OTHER WAYS OF LOOKING AT POLICYMAKING:
A SUPPORT FOR THE "DESIGN FOR POLICY" RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Designers are increasingly being employed within government and the public sector, leading to a growing scholarly interest in understanding how design approaches, methods, and tools may affect policymaking. This inquiry has been carried on by design scholars in a field called "design for policy". The present theoretical paper argues that such interest, whilst timely and relevant, has been hampered by a simplistic conceptualisation of "policy", rooted in the authoritative instrumental view of policymaking and exemplified by a staged vision of the policy process (i.e., the policy cycle). The paper will review the shortcomings of this way of seeing policymaking by referring to the main critiques of authoritative instrumentalism. Then it will propose alternative ways of overcoming this vision by developing a theoretical and conceptual framework applicable to the empirical study of data-centric policymaking practices. The purpose is to support design researchers in developing empirical investigations for the "design for policy" field.

Keywords:
design for policy, authoritative instrumentalism, policy conceptualization, policy process theory

1. DESIGN ENTERING THE SPACE OF POLICYMAKING

In the contemporary design research discourse, the field of "design for policy" emerged to investigate the potential of design to drive experimentation and innovation in governments (Mortati et al., 2018). It might be argued that such inquiry, while it might look rather recent, can find its conceptual roots in the seminal work of authors such as Horst Rittel, Christopher Alexander, Buckminster Fuller and Donald Schön (Legeby et al., 2018). More than by giving continuity to these authors' thinking, "design for policy" has developed thanks to the reflections of practitioners' and academics, who have commented the many experimental uses of design approaches, methods and tools within the public sector (Bailey and Lloyd, 2016; Kimbell, 2016; Junginger, 2017; Legeby et al., 2018; McGann et al., 2018; Mortati et al., 2018).

Perhaps because of this strong practice orientation, "design for policy" developed as an under-theorized field, mostly in response to trends in public management and public sector innovation, among which stands the diffusion of public innovation spaces (PIS) (Bason and Schneider, 2014; Kimbell, 2016). In line with that, it can be said that "design for policy" owes its birth to the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008, when governments worldwide struggled with improving service provision while coping with budget cuts (Julier, 2017). Under these circumstances, the

constituency of PIS unfolded as part of a long-standing tendency of agencification, i.e., the decentralisation of policy capacities to governments' peripheral/external bodies (Wellstead et al., 2021). Since incentivizing innovation and maintaining public service quality became relevant for government agendas; several design consultancies — mostly with expertise in service design — were externally hired or embedded within governments to support public sector innovation (Julier, 2017; Tõnurist et al., 2017). Often, these PIS would employ design methods and tools as part of their activities, because easy to be used through a standardized and replicable approach (McGann et al., 2018). By mainly examining these experiences, "design for policy" scholars have sought to determine whether the value of these practices could extend beyond the simple dimension of service provision (Bailey and Lloyd, 2016; Buchanan et al., 2017), asking whether such experimental settings might influence institutional contexts and enable a more experimental form of policymaking and governance (Kimbell and Bailey, 2017; Legeby et al., 2018; Kimbell, 2019). Arguably, these research questions emerged from a normative vision on the benefit of transferring paradigms design paradigms into policymaking and driving organizational change in the public sector — for example, by enabling forms of policymaking more centred on the citizens' needs (Junginger, 2013; Vaz and Predeville, 2019).

In this view, innovative design practices could challenge established paradigms of policymaking and foster the development of new ones (Bailey and Junginger, 2014). As the conversation on "design for policy" developed, also policy and public administration studies started to inquiry this field from their own disciplinary perspective (Considine, 2012; Howlett, 2014; Hermus et al., 2020; van Buuren et al., 2020) — e.g., by inquirying how design contributes to collaborative governance (Ansell and Torfing, 2014). Some authors have harshly criticized the design perspective on policymaking as limited (Howlett, 2014; Clarke and Craft, 2019). For instance, Clarke and Craft (2019) argued that the user-centric view of design is undermined by a "*naïve blindness to the politics of the policy process*" (p. 14). Such critical perspectives also appear to align with the views of practitioners engaged in design practices (Bailey and Lloyd, 2016; Blomkamp, 2018). At the same time, the actual potential of PIS — the empirical stronghold of "design for policy" research — to drive institutional change remains rather unclear (Lindquist and Buttazzoni, 2021).

This paper argues that part of the problem lies in how researchers have addressed the relationship between innovative practices in government and policymaking. In this regard, a gap appears to remain — possibly intentionally — due to existing disciplinary perspectives. While traditional policy scholars have often failed to see policy innovation in terms other than political reforms (Windrum, 2008), design researchers have yet to engage with conceptualizations of policymaking that align with their interests and yield meaningful results. In the following sections, I contend that this stems from the acceptance of a canonical way of seeing policies and policymaking.

2. THE CANONICAL ACCOUNT OF POLICY AND POLICYMAKING PROCESS

Policy science and policy studies are the disciplines that have investigated the nature of "policy" for the longest time — at least since the work of political scientist Harold Lasswell in the 1950s and 1960s (see, for example, Dunn, 2017, pp. 37–38). Despite this long tradition, the definition of policy remains contested today (Howlett and Cashore, 2020). To understand the canonical view of policymaking, it is important to note that the very notion of "policy" already serves as an analytical lens through which the complex activities of governments are interpreted (Colebatch, 2005).

Policies can be understood as whatever government chooses to do or not to do (Dye, 2013) and are therefore primarily characterized by an element of authority, which distinguishes governmental actions from those of other social actors. In representative democracies, governments hold the authority to act within the boundaries of existing laws by allocating public resources, issuing and enforcing regulations, and developing programs that favor certain classes of social actors over others (Lowi, 1964). Policies are thus politico-administrative acts through which governments carry out these actions and mobilize available resources toward issues perceived as relevant (Howlett & Cashore, 2020) (fig. 1). From this perspective, policies can be conceptualized as the outputs of political systems and institutions (Easton, 1957). The canonical conceptualization of policymaking typically integrates both internal and external factors of political systems within such an input–output framework. For example, an internal input factor would be the deliberations of political parties on a public issue, which translate the issue into policy ends and aims, including goals, guiding principles, and operational plans to achieve them. External output factors would include policy instruments (i.e., the means used by government to achieve its goals), consisting of a mix of measures and rules that affect the structures of public organizations, the redistribution of public resources, existing regulations and enforcement mechanisms, and governmental communication (Cairney, 2019; Howlett and Cashore, 2020).
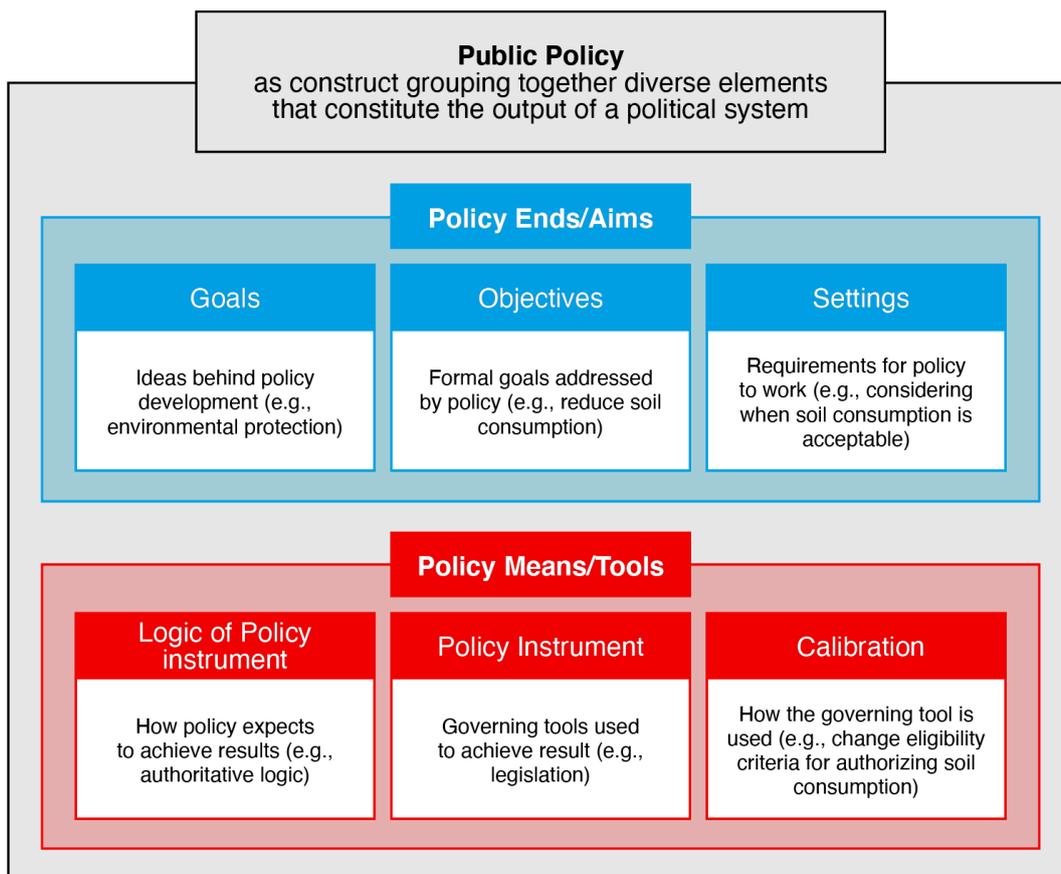

Figure 1. The components of policy as abstract construct (adapted from Cashore and Howlett, 2007).

By maintaining this view, several models and theoretical frameworks have been proposed to analyse the process of policymaking. Among them the policy cycle should be regarded as the most widely used. The policy cycle conceives public policymaking as a problem-solving activity (Jann

and Wegrich, 2007). In line with that, it conceptualizes policymaking as a process in which government addresses public policy problems throughout discrete stages; firstly by recognizing the problem and then acting upon it. These five stages indicate a different behaviour and role of social actors involved in the policy life cycle (i.e., the policy actors) (Howlett and Giest, 2013).

- *Agenda Setting*; where different societal actors attempt to influence governments' agenda.
- *Policy Formulation*; where government experts and a limited group of societal actors influence policy problems prioritization (i.e., government bureaucracies, interest groups, legislative committee rooms, special commissions, think tanks).
- *Decision-making;* where authoritative government decision- makers (typically experts) take a decision on the right course of action within a policy option.
- *Implementation;* where public administration officials and street level bureaucrats implement and adjust the measures.
- *Evaluation;* where a range of policy actors evaluates policies/ programs and their outputs/outcomes.

The policy cycle model is often meant as a device for heuristics, rather than a realistic depiction of the policy process and, as such, is regarded as widely useful by practitioners (Bridgman and Davis, 2003).

3. THE LIMITS OF SEEING POLICY THROUGH AUTHORITATIVE INSTRUMENTALISM

The canonical conceptions of policy and the policy process implied by the policy cycle have been criticized as biased by an "authoritative instrumentalist" view (Colebatch and Hoppe, 2018). This term brings together diverse reflections across policy studies that cannot be fully addressed here. Among them, I highlight two main perspectives that challenge the account of policy described in the previous section by questioning its underlying notions of "authority" and "instrumentality" (Colebatch & Hoppe, 2018a). These perspectives are summarized in the critiques of "*incrementalism*" and "*policy as practice*." Both fundamentally contest a central tenet of authoritative instrumentalism: the idea of policies as intentional choices designed to address a public issue (Turnbull, 2018), which assumes the possibility of rational decision-making in policy.

3.1. Critique from the incrementalism

The rational choice view of policy has been notably challenged by the incrementalist perspective in policy studies (Hoppe, 2018). Early proponents of incrementalism built on the idea that the rationality of decision-makers is bounded by the information available to them (Simon, 1979). Accordingly, proponents argued that fully comprehensive knowledge enabling the pursuit of optimal goals is unattainable. Policies, rather than products of rational design, are instead understood as the continuous application of political and practitioner wisdom, moving incrementally toward improvement (Lindblom, 1959). In this sense, policies are incremental adjustments to existing programs and practices. This perspective profoundly influenced later theorization of the policy process:

"Incrementalism revealed a deep, ineliminable tension in policy process theorizing between ideal and practical thought, between policymaking as a series of science-informed choice opportunities and as a continuously evolving process of practice-informed adjustment and change" (Hoppe, 2018, p. 398)

The limits of rational choice in the incrementalist view are also tied to the limits of central coordination and to the recognition of the multiplicity of actors involved in policymaking (Lindblom, 1979). Policy actors cannot be regarded as neutral truth-seekers, but rather as partisans operating within a political arena shaped by conflicting interests, in which:

"decision-makers, pressure groups, experts and civil society organizations make policies because they have objectives of power, influence, prestige or epistemic authority in society" (Dunlop et al., 2018, pp.6–7).

Acknowledging these multiple interests does not, however, reduce policymaking to mere political calculation or power plays. Instead, the incrementalist view suggests that, in a pluralist democracy, no single agency is capable of steering policymaking instrumentally (Hoppe, 2018). Since many reasons and perspectives coexist in the political space, policies emerge not from rational, instrumental choices but from partisan mutual adjustments (Lindblom, 1979, p. 522).

"Policymaking is an interaction between democratic politics, on open and pluralist civil society, and a capitalist, market-driven economic system, which is not dominated by a single actor […] Interpunctions (like in the orthodox stages model), as attempts to detect or impose order or regularity on the process, only obscure that policies emerge from serial, ongoing work on day-to-day problems and slow hardening of particular rules and routines […] In this sense, the making of policies as strategic, longer-term guidelines is not just serial interaction, but also epiphenomenal, that is, not the purpose or focus, but a by-product of daily dealing with practical problems" (Hoppe, 2018, p. 398)

3.2. Critique from the "Policy as Practice" view

By recognizing the limits of scientific rationality in policy decision-making — and the complex social interactivity of the political sphere — incrementalism challenged the view of policy as the product of a unitary choice. This recognition also undermines the anthropomorphic, Cartesian image of government implied by authoritative instrumentalism, in which "thought" (or mind) is separated from and legitimates "action" (or body) (Colebatch & Hoppe, 2018, p. 7). In the staged view of the policy process, this separation is represented by the division between the early stages of the policy cycle (agenda setting, policy formulation, decision-making) and policy implementation.
Critics of authoritative instrumentalism argue that this division obscures the multiplicity of actors contributing to policy-relevant knowledge and reduces policy to a matter of problem-solving (Colebatch, 2006; Turnbull, 2013; Bartels, 2018; Turnbull, 2018).

These arguments ground the critical perspective of "policy as practice," sometimes also referred to as "policy work" (Bartels, 2018; Turnbull, 2013). This view seeks to account for policy by starting from the lived experience of those directly involved in its making — i.e., policy workers (Colebatch et al., 2010; Kohoutek et al., 2018). Policy workers are thus proposed as a category encompassing a variety of professionals working within and alongside public administrations (Kohoutek et al., 2013, p. 32).

"They may be employed by the government, or one of a range of bodies concerned about how the authority of government can be brought to bear on problems: think tanks, interest groups, professional bodies, community associations, international organizations, etc. They may be activists, not employed in this sector

at all, but committed to policy as a major part of their lives […]" (Colebatch et al., 2010, pp. 10–11)

Viewing policy as the practice of policy workers highlights policies as the intentional activities of multiple actors engaged with problematics and processes of knowledge mobilization (Colebatch et al., 2010; Kohoutek et al., 2013; Turnbull, 2013). The more explicit strand of research on policy as practice and policy workers (Bartels, 2018; Kohoutek et al., 2018; Turnbull, 2013) has notable antecedents in the tradition of implementation studies (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984; Lipsky, 2010). These studies outlined that the activities of civil servants and front-line public workers largely constitute what "policy" is in the eyes of citizens and other social actors (Lipsky, 1971). Because these actors profoundly shape the concrete realization of governmental decisions, their practices may even be regarded as policies without an agenda (Page, 2006).

The policy-as-practice perspective particularly emphasizes the role of policy workers in creating policy-relevant knowledge. Contrary to the positivist view, dominant in traditional policy analysis, this perspective argues that knowledge relevant to policy is not solely generated exogenously by external experts who "speak truth to power" (Radaelli, 1995). Rather, while policy workers may not be in a position to alter the high-level architecture of policy directions, they themselves hold practical and political intelligence. They mobilize a variety of non-scientific and lay sources to translate political directives into policies (Colebatch, 2015; Maybin, 2015).

In essence, the policy-as-practice (or policy work) perspective argues that policy workers actively create policy-relevant knowledge (Colebatch et al., 2010; Turnbull, 2013). Policymaking, instead of being understood as a problem-solving activity, should be seen as a collective process of problem-finding fuelled by practice (Hoppe, 2010, p. 25; Turnbull, 2013). Policy workers, through practice, re-articulate given interpretations of a problematic (i.e., policy problems) into new problems that are politically and operationally contextualized (Maybin, 2015; Turnbull, 2013); thus, can be acted upon.

4. HOW LOOK AT INNOVATIVE PRACTICES FOR POLICYMAKING?
THE CASE OF DATA-CENTRIC POLICYMAKING

The "design for policy" discourse has largely drawn on the staged view of policymaking embodied in the policy cycle (see Villa Alvarez et al., 2022). I aim here to offer researchers in this field alternative ways of conceptualizing policy, moving beyond the vision of authoritative instrumentalism described above. That vision is particularly problematic for "design for policy" research, as it seeks to directly connect practices (as inputs) with authoritative policy decisions and documents (as outputs and formal manifestations of policymaking). A document-based methodological approach may be appropriate for retrospectively assessing policy innovation and change (i.e., once new policy documents have been issued). However, design research often needs to understand the value of innovative practices as they occur and to assess their impact before such official outputs exist.

In the following section, I propose to address this by reframing the relationship between policymaking and innovation through the lens of policy learning. I introduce a theoretical and conceptual framework for interpreting the institutional impact of innovative, micro-level practices. This framework was first developed in research on the innovative use of data in the public sector,

where the concept of data-centric policymaking was explored. Given the growing importance of data use in the public sector, the framework also holds particular relevance for "*design for policy*" (Mortati et al., 2022). Building on the critiques of authoritative instrumentalism outlined above, it seeks to contribute equally to the "*data for policy*" and "*design for policy*" fields (cf. Leoni, 2020).

4.1. Proposal #1: Considering the Practices of Policy Workers Toward Policy Problems as Policymaking

Critiques of authoritative instrumentalism offer valuable insights into the nature of policy-relevant knowledge and the role of policy practice and policy workers in actively creating it. These perspectives are particularly useful for building a framework around data-centric policymaking practices, as they suggest a way to connect the use of non-traditional data at the level of individual and group practices with the institutional and structural dimensions that give them characterization as "policymaking". Establishing this link cannot be taken for granted, yet it is necessary to inform any analysis.

Most theoretical frameworks developed in policy studies support the identification of internal and external dynamics that affect policymaking (for a review, see Carlsson, 2017). However, many of these frameworks model actors and their relations on the basis of a conception of policy grounded in authority and outputs (Kohoutek et al., 2018). In this view, institutional outputs (e.g., the publication of official documents, the creation of an office, etc.) serve as reference points for interpreting observed activities or historical data as relevant for analyzing policy. This approach essentially returns to the authoritative instrumentalist perspective described earlier, treating the activity of policy workers only in relation to authoritative decisions.

By contrast, adopting the view of policy as the practice of policy workers rejects the idea that policy is merely an output detached from these activities, reframing the notion of the "policy process" into "policy-as-process" (Colebatch & Hoppe, 2018). At the same time, there remains the acknowledged "[…] need to do better than to offer a rambling list of practices which may 'involve' policy" (Colebatch & Hoppe, 2018a, p. 7). The perspective of policy work therefore carries a methodological challenge — namely, the necessity of choices and trade-offs — one that is common to the entire field of policy studies and well summarized by the renowned political scientist Paul Sabatier:

"Given the staggering complexity of the policy process, the analyst must find some way of simplifying the situation in order to have any chance of understanding it. One simply cannot look for, and see, everything." (Sabatier, 2007, p.4)

This methodological conundrum is not fully resolved by the policy practice/work view. At the same time, the aspiration to produce a universal theoretical account of practices conflicts with their inherently contextual nature (Kohoutek et al., 2013). The policy practice/work literature acknowledges this issue and proposes that orientation toward a policy problem is a salient aspect that signals policy work (Colebatch & Hoppe, 2018; Kohoutek et al., 2013). Following this suggestion, the knowledge of policy workers about a policy problem may represent a potential link between the micro-level of individual practices and the macro-level of institutional structures. Through the "*agency vs. structure*" dichotomy, it is possible to argue that:

- Practices at the micro level interact with and shape policy problems from the "*bottom-up*". What is considered a policy problem, and how it should be addressed (the policy paradigm), is shaped over long periods of time through continuous collective reflection on public issues (Hall, 1993).

- Institutions, shared norms, and rules constrain individual agents' framing of policy problems from the "top down." Individual knowledge of a policy problem is limited, and beliefs are shaped by the influence of broader institutional contexts (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2017; Grin & Loeber, 2007; Moyson et al., 2017).

In essence, focusing on policy problems may help identify the specific activities of policy workers that account for policymaking (Turnbull & Hoppe, 2019). Experimental practices that explicitly investigate public problems should thus be considered empirically relevant, whereas routine activities may not be equally so. What remains necessary to clarify is how — starting from this focus on policy problems — innovative practices (e.g., data-centric policymaking) can be understood.

4.2. Proposal #2: Framing Policy Innovation as Policy (Social) Learning

Policy learning, understood as social learning at the micro level of groups and individuals, has long been studied as a driver of policy change (Heclo, 1974; Hall, 1993; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Policy change is thus explained not only by dynamics of power but also by networks of actors "puzzling" over policy problems (Hall, 1993; Heclo, 1974). A notable example of how learning is used as an *explicans* of policy change can be found in the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). According to the ACF, policy change depends on the influence of individuals and groups (advocacy coalitions) that gather around a shared set of beliefs about policy problems and solutions, thereby shaping a policy subsystem (i.e., a portion of the political space focused on a particular issue). As these coalitions revise their beliefs through internal discussions about policy problems or through external "shocks" to the subsystem, they generate policy learning at various levels of belief, eventually affecting policy.

Thanks to such studies, policy learning has become a well-established field within policy studies and has been proposed as an interpretive lens for understanding policy processes and their dynamics (Heikkila & Gerlak, 2013; Moyson et al., 2017; Dunlop & Radaelli, 2018). Yet policy learning has been interpreted in both positive and negative terms. Positive perspectives view it as a useful concept and theoretical framework not only for analyzing knowledge utilization but also for understanding the diverse dynamics of policymaking in a governance perspective (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2018) — that is, a multi-actor, complex perspective that acknowledges policymaking as dependent on a multiplicity of stakeholders. By contrast, critical accounts (Bennett & Howlett, 1992; Goyal & Howlett, 2019) argue that policy learning is too theoretically fragmented to serve as an explanatory tool. The main critique is that it remains difficult to isolate what exactly causes learning within the complexity of policy settings, or even to define when learning does not occur (Goyal & Howlett, 2019). As a consequence, the link between policy learning and policy change continues to be studied extensively but is never presented as self-evident (Moyson et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, policy learning remains a thriving field, with a wide variety of theoretical and empirical studies showing considerable coherence in the methodologies applied (Squevin et al., 2021). Perhaps because of its emphasis on the micro–macro link, the concept has also travelled into the public sector innovation literature, where it is incorporated into definitions of policy innovation (cf. Windrum, 2008).

5. MOVING FROM THEORY TO RESEARCH WORK: A THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING DATA-CENTRIC POLICYMAKING

There is limited theoretical understanding of the use of innovative data sources (also called non-traditional data) in policymaking (Verhulst et al., 2019). Traditionally, policy studies have not engaged directly with technological innovation, and they usually conceptualize change and innovation on decades-long timeframes (e.g., ACF). However, as shown above, these disciplines provide useful conceptual tools and linkages for theoretically strengthening research on these practices. This paper has sought to identify perspectives that can support the conceptualization of policy and policymaking in order to build a framework for understanding experimental practices of data-centric policymaking. This framework draws on two perspectives:

- **Perspective A**. Policymaking is conceptualized as the practices of policy workers. In the case of data-centric policymaking, this allows us to examine cases where non-traditional data are collected and shared to investigate policy problems. Without dismissing the policy cycle as a heuristic device, the intention here is to employ a conceptualization of policy that provides a contextual view focused on practices. To avoid purely anecdotal or idiosyncratic analysis, given the variety of practices, the focus is placed on policy problems, which remain a consistent element of policy work across different empirical contexts.

Building on this, a second theoretical perspective is proposed to reach insights into innovation across contexts of data-centric policymaking:

- **Perspective B**. The potential innovation brought by data-centric policymaking practices is conceptualized as policy learning. Policy change is generally understood as having an institutional dimension (i.e., macro-level effects) (Moyson et al., 2017). Such change often unfolds over decades and may only be detectable retrospectively, which is less useful for "design for policy" scholars. While conceptualizing policy as practice helps to address this problem, it remains challenging to understand the interaction between micro-level practices and macro-level effects. Policy learning — understood as social learning at the micro level of policy workers — offers a well-established theoretical perspective for analyzing this change. The knowledge of policy workers is always connected to broader organizational and institutional framings of what constitutes a policy problem, which, in the policy work perspective, is a constant element across practices. Considering variations in individual policy learning across cases (e.g., data-centric policymaking practices) does not create a direct causal link between practices (e.g., data use) and institutional change, but it enables exploration of how different uses of data influence policymaking in different ways.

In essence, considering policy learning is not intended to capture innovation in the use of non-traditional data in absolute terms, but rather to highlight the different forms such innovation may take. This perspective understands policy innovation as innovation in the process of policymaking, rather than in the production of new policies or policy adjustments — a view also advanced by other "design for policy" researchers (Vaz & Predeville, 2019). The conceptual framework developed here (fig. 2) suggests that policy workers engaged in data-centric policymaking (i.e., collecting, sharing, and processing non-traditional data) are involved in forms of policy practice that, in the policy practice/work perspective, equate with policymaking itself. As a result of these practices (alongside other factors), their existing frames of policy problems — defined at the micro level by cognitive and normative knowledge about an issue — may shift. Comparing such changes across cases can reveal how different uses of data affect policymaking in different ways.
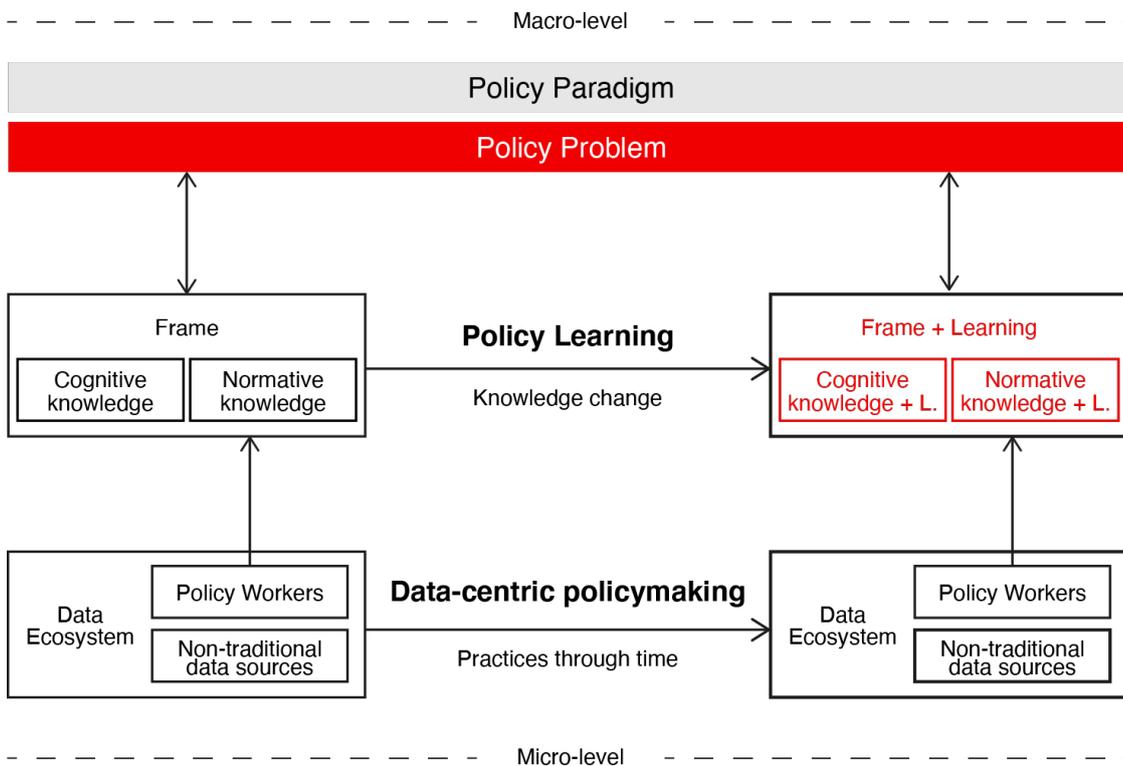

Figure 2. Conceptual/Theoretical Framework of data-centric policymaking.

6. Looking Forward

The perspective and related theoretical framework proposed here were developed in the context of a research exploring the concept of data-centric policymaking through a design perspective. However, I would argue that the need for strong conceptualization extends to the entire, and growing, "*design for policy*" field. Policymaking is a concept whose empirical instances must be clarified and operationalized for research. As Sartori (1970) reminds us, developing robust concepts is the foundation of robust methodological frameworks and, in turn, reliable research. While design researchers may find this exercise somewhat dull, it has practical implications and is especially necessary in the "design for policy" domain. Moreover, examining how disciplines frame concepts such as "policy" and "policy innovation" is the only way to address the many spaces they (intentionally) leave unaddressed — design included. This effort also supports the kind of interdisciplinary engagement that design is increasingly called upon to foster in the public sphere.

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