priorities.

<sup>14</sup> Many schools of thought exist about how to explain the existence of policy networks. However, as Börzel (1997, p. 2) states, there is a "Babylonian variety of different understandings and applications of the policy network concept." Nevertheless, the author provides a nice exposition



of this variety. She also discusses how different schools of thought try to explain the emergencies of policy networks.

<sup>15</sup> Within the field of social network analysis a whole array of concepts are developed to capture the centrality and other qualities of networks. "Betweenness" is a measure that is often used to indicate an individual actor's ability to control and thus execute power in a network (Scott, 1994, p. 89).

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