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Article

Discursive Black and Translucent Box Frames of Policy Work: How do Practitioners and Scholars Compare?

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Abstract

Policy work in government is often framed as existing in a "black box". It is assumed that public administrators, as "insiders", have more knowledge of policy development processes than those outside of government. Are black box narratives of policy work constructed by practitioners? Or is the idea of a "translucent" box more appropriate to understand policy work within the bureaucracy? Based on interviews with sub-national civil servants in one provincial government in Canada, this article finds that black box narratives are used by practitioners to understand policy work. I interpret these results to argue that a theory-practice gap does not necessarily exist when it comes to constructions of policy work: practitioners in the field, like scholars, employ black box narratives to frame policy work in the bureaucracy. Yet, academics may still find that translucent box theory provides a more nuanced way of understanding government's internal policy processes.

Résumé

Le travail politique au sein du gouvernement est souvent présenté comme existant dans une « boîte noire». On suppose que les administrateurs publics, en tant qu' « initiés », ont une meilleure connaissance des processus d'élaboration des politiques que ceux qui ne font pas partie du gouvernement. Les récits en boîte noire du travail politique sont-ils construits par les praticiens ? Ou l'idée d'une boîte « translucide » est-elle plus appropriée pour comprendre le travail politique au sein de la bureaucratie ? Sur la base d'entretiens avec des fonctionnaires infranationaux d'un gouvernement provincial au Canada, cet article constate que les récits de la boîte noire sont utilisés par les praticiens pour comprendre le travail politique. J'interprète ces résultats pour soutenir qu'un fossé théorie-pratique n'existe pas nécessairement lorsqu'il s'agit de constructions de travail politique : les praticiens sur le terrain, comme les universitaires, utilisent des récits de boîte noire pour encadrer le travail politique dans la bureaucratie. Pourtant, les universitaires peuvent toujours trouver que la théorie de la boîte translucide offre une manière plus nuancée de comprendre les processus politiques internes du gouvernement.

Key Words: Black Box Theory, Qualitative Semi-Structured Interviews, Social Constructivist Coding, Prince Edward Island Civil Servants, Policy Capacity

Mots-clés : Théorie de la boîte noire, entretiens qualitatifs semi-structurés, codage constructiviste social, fonctionnaires de l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard, capacité des politiques

Introduction

Policy scholars often analogously employ "black box" narratives to frame policy work in government. In academic and public discourses, government is constructed as being a secretive monolith whose day-to-day processes and decision-making are known only to "insiders". The literature makes clear that the narrative of unknown and mystery surrounds, moves through and sometimes constitutes public administration discourses. It is perhaps for this reason that governmental policy work —the processes and methods by which decisions are made, implemented, and evaluated in government— has been the focus of empirical studies that have attempted to uncover *how* decisions are made in government and *who* the people are that make these decisions.

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Given the important role of public administrators in the policymaking process, it is important to ask, how do practitioners' constructions of policy work compare to that of scholars? More specifically, are black box narratives of policy work constructed and maintained by practitioners? Or, is the idea of a "translucent" box, as conceptualized by Bunge (1999), a more appropriate frame to understand policy work within the bureaucracy? Literature on "insiders," for example (Olive 2014), would argue that those who work for government are more knowledgeable of, and involved in, policy development processes than those on the outside of government. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that a black box narrative of policy work should not be a primary discourse that practitioners use to frame policy work. At the same time, theoretical and empirical research on insiders also shows that *insiderness* and *outsiderness* are located on a spectrum, for example (Deutsch, 1981, p. 174): depending on context, certain members of an organization may be more involved with internal processes than others.

This article looks more closely at policy work discourses in government by investigating the applicability and utilization of black box narratives in the public administration field. It investigates the applicability of the black and translucent box conceptualizations proposed by Bunge, for example (1999), and the mechanisms that occur within the public administration system when developing public policy. Results of interviews completed with public administrators, or insiders, in the provincial government of Prince Edward Island in 2018 show that practitioners discursively construct policy work citing the complexity of public policy, the "invisibility" of policy workers in the bureaucracy, confusion related to policy development processes, and a lack of internal policy communication channels. I interpret these results to argue that a theory-practice gap does not necessarily exist when it comes to constructions of policy work: practitioners in the field, like scholars, employ black box narratives to frame policy work in the bureaucracy. Nevertheless, while black box theory may resonate with practitioners, academics may find that translucent box theory provides a more nuanced way of understanding government's internal policy processes.

Mechanisms and Black and Translucent Box Discourses in Public Administration

Black box theory posits that the processes where the inputs to a system are transformed into outputs are unknown. Knowledge about a system is gained by investigating the relationship between the inputs and outputs of the box (the system) (Rosengren, 2017, pp. 87-88). The variables of a black box are completely external and observable (Bunge, 1999). Policy work literature, which aims to uncover internal policy development processes, highlights scholars' desire to move beyond the external and uncover precisely how decisions are made inside government.

Applying a black box approach when studying public administration brings into question the role of internal *mechanisms*. As stated by Bunge (1997), "a mechanism is a process … that it is capable of bringing about or preventing some change in the system as a whole or in some of its subsystems" (p. 415). Social mechanisms are sometimes considered by scholars as the devices used to explain relations between individuals and groups (Pierik, 2004, p. 542). "Most mechanisms", as noted by Bunge (1997), "are hidden" (p.420). Studying mechanisms (and social mechanisms in particular) is important for understanding policy work within institutions, as well as organizations more generally (Anderson et al., 2006). "Mechanisms allow us to see beyond the surface-level description of a phenomenon" by focusing our

attention on such things as associations between actions, relationships and other connections between individuals (Anderson et al., 2006). Individual actions and stories can eventually result in collective meaning among a group (see Clarà, 2019). As such, the term black box, when considered alongside social mechanisms internal to an organization, often evokes a sense of unfamiliarity, mystery and the unknown. Not surprisingly then, black boxes are appealing to researchers who are interested in uncovering the inner workings of a system and its complexities and nuances. Being inside the system is assumed to put one closer to the "truth" of how decisions are made to transform inputs to outputs.

Von Hilgers and Rauscher (2011) trace the scientific-historical development of the term black box, finding that its use has come to symbolize opaque parts of society. Black box narratives, being rooted in electronic systems used in World War Two, often evoke notions of complexity (technological and other) (von Hilgers & Rauscher, 2011). Today, analogous and metaphorical black box narratives, with their associated values of secrecy, are often framed as being at odds with political narratives of openness and transparency (Birchall, 2011; Horn, 2011; Henninger, 2013, p. 88).

Other work has conceptualized boxes that are translucent. Here, Bunge (1999) postulates that, whereas black box theories are employed to explain systems that only require the manipulation of *external* factors to operate, translucent box theory is employed to explain systems that require the manipulation of both external and internal factors. In other words, translucent box-type explanations of phenomenon "introduce hypothetical constructs that establish detailed links among the observable inputs and outputs" (Bunge, 1999, p. 236). The focus is on the internal mechanisms the system requires in order to operate. Using a translucent box approach to study public administration brings attention to the "constitution and structure" of the system (Bunge, 1999, p. 236).

Public administration researchers have employed black box narratives when referring to and explaining the inner workings of "secretive" governments. Government secrecy has been included in the literature from the early works of Francis Bacon in 1893 (Bacon, 2010, p. 313) through the early 1900's (Cowell, 1935), to present day (Harris, 2018; Heide & Villeneuve, 2020; McArthur, 2007; Sapeha et al., 2019). Sapeha et al. (2019) analyzed the results of a survey with policy workers to "peer into the black box of government policy work." Harris (2018, p. 876) argued that it is essential to navigate the "black box of policy-making to create healthy public policy" in Australia. Others have noted that government secrecy has impeded the development of scholarly public administration research, for example, Kernaghan (1975, p. 10). McArthur (2007, p. 238) noted that there is relatively little knowledge about the internal workings of provincial governments in Canada. Finally, in their study of the use of evidence in the Australian government, Newman, Cherney and Head (2017) constructed the public administration profession as "heavily guarded" with "an institutionalized protection of anonymity" that "is generally opaque to outside investigation" (p. 163).

Difficulties with accessing civil servants for survey and interview research has contributed to the construction of black box narratives in public administration research. Duke (2002) noted that gaining access to elite policy actors is difficult because they have "the power to create barriers, shield themselves from scrutiny and resist the intrusiveness of social research" (p. 45). Signal et al. (2018, p. 192) discussed how gaining and maintaining access to health policymakers in New Zealand context was difficult but aided by the use of gatekeepers and the researchers' familiarity with interviewees. In Lancaster's (2017, pp. 95-

96) reflexive discussion of her experience researching drug policy in Australia, she described how the bureaucratic hierarchy of needing a superior's approval to participate in an interview created challenges in accessing those located at lower levels. Therefore, scholarly research both discursively forms, and empirically grounds, black box narratives in public administration.

The Social Construction of Policy Work

Narratives are socially-constructed through language and discourse. Constructivist-interpretive studies of policy recognize that policy work is not a value-neutral phenomenon. Policy work is a value-laden process, whereby people shape practices to govern societies and control political processes (Colebatch et al., Eds., 2010, p. 29; Williams, 2010, p. 201). Socially-constructive accounts of policy work question the tangibility of public policy itself: the way in which people experience policy and the constructions that they make from their experiences collectively forms public policy (Guba, 1984 p. 65). Therefore, public policy is as much about socially-constructed experience as it is formal and codified rules and procedures. Communication, dialogue, and discourse are implicated in how people construct and understand public policy.

One way that people construct public policy is by employing "primary frameworks" (Goffman, 1974, p. 24) to interpret and understand complex information, such as policy development processes and policy work. As explained by Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007),

> as a macroconstruct, the term 'framing' refers to modes of presentation that … communicators use to present information in a way that resonates with existing underlying schemas among their audience. … As a microconstruct, framing describes how people use information and presentation features regarding issues as they form impressions. … Frames … become invaluable tools for presenting relatively complex issues … efficiently and in a way that makes them accessible to lay audiences because they play to existing cognitive schemas. (p. 12)

The idea that social construction is important for understanding public policy is not necessarily new. Lasswell (1951, p. 51) believed that the social processes within which policy workers are located are important, as workers cannot be separated from their context. The *policy archaeology* methodology, promoted by some critical post-positivist scholars, investigates the social construction of problems and policy solutions, focusing attention on such things as the discursive social construction process of identifying and naming problems (Scheurich, 1994). Therefore, the way in which practitioners talk about and communicate policy work impacts how public policy is developed, implemented, and ultimately experienced.

First Order Accounts

More recently, Colebatch et al. (2010, p. 19) wrote that there is an emergent counter-narrative, which has begun to challenge dominant instrumental and rational accounts of policymaking. The counter-narrative, they write,

> focuses attention on the dynamics of…interactions and on the structures through which these linkages operate, the practices by which they are maintained, and the

> shared meanings, which they give rise to, and which, in turn, sustain…ongoing collaboration. (p. 19)

The idea that a logical, process-oriented, predictable and rational policy development process exists in day-to-day practice is questioned. This counter-narrative brings attention to the dynamics of human interaction when developing policy, meaning creation among policy workers and the role of narratives in constructing how policy is understood and developed. It is a perspective of public policy that is often inaccessible in positivist studies of policy capacity and policy work.

First Order Accounts of policy work include accounts of policymaking by policy workers *Second Order Accounts* include academic understandings of policy practices and *Third Order Accounts* focus on perspectives and the nature of policy processes (Noordegraaf, 2010, p. 46). Each type of account is valuable in deepening knowledge of public administration. For the present study, first order accounts were chosen as the primary source of data since it was the perceptions and experiences of practitioners that was shown to be missing in the literature.

Understanding first order accounts of policy work is important to fill gaps in knowledge, including comparisons of accounts between practitioners and academics. Studying discourses and narratives about policy work from the perspective of both scholars and practitioners is important to understand how policy work and processes are framed and acted upon in academia and the field. By focusing on "issues of language, discourse and power and the cultural context in which policy processes operate", we can better understand "the meaning attached to policy accounts" (Shore, 2010, p. 218).

Studies of public administrators' perceptions generally adopt the assumption that there can be perceptual similarities among administrators, and, therefore, general conclusions can be made about a group's collective perception of a phenomenon, for example Bouckaert, (2001, p. 23). Through shared experiences in the public service, administrators often come to develop similar identities and outlooks (Rubin & Chiqués, 2015, p. 553). Structural influences, such as being involved in similar processes and procedures, also support the assumption that context influences the collective perception of civil servants, as well as how they think and behave (Christensen & Lægrid, 2010, pp. 9–10). Therefore, shared perceptions among public administrators constructs reality through shared "communities of meaning" or "reference worlds," in which public administrators operate on a day-to-day basis (Emery et al., 2008, p. 312). This article questions *how* policy work discourses are constructed and the accuracy of the discursive black box frame to practitioners.

Methods

Research for this article was completed for a project that investigated policy capacity (Cameron, 2019; 2020). The setting was the Government of Prince Edward Island, a sub-national provincial government employing approximately 2,100 core civil servants in a jurisdiction with a population of approximately 153,000 residents. After receiving ethics approval, in 2018, semi-structured interviews were completed with eleven deputy ministers (DM) (92 per cent) from across government and twenty-one directors (D) and managers (M) at one department (95 per cent). Choosing one department allowed the study to add depth to the data collected from interviews with deputy ministers. Furthermore, the department chosen had a comparatively higher level of policy capacity than other departments, a longer

history of institutionalizing its policy unit and was frequently assigned as lead for projects that involved multiple departments. As such, responses provided by managers and directors at the department were informed by a long history of institutionalized policy work that included experiences both within the department and across government. The sample was inclusive of a range of genders, experiences with public administration, seniority levels and perspectives on policy work in government. Participants were asked questions about policy capacity, policy work, policy leadership, evidence, and policy networks.

Transcripts of interviews were transcribed *verbatim*. Nvivo 12 was used to code interview transcripts. Coding methods were inductive (to build policy concepts and theory from the ground up) and deductive (to understand how policy theory was present or absent in practitioners' perceptions) (Saldaña, 2016). The thrust of the inductive analysis drew from the Charmaz (for example 2014) stream of constructivist research methodology. Once codes were developed, they were interpreted, compared and contrasted to arrive at continuously higher levels of abstraction and theorization. The process of interpretation was informed by my own observations in the research field, my experiences as a public administrator in the province and existing literature on public administration and policy capacity. Interview results were also triangulated with the results of a survey that was conducted at the same department where interviews were completed.

Results

As discussed in more detail below, when asked about policy work in government, interviewees cited that public policy and policy capacity were complex concepts, policy workers in government tended to be "invisible", there is confusion about how public policy is developed, and there is a lack of policy communication channels which leaves staff feeling as though they are on the outside of the policy development process. These are essentially the narrative mechanisms at play in day-to-day public administration that socially-construct policy development processes as well as the reality of policy work. The following describes each of these mechanisms in more detail.

Complexity of Public Policy and Policy Capacity

"It's … broad" (M6) and "abstract" (M3). For a director, even after working in PEI's public service for ten years, they were not sure what "public policy" meant in practice. This director stated, "I will be blatantly frank,…I worked…in provincial government for ten years and heard 'public policy' all of the time, and honestly struggled to understand what it meant" (D10). Another director alluded to this as well when they reflected on the earlier period of their career: "I didn't understand what policy was; I thought it was just bureaucratic" (D20). Confusion experienced by these directors with the complexity of public policy is because "people refer to 'policy' in much different ways" (DM23) and, therefore, public servants "interpret it differently" (DM27).

Other participants also reflected on the complexity of public policy in practice and said that, "even [though] when someone is working with program statistics, [and] that all contributes to policy, I don't know if everyone 'gets it'" (DM21). As told by a director, "I don't think people really understand what policy is" (D1). This point was confirmed by a manager who said that, "personally, I don't know a lot about policy" (M22) and another manager who said that, "I'll be honest, I'm pretty uncomfortable with the whole [policy concept]….It's just

not something that is in my mind, [or] [some]thing that I'm dealing with on a day-to-day basis" (M15). The abstraction of public policy in practice is, according to a manager, because "there is [not] much information on policy out there" (M9).

Similar to how results pointed to the idea that the concept of public policy was complex in theory and practice in PEI's public service, the same can be said for policy capacity. When interview participants were asked to reflect on survey results that showed that respondents were "unsure" if the department needs to improve its policy capacity, one director explained that the reason for people being unsure is because, "they [the survey respondents] are not sure of the status of the department's policy capacity. They are not sure where we are at. I would have to agree, I don't know" (M22). Other interview participants shed additional light on why survey respondents were unsure, by pointing to the idea that policy capacity is not well defined in PEI's public service. Managers noted that, "They probably don't know what 'policy capacity' is" (M12), "They may not even be sure what 'policy capacity' means" (M16), and "people may not understand what 'policy capacity' would mean" (M19).

Policy Worker Invisibility

With respect to the role of the department's policy unit and policy analysts, interview respondents explained that they were often unsure about what this unit and group of staff did in practice. The policy unit was the only section in the Department that completed substantive policy projects. Other divisions and sections were devoted primarily to program and regulatory administration. The policy unit's projects often involved working with staff from the Department's other sections and divisions. Respondents communicated that policy staff were "hidden". As one director stated, "A lot of people think that policy [workers are] these people that sit this ivory tower, that just wave a wand and make decisions." (D1). This point was also alluded to by a manager who, when asked what they thought policy analysts did in practice, said, "It's people that have a PQ [a job description] [that says] ... they are a 'policy analyst'. [But I ask myself:] 'What is that?' 'What exactly do you do?'" (M3). Another manager supported this point when they said, "I don't know a lot about what the Policy Section does" (M22). Additionally, another manager was not sure "how many people are actually involved in the policy side versus the people that are front line" (M12).

Physical co-location of policy staff and program administration staff, nevertheless, seems to have improved non-policy staff members' understanding of what policy staff do in practice. One manager remembered when the program administration unit and policy unit were not located together in the same physical area. This manager said that a "them versus us" mentality was cultivated because program administration staff rarely saw policy staff. For this manager, not seeing what policy staff did in practice resulted in a devaluation of their work.

> We were physically not co-located…. So it was very much a 'them and us' [mentality]. So, Policy was kind of seen as a black hole. I think they [policy staff] were very, very bright people but…we almost never saw them. So, you didn't really know what they did. And I have no doubt they were busy, and [that] they had… some very important files. But there really was not any cross over [between Policy and Program Administration]. (M6)

For sections of the organization that are still not physically co-located with the policy unit, aspects of the manager's theory persist. Participants who did not work in close proximity to the policy unit noted that:

> You could ask my staff about people downtown, and they would say, 'I don't know'"…maybe the people who are in the deputy minister's office or the minister's office are trying to plan long-term? But you don't always see that when you are on the ground. (M9)

Policy Process Confusion

In addition to there being confusion and mystery about the role of policy units and policy staff in government, the policy development process was also perceived to exist in a black box. Directors noted that, "[Staff] just don't really understand the components of what goes into making sound policy" (D1) and " [Policy staff] design a program, based on what? They [program administration staff] are delivering the program, they don't know where it came from" (D20). This latter statement draws attention to the imagined boundary between policy and program administration. This boundary was highlighted by a manager who viewed their role as strictly program administration-related when they said that, "Well, quite frankly, I don't know how we got where we are, I just have a job every day, and I do this [administer programs]" (M12).

Managers confirmed the idea that staff are unsure of the policy process when they said that, "I don't have a lot of familiarity with the actual bare bones policy being implemented" (M17). Another manager, reflecting on staff in their section, said that the reason there is confusion regarding the policy process is because "[staff] don't see [policy]…in their day-to-day activities. They just don't see or feel the impact of policy. They don't necessarily know what's driving them; they are just doing what they do" (M13). When asked to describe policymaking at the department, another manager responded by saying, "That's something I have never been involved with. So, I really, it's something that happens someplace else and I am not privy to it" (M9). The lack of understanding of policy processes was not isolated to managers. A deputy minister noted that they have a "lack of understanding…of what policy work really is within a government" (DM23). For this deputy minister, although they knew that their respective bureaucratic level was involved with generating ideas in the policy process, they said that, "in the next level down in government, I don't actually know what they do with [my ideas]" (DM23).

Staff Exclusion and Communication

The confusion that exists with respect to the abstraction or complexity of public policy and policy capacity, the role of the policy unit and its staff and the process of policy development is due to staff not being consulted regularly and a lack of communication in the public service as to what policy is in practice. A manager shared, "We can be consulted from time-to-time…but not on policy-making usually" (M22). Due to this lack of consultation, "staff are not aware of policy" (M9) and, therefore, sometimes "feel isolated…when it comes to the rest of the department" (M22). Issues with physical location intersected with the idea of staff exclusion. As one manager stated,

> I know that we are all [in a] stretched world. But I think, we should really talk…more and get a little more input from staff. I find that sometimes…if you are at a distance from the offices [downtown]—that people are not consulted. (M9)

Interview participants pointed to issues with communicating policy process-related messages as to why staff are sometimes excluded. Reflecting on PEI's public service, a manager told me that,

> Sometimes…I find government as a whole, sometimes there's policy…but it's not well communicated… Even if it's just the communication that: 'This is what the policy is.' We are not even getting that a lot of times. (M9)

When I asked a director as to why people were unsure of what policy was in practice, they replied, "Do you think it's because people are unsure of how decisions are made at the top? Like maybe it's a communication thing?" (D20). Finally, some participants pointed to the idea that, since some areas of the organization are not always reflected in communication and policy documents such as strategic plans, they tend to feel excluded. A manager shared, "You don't often [see my section] being mentioned in strategic plans" (M22). As a result, there is "a lack [of] understanding from a lot of staff as to what the vision is for the department, what their direction is" (M18).

Findings and Conclusion

Recent policy capacity scholarship has noted that governmental policy work largely exists in a black box (Sapeha et al., 2019). Black box theories are based on phenomenological and philosophical models, which focus on vague or abstract systems that have relatively unknown constitutive components. These "ubiquitous opaque decision systems" hide their internal logic and processes from the outside observer (Guidotti et al., 2018, p. 1). The theories posit that the inputs and outputs of the black box system are known, while knowledge of the processes that occur within the box are unknown (Ljung, 2001, p. 1). In some cases, the focus of black box theories is not on the structure of the black box itself: "it treats systems as units and introduces no space coordinates to localize its parts" (Bunge, 1963, p. 357). Translucent boxes, on the other hand, are observable from the outside and, like black boxes, require external manipulation. However, translucent boxes also have internal mechanisms or factors that require manipulation for the system to operate (Bunge, 1999). These internal mechanisms need to be understood in order to understand the system as a whole.

This article adds to black box discourses of policy work in two ways. First, the results provide empirical evidence that practitioners from a range of seniority levels and locations in government can be unfamiliar with policy development processes. This is the case even when the same practitioners are involved in processes that the literature would define as "traditional" policy work such as planning, research, coordination, and deliberation. Therefore, employing black box narratives to describe how policy work unfolds in the field is not simply an academic construction, but is a useful way to for practitioners to conceptualize public policy processes. Yet, Bunge's (1999) translucent box theory may still indeed be a useful way for academics to conceptualize policy work in the bureaucracy (but this language may not necessarily resonate with practitioners): There are internal and external factors that are manipulated when developing public policy and complex social

mechanisms and narratives being acted on. These factors and mechanisms can be accessed through first order accounts, such as practitioner narratives. This article has focused on internal processes and has shown that narratives and perceptions are powerful mechanisms shaping the reality of policy development processes. It is perhaps that studies of policy processes internal to government are slowly moving this box from 'black' to 'translucent'.

Second, this article supports the argument that exclusion from policy development processes is not a phenomenon experienced only by those researching or developing public policy from the "outside" of government. The findings of this study showed that even those who would normally be constructed in the public administration literature as insiders, such as public servants, sometimes find themselves existing outside of the black box of policymaking. This strengthens the argument for future research to continue to investigate through theoretical and empirical research why and how black boxes manifest in public sector organizations (see, for example, Andrews & Boyne, 2010, for their study on the black box model of public management).

These findings, which point to a black or translucent box of policymaking existing within government, not only fills an empirical gap in knowledge about how PEI public servants perceive policy work, but also supports the study's decision to heed Gleeson et al.'s (2009) recommendation that policy capacity researchers should use a range of qualitative methods that employ the *judgement of policy practitioners themselves* in evaluating policy capacity, rather than attempting to measure policy capacity according to 'objective' measures of policy outcomes or explicit evaluative criteria. (p. 14) (italics mine)

Furthermore, this article adds to the body of literature on policy work in Canada by providing qualitative description to contextualize previous survey research on the day-to-day tasks completed by policy workers in provincial and federal departments (e.g., Bernier & Howlett, 2012; Howlett, 2009; Howlett & Wellstead, 2011; Wellstead et al., 2007; Wellstead et al., 2009) and policy work in the nongovernmental sector (e.g., Evans & Wellstead, 2013; 2014; 2017). It also works towards filling an empirical gap on policy work in Prince Edward Island, which has been relatively understudied to date (Cameron 2019; 2020).

This study's adoption of a qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews with participants allows this article to construct and contextualize policy work in a way that could not have been accomplished if a positivist or strictly quantitative approach had been adopted. Internal processes, or mechanisms, were uncovered through one-on-one interviews with practitioners which in turn led to the identification of various narratives constructing reality. As such, it is important that future methodological research on policy capacity continues to study how policy work can be understood using qualitative inquiry, and social constructivism in particular.

This article shows that post-positivist, interpretive and first order accounts of policy work in practice are important for filling gaps in knowledge. Policy studies needs to continue to welcome methodological pluralism, for the potential to offer new insights and perspectives on something as important as public policy. Socially-constructive, narrative, and discursive studies of policy work —that are grounded in the language of practitioners— helps to connect theory and practice in a way that makes sense to those in the field.

Finally, this article's closer examination of the discursive black box frame of policy work in the field sheds light on how being an insider to public administration is relative and

insiderness is located on a continuum. (Both public servants and the general public are sometimes perplexed as to how decisions are made in government). It also allows us to better understand the discursive and constitutive components of policymaking—namely, public policy abstraction and complexity, policy capacity abstraction and complexity, hidden policy analysts, policy process confusion, and staff exclusion.

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