

# Policy design: Its enduring appeal in a complex world and how to think it differently

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## Abstract

Policy design has re-appeared on the scholarly agenda. This special issue investigates the assumptions of the policy design concept, questioning its theoretical coherence and relevance for practitioners. The conventional idea of policy design implies an instrumental-rational theoretical model which is out of place in contemporary governance arrangements. While the concept appeals to academic sensibilities, it has less utility in practice. It can also become caught up in the political aspect of policymaking by being used to generate legitimacy for the actions of public managers via rationalising accounts. Contributors to this issue argue that the design idea should be reconsidered from the ground up. An alternative orientation is put forward, which regards policy design as something that emerges from policymaking practice.

## Keywords

Instrumental-rational model, policy design, policy science, process model

The idea of policy design has appeared once more on the scholarly research agenda (see, e.g. Howlett, 2011; Howlett and Lejano, 2012; Howlett et al., 2015; Peters, 2015). Advocates of a research programme based on a ‘new design orientation’ claim that, in the context of complex problems, policymakers are seeking innovative solutions via the ‘intelligent design’ of policies (Howlett et al., 2015). They suggest a rebirth of policy design studies (Howlett et al., 2015), not least for the aim of assisting policymakers deal with the many ‘wicked problems’ facing governments today (Peters, 2015). But what does it mean to ‘design’ a policy, why is it more intelligent, and why is ‘design’ something in which we should be interested?

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The commonplace view is that, of course, policy is designed because it is crafted and stylised with a goal in mind. Policymakers carry out an intervention in society in order to change it, and presumably the better designed that intervention, the more likely the chances of success. But more than simply ‘policymaking’ or ‘policy intervention’, the notion of design calls to mind both goal-direction and the intention of achieving that goal, along with rational planning of the means to reach it. The idea of policy design is distinctive and important because it speaks to fundamental assumptions about the nature and possibilities of policymaking; that is, how we understand core concepts in our field:

public policies are the results of efforts made by governments to alter aspects of their own or social behaviour in order to carry out some end or purpose and... are comprised of complex arrangements of policy goals and policy means... Policy design extends to both the means or mechanisms through which goals are given effect, and to the goals themselves, since goal articulation inevitably involves considerations of feasibility, or what is practical or possible to achieve in given conjunctures or circumstances considering the means at hand. (Howlett, 2011: 281–282)

So, this view of policy design is entwined with a view of policy as a kind of instrumental-rational action – while noting that its adherents acknowledge the limitations of rationality in policymaking and suppose a less technocratic, attenuated rationality assumption (see Howlett and Lejano, 2012; Peters, 2015) – from conception through planning and execution of practical steps in line with that action, to reach a defined goal (for a critique of the ‘rationality project’, see Stone, 1988). Even when such a theory is acknowledged to have limited practical applicability – particularly given the many years of implementation research showing that policy often turns out quite differently than intended (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973) – it retains its appeal as the basis of hopes and desires for what successful policy can be and do. Thus, at the very least, the design perspective is proposed as a normative yardstick from which to evaluate real-world policy practices and thereby to improve them (Peters, 2015). Additionally, from a scholarly point of view, the idea of policy design expresses the desire to create theories that will match the formal models found in other sciences. Hence, the policy design agenda appeals to both the practical and theoretical ambitions of policy science scholars.

The aim of this special issue is to challenge the policy design agenda by questioning the nature and utility of the design concept itself, in theory and in practice. Given its pertinence to fundamental ontological categories (see Ongaro, 2017) of our field of investigation – that is, putting forward the idea of design itself makes a fundamental claim about what policymaking *is*, or at least could be in an ideal world – the question of policy design is an important one. It spans both academic investigations of the policymaking process and real efforts by practitioners to improve policy outcomes. However, scholarship has been dominated by perspectives informed by the instrumental-rational conception of the activity of policy

design. Such perspectives propose that policy design is a process of selecting tools or policy instruments suitable for achieving a particular problem-solving task. Although this literature has incorporated scholarship on the political construction of policy problems through framing, and noted the political dimensions of the policymaking context, an underlying goal-directed rationality persists, inherent in the problem-solution logic that underpins much policy design research. The papers in this issue argue that theorising the practice of policy design in instrumental terms imposes upon it a logic that is, firstly, theoretically unsuitable and, secondly, has little resonance for practitioners. This collection puts forward an alternative perspective, an account of policymaking practice in which practitioners are engaged in a highly mediated process. This does not entail claiming that neither intention nor design actually exist, in some form. But, instead of a primarily instrumental account that makes allowances for contingencies, these papers rethink policy design from the ground up as a contingent process, in which problem and solution are not pre-defined and ordered according to an instrumental orientation. Ultimately, they put into question the 'policy design' concept itself.

In this introduction, rather than pre-empting the analyses within, I want to consider what in the concept of policy design is so appealing, and why at this time. The role of the public official seeking solutions to the problems of the city has existed for millennia. But the particular scientific conception of policy design is integral to the modern state and corporate bureaucracies. The figure of the rational policymaker is the expert of modernity, an individual using ideas and evidence to produce a planned, ordered society. It is the responsible politician and rational, Weberian bureaucrat who seek the best solution to a given problem: policy would be put to best effect if it were designed and implemented scientifically (Lerner and Lasswell, 1951). At the same time, the history of the academic field of policy sciences has long endeavoured to reconcile this vision with the complexity of policymaking in the real world. Scholars have articulated this tension at the level of fundamental theory in different ways: Lasswell's (1951) incorporation of values in setting the policy goals to be scientifically tested; Simon's (1976) logic of satisficing solutions; Lindblom's (1965) process of muddling through; and Vickers' (1965) notion of 'appreciative systems'. The question that we face today is not just how to design public policies, but what makes a good theory about policy action in general, and what makes such a theory 'good'.

Divisions can be (very loosely) made between those scholars who think effective theories should aim to be systematic per se – and hence support the rationality assumption at least in theory, because they support analytical thinking and its products – and those who feel that theory should emerge from practice, and thus demands a different terminology. In the latter camp are also those who argue that the former, instrumental account serves more to validate, rather than explain, the actions of powerful policy players. Such divisions arise from fundamental orientations towards the social scientific enterprise. But the critics of the instrumental-rational assumption have also argued their case on empirical grounds, given the long-term trends in governing practices found in the advanced democracies.

The case for policy design as a formal process is that it can, at the very least, teach us lessons for policymaking. Opponents reject the relevance of this approach to design and some reject even the design concept itself. For example Colebatch asks in this issue whether, in a world of ‘governance’, the notion of design makes any sense when policies are produced by so many stakeholders in multiple spheres of negotiation. And if policy ‘complexity’ (Geyer and Cairney, 2015) means that policy processes are non-linear by nature, then the instrumental calculation at the heart of the design idea is misconstrued. Nevertheless, policy actors continue to design policy insofar as they devise strategies and actions to achieve them, even if these are operationalised through many players in a complicated and fragmented process (Braybrooke and Lindblom, 1963). Indeed, such a process may be intentionally diversified, as in policy design by ‘co-production’ (Durose and Richardson, 2015), in which it is argued that policy can be better formulated by the involvement of citizens outside narrow groups of elite decision-makers. In this issue, Colebatch explains that the field has become divided into two broad conceptions of the policy process – instrumental accounts and process-based accounts – with the question of design treated quite differently in each.

But to explain the appeal of policy design we might also look towards trends in wider society, seeing in its return a renewed desire for control in an increasingly disordered world. For academic social scientists, it could be seen as a response to their long-term declining relevance for practitioners. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (1987) argues that social scientists’ difficulties in producing robust hypotheses has led to a declining confidence about the value of their knowledge, while their political influence has also waned in the face of robust competition, for example from think tanks. The distorted link between knowledge and policymaking – confirmed long ago (Weiss, 1977) – has dashed the hopes of Lasswell for a policy sciences which informs practice through the use of scientific evidence. In these conditions, policy analysis has been labelled ‘argumentative’ (Fischer and Forester, 1993; Fischer and Gottweis, 2012; Majone, 1989), such that an intellectually informed ‘design’ is merely one argument among many, with no widely acknowledged claim to special status. The return of policy design might, therefore, be explained as a fruitless reaction against social change by seeking to reassert a modernist agenda (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010), which has already been bypassed by history. However, the idea of design can certainly extend beyond an idealistic, scientific conception. Clearly, policy problems are intentionally acted-upon and systematic efforts are made to develop policy mechanisms to change the future: design has been said to be both ubiquitous and necessary, however difficult (Bobrow, 2006). Rejecting the rationalist conception of design need not entail rejecting design itself.

But perhaps the way policy scientists since Lasswell have approached the notion of policy design reflects something fundamental about the academic way of thinking. For intellectuals, a first response to the complexities of the world is often to bracket out the noise and seek a formal solution, to aim for a theory conceived in the rarefied air of other-worldly abstraction, in which institutions function predictably and programmatically, and the political rationality of decision-makers can be

side-lined. This formalising move is, if you like, a generalised answer to the problem of policy complexity and politicisation. This renewed desire for control in a complex world extends further than academia. The recent UK referendum on membership of the European Union saw the 'Leave' campaign declare that voters should, in the face of complexity, 'take back control'<sup>1</sup> by restoring national sovereignty, particularly to control unchecked inflows of migrants allowed under European Union free movement provisions, but also to control fiscal policy so as to maximise spending on welfare state goods linked to citizenship rights, which had been undermined by globalisation. The implication is that persistent social problems reflect a lack of political will, a lack of sufficient authority and organisational effort, rather than arising from anything intrinsic to the problems themselves or to the mediated reality of governing arrangements. The policy design orientation supposes that it is possible and desirable to consider public policy as something which, at the very least, *could be* designed in terms of ends and means, and for policy analysts also to think of their jobs in this manner. But would such an intelligent policy designer actually bring order to chaos? Does it make sense to imagine the policy landscape as a kind of blank slate, when such a view does not, and many say cannot, exist? If Bauman is correct about postmodernity being the continuation of modernity but the waning of its ideal-typical rationality in favour of more modest interventions by intellectuals, who have become 'interpreters' rather than 'legislators', then in what way is it productive to imagine policy analysis in the old language, even via an 'as if' exercise?

Why, then, would the 'solution' to the general problem of persistent policymaking complexity be 'more design'? And in particular, what does this say about how 'politics' is incorporated into the policy design concept? Certainly, policymakers can take account of institutional and political realities when working up policy ideas. Nonetheless, given that the policy process is recognised more and more as political, then why would distilling the political element from it produce better design? One could easily argue the opposite effect. The design impulse is indicative of the scientific orientation towards understanding analysis as a process of problem *reduction*, of rendering reality in such a way as to make it amenable to scientific questioning in which one can obtain yes or no answers. In contrast to synthetic approaches which mediate different knowledges and political interests, the former practice is analytical, because it hives off parts of the world into ever smaller and simpler pieces, more amenable to producing generalisable models, which can be published and debated in scholarly journals. Such research also looks attractive to policymakers seeking clear technical means of designing policy, not just because it offers the prize of a definable and attainable goal, but because technical measures attract political legitimacy, regardless of their implementation success. Given that the political problem for public managers is firstly to act (i.e. to be seen to respond to public concerns), and only secondly to succeed, then the carrying out of a policy action with the legitimating wrapping of technique is itself an effective response to their problem. The concept of 'design' may therefore be more significant as validation and legitimation of policy as a *political* response to a problem, rather than a

guide to any subsequent outcome nor an explanation of the process which produced it.

Finally, the scientific, formal concept of design implies a particular conception of the policy process in time. That is, policy is something which proceeds in a sequence, first designed, then implemented, and (possibly) evaluated. Autonomous consequences can be distilled from independent actions in an identifiable manner, hence policy effects may be manipulated by degrees. Now, of course it is the case that actions have consequences. But in a complex policymaking environment, feedback processes mean that the effects quickly become part of the action itself. In a multi-actor environment, by whom is policy designed? And precisely which action-effects constitute 'policy'? Indeed, policy can be conceived as emerging from a continuous process of 'policy work' (Colebatch et al., 2010; Hoppe, 2010), such that the effort itself is a form of policymaking, created by a multitude of actors who all act 'rationally' and 'systematically', but nonetheless do so without operating within an instrumental-rational mode of thought in regard to a discrete, analytically identifiable problem.

This suggests we return to the starting point by rethinking whether the design concept might still be useful, and how. Rather than pursue a renewed instrumental-rational policy design, abstracted from the political context in order to generate more modelling, we might rethink 'policy design' within a general view of policymaking and all its attendant complexities. In the first article in this special issue, Hal Colebatch (2018) does just this. He carefully takes apart the design concept, uncovering its assumptions and challenging its utility. He makes a central distinction between policy practice, which is complex and has little to do with directly pursued objectives, and *accounts* of that practice, which re-present this interactive, negotiated, and ambiguous reality as a process of objective action by authoritative choice. This latter aspect is what makes it possible for academics to present policy design as a description of reality. However, he argues that this is to permit social science to be caught up in the political process and thus lose sight of the larger, actual process of policymaking.

In the same critical vein as Colebatch, Robert Hoppe (2018) offers an approach to policy design in a new mode. He rejects the problem-solving foundation of policy design and sets out the basic tenets of his alternative, problem-finding and problem-structuring approach. He then extends the theory to a detailed method for how practitioners should proceed through policy design via an iterative process, oriented towards their actual experience of policy work. This speaks directly to practitioners engaged in policy design, culminating in a series of rules-of-thumb to guide their inquiries.

Finally, Anna Durnová and Eva Hejzlarová (2018) aim to reveal the hidden, emotional dimension of policy design by showing how it functions in policy implementation. They explain how emotional responses to public policy are, in effect, integral to its design, even though, in the mainstream model, they are unstated and submerged within the domain of 'interests'. They document how their empirical study shows that the conflicting emotions of single mothers, in their role as key

policy intermediaries, are responsible for the continuation of policy coherence and also bear the burden of its practical failure. In so doing, they argue that, if outcomes are to be improved, the consideration of emotional responses should be integrated into policy design processes.

The articles in this issue enrich our understanding of policy design by moving away from the instrumental model towards an alternative design orientation. This perspective proposes alternative conceptual bases for theorising the activity of policy design and, at the same time, speaks to the concerns of policy practitioners seeking to reflect upon their work in order to better understand how effective design processes might be put in place. Collectively, the authors argue that critically reflecting upon the instrumental approach to design, and seeking an alternative situated in the experience of policy actors, will support improved theory and also provide insights for practitioners who wish to better understand their own policy work.

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1. See [www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/](http://www.voteleavetakecontrol.org/) (accessed 25 April 2017).

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