

Policy Sciences: The Discipline and Profession

Author(s): Peter deLeon

Source: *Policy Sciences*, Feb., 1981, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Feb., 1981), pp. 1-7

Published by: Springer

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/4531828>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Springer is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Policy Sciences*

# Policy Sciences: The discipline and profession

With this issue, *Policy Sciences* marks the resignation of its editor, Professor Thomas J. Anton of the University of Michigan. I would like to take this occasion to emphasize that during his three-year tenure, Tom Anton has done much to enhance the position of the journal. He has gracefully carried out and indeed enlarged the *Policy Sciences* charter as set out more than eleven years ago by Edward Quade and admirably continued by Garry Brewer. The journal's readership owes Tom Anton an abiding debt of intellectual and professional gratitude.

*Peter deLeon, Editor*

It is difficult to comprehend that a field of study first proposed in 1951 by Harold Lasswell [1] could be as widely practiced as policy science and, as applied to specific policy problems, policy analysis, are today [2]. Throughout the government and private sectors, one hardly finds any office that does not have a staff "policy analyst". Newly graduated baccalaureates engrave that title on their business cards and many senior government officials view themselves primarily as analysts. Several universities offer both undergraduate and graduate degrees in policy studies and special schools have been established within the nation's major universities to train policy scientists. Within the past year, a dues-collecting, journal-issuing professional association has been established. Clearly, policy analysis can be seen as a growth stock. Yet the pervasiveness of the genre leads one to question the heritage, present condition, and future of the discipline and profession. It is appropriate, then, that the editorial transition of *Policy Sciences* pauses for a moment to reflect upon the state of the policy sciences.

The three distinguishing characteristics of the policy sciences are, first, their policy applications and orientation, second, their emphasis on contextuality, and third, their explicitly multidisciplinary (or interdisciplinary) approach to policy problems. These were plainly set forth by Lasswell twenty years ago [3] and reinforced by the first editor of this journal when Quade wrote in its inaugural issue that "The intention of the

policy sciences is simply to augment, by scientific decision methods and the behavioral sciences, the process that humans use in making judgments and taking decisions” [4]. The second editor of the journal, Garry Brewer, went beyond Quade and proposed a research agenda, both for the policy process itself and a number of specific policy issue, in an attempt to “nurture and structure a discipline” [5]. The present ubiquity of policy analysis would seem to be evidence of their collective success.

Another interpretation, however, is less generous. Rather than accept the widespread application of policy analysts and the growing volume of their work as *prima facie* evidence of acceptance or even success, a second explanation exists that delves beneath the surface to reveal several key and unresolved problems which could inhibit the future development and ultimate value of the policy sciences. This alternative explanation would claim that two conditions lend themselves to the putative growth in policy analysis. First, few can argue against analysis; more “facts” and information are better than less (to a certain point, obviously). Second, the multidisciplinary character of analysis permits anybody or any discipline to be identified as a policy scientist or science. Economists, computer programmers, political scientists, sociologists, physicists, and lawyers can assume this new and “salable” appellation with relatively little knowledge as to its intellectual connotations and the attendant responsibilities. This is not to suggest that economists, programmers, and other professionals cannot perform excellent policy-relevant research or that only the interdisciplinary graduates of public policy programs should be licensed policy analysts. It is only meant to explain the great proliferation of policy analysts and research within the last few years.

If this explanation is valid, then one has legitimate cause to worry over the future of the policy sciences, both as a discipline and a profession. Brewer’s invocatory editorial stressed the disciplinary issue with some clarity and cogency [6], yet the methodological rigor which defines a discipline seems not to have taken firm root in the six years hence. One is entitled to ask why. My suspicions here are somewhat – perhaps unjustifiably – optimistic. The vast range and enormous complexity of problems presently facing the policy sciences do not readily submit themselves to robust methodological solution, let alone aggregation, especially if one includes behavioral and organizational factors. Simply put, the more rigorous and methodologically elegant one’s approach, the further removed it appears to be from policy problems and solutions [7]. Just as important, the broad charter and scope of the policy sciences almost necessarily preclude overarching theoretical constructs which can succinctly integrate the entire area of inquiry. Lasswell and Kaplan caution against “the quest for ‘universal laws’ . . . [which could] distract attention and energies from partial inquiries that can illuminate situationally localized problems in empirical ways” [8].

This hardly should be viewed as an excuse for glib analysis, methodological *ad hocery*, or irrelevant sophistication; numerous examples of these can already be found. But it does suggest that the present lack of an integrated theory in the policy sciences is not as debilitating as it might first appear, or as straightforward as one might have hoped. Lasswell and others have left the policy sciences a theoretic legacy

to focus future attentions to constructive ends [9]. Whether the opportunity will be exploited is still open to question.

There is ample room for work beyond the immediate case study mode, that is, research to develop the applications of various multidisciplinary approaches to classes of problems (e.g. the principle of situational references [10]), to establish rules of evidence where there are none, and to create typologies or taxonomies as instruments of inquiry and possible precursors to later, more general statements [11]. For example, significant advances have been made in the study of policy implementation in the past decade [12]. Great strides have been made in developing and applying methodologies for policy and program evaluation. Where policy science is still particularly deficient is in devising means to integrate the normative, contextual aspects of policy decisions into its interdisciplinary calculus. It is in this area where future work might best be focused, for it will basically determine the intellectual credentials and normative credibility of the discipline.

One might justifiably have greater fears over the future and integrity of policy science as a profession. As noted above, the burgeoning community of "policy analysts" could conceivably lead to a market surfeit and possibly a professional "identity crisis" [13]. One needs to ask what distinguishes a policy analyst from any other professional and, within the profession, between the acceptable and unacceptable. One distinction should lie with the contextual responsibility of the policy sciences to advance basic human values. On a more particular level, how does the policy analyst meet the specific needs of the program manager? How does the analyst weigh responsibilities to the greater societal goals and to the program goals [14]? And under what conditions should the policy analyst assume the role of the policy advocate? For better or worse, policy analysts are not legislated into existence, as are lawyers, nor is there a physiological need for them, such as one finds for physicians. Analysts' credentials are currently established on a strictly personal basis. The skepticism facing their product, however, leads one to question if the aggregate profession will continue in its growth mode.

This skepticism among potential clients is scarcely cavalier or without cause. Four reasons might be identified. First, many analyses are plainly not wanted by decisionmakers; they are ordered for a number of reasons irrelevant to the solution of a specific problem, such as a blue ribbon panel study mandated to postpone rather than formulate action. Second, many analyses are failing to meet the legitimate needs of the policymakers or the broader requirements of the society. This may be the fault of the policymaker, but it is a charge which the analyst cannot neglect or plead innocent to, for it will surely undermine the credibility of the profession. Third, analysis can be viewed as little more than politics with an "objective" veneer. Commoner documents how energy officials of the U.S. government brazenly manipulated a computer energy model to support the political program they wanted [15]. And finally, it is not clear that analysis "helps". In the really difficult policy problems, even the best analysts can arrive at contrary positions and, by implication,

policy recommendations [16]. Also, faulty analysis can render a situation in a worst state than was otherwise the case.

Thus the policy sciences are positioned at a critical intellectual and professional junction. In the former case, they should no longer be content to produce idiosyncratic policy analyses or even exemplary case studies. The growing body of evidence must be moved towards a more general understanding of the policy process and its components if the field of inquiry is to assume credible disciplinary trappings. Perhaps just as important, its activities must be truly interdisciplinary, for the problems being presented are simply too complex to permit solution by a single discipline's biases.

The professional credibility of the policy analyst – in many cases, the relationship between the analyst and the client – is presently even more endangered. Disciplinary diatribes and methodological monographs can always retreat into the groves of academe and be disputed in arcane journals until nobody, saving the participants, really cares. But the policy scientist needs to place the client's or sponsor's requirements in the context of overall societal values, and act accordingly. To abandon that mandate would be to reject the fundamental characteristic of the profession. The increasing skepticism regarding policy analysis among knowledgeable policymakers can be viewed as either a dangerous harbinger of growing disrepute of the analyst's skills or, more constructively, as a demand that special care be given to the judicious application of those skills [17]. It is a vapid bromide to suggest that "better work needs be done," but it is clearly to the advantage of all concerned that professional standards be formulated, scrupulously applied, and inferior work professionally castigated. One can justifiably debate if the profession is ready for a code of ethics, or whether it can long continue without one.

The policy science body is hardly one-shoed. Just as the analyst must bear the brunt of the profession's potential demise, the sponsor or client must likewise assume some of the responsibility for both the cause and the cure [18]. Research sponsors should be candid in presenting their requirements and be knowledgeable recipients. Otherwise, they might well receive a product which does not fit their needs, and regardless of the quality of the analysis, be hesitant to use analysis again, even if the fault were theirs.

Of course, neither of these eventualities might occur. The rational construct is too embedded in the policymaker's mind to permit the easy atrophy of analysis; concomitantly, some corpus of theory and methodology will accumulate – perhaps haphazardly – because of personal interests and enthusiasms. But the problems facing the industrial and nonindustrial societies are much too pressing to permit a facile or random future for the policy sciences. Brewer laid out a menu of critical policy research issues six years ago [19]; in retrospect, his list was too short and maybe even too benign as one gazes into the policy issue future.

Some claim that the best use of social science policy research is to create an amorphous "policy enlightenment" [20]. Where this alone true, then one should despair for the intellectual and professional growth potential of the policy sciences and their contributions to their society. But a stronger case can be made for the potential

contributions which careful analysis can make in as widely divergent areas as the applications of technology to societal problems [21], genetic engineering, the relationship of the industrialized to the nonindustrialized nations, and the most basic question of the citizen's faith in the government [22]. Although professional humility is important and surely welcomed (albeit rarely recognized), the potential applications and value to society of quality analysis performed by skilled and trusted practitioners should be the upper bounds of the policy sciences. It might still be problematic if the policy sciences can meet the challenges posed but it is certain that they cannot unless the issues stated above (*inter alia*) are directly confronted on both the intellectual and professional bases.

The preceding essay has attempted to serve twin purposes. First, it continues in the tradition established by Quade and Brewer in proposing some areas of inquiry for the policy sciences over the next few years. Second, it also offers a very rough set of guidelines for the thrust of *Policy Sciences* for the next three volumes. Obviously quality submissions will always be welcomed but the author(s) should realize that the journal has a variegated audience. To appeal to or inform a very narrow segment of that audience rarely redounds to the overall benefit of the journal's readership. The author of the case study or particular analysis should identify methodological applications or policy lessons that will be of interest to the policy scholar or practitioner outside that specific policy area. Similarly, the policy theorist must recognize that grand conceptual architectures should be grounded in concrete examples so that theorizing can be appreciated and perhaps somehow incorporated by the policy practitioner. Articles addressing the state of the discipline and the profession (and the synergistic relationship between the two) will be treated sympathetically. A final editorial note: *Policy Sciences* is an avowedly international journal of policy research. As such, it encourages articles from authors and experiences outside the United States, both for the different perspectives they offer and because of the potential richness of comparative policy analysis [23].

In maintaining the editorial standards of excellence established by my predecessors, I foresee no major changes in the structure of *Policy Sciences* over the next few volumes, although I will be receptive to any changes that the readership might propose. I will, however, offer two minor changes. On occasion, I will solicit review articles of particularly interesting or publicized pieces of analysis; again suggestions are invited. And, when the opportunity presents itself, I will encourage and publish opposing perspectives, such as critiques and rejoinders to a given article within these pages, as a means to make the journal more of an exchange rather than a presentation of views.

The purpose, then, of *Policy Sciences*, as set forth in its earliest issue, is the development of knowledge *in* the policy process and knowledge *of* the policy process [24]. As editor, I fully intend to let the journal's readership exercise that purpose to the fullest extent of the license. To permit any less would undermine the policy sciences in

both their intellectual and professional roles. This is a purpose and aspiration I trust the readership and editorial board will share.

### Notes

1. It is generally conceded that the expression "policy sciences" (and much of its subsequent intellectual underpinnings) were coined by Harold D. Lasswell, "The policy orientation," in Daniel Lerner and Harold D. Lasswell, eds., *The Policy Sciences* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1951), pp. 3–15, although analysts and analysis have a tradition as rich as recorded history (see Herbert Goldhamer, *The Adviser* [New York: Elsevier, 1978]).
2. "Policy science" and "policy analysis" should not be treated as synonyms, even though the two overlap in important areas. Policy science is primarily concerned with knowledge of and in the policy process; it is explicitly value directed. Policy analysis is more concerned with specific policy problems, applications, and resolutions. The latter is subset of the former.
3. Lasswell, "The policy orientation," p. 3; for an elaboration, see Harold D. Lasswell, *A Pre-View of Policy Sciences* (New York: Elsevier, 1971).
4. Edward S. Quade (1970), "Why policy sciences?" *Policy Sciences*, 1 (1): 1.
5. Garry D. Brewer (1974), "The policy sciences emerge: to nurture and structure a discipline," *Policy Sciences*, 5 (3): 239–244.
6. *Ibid.*
7. One need only view the skepticism accorded the macroenergy models by academicians and government officials alike; for a review, See Allan S. Manne, Richard G. Richels, and John P. Weyant (1977), "Energy policy modeling: a survey," *Operations Research*, 27 (1): 1–36.
8. Harold D. Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan, *Power and Society* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950), p. xxiii; also see Albert O. Hirschman (1970), "The search for paradigms as a hindrance to understanding," *World Politics*, 22 (3): 329–343.
9. Lasswell, *A Pre-View of Policy Sciences*, and Lasswell and Kaplan, *Power and Society*. One effort to apply Lasswell's approach is Garry D. Brewer and Ronald D. Brunner, eds., *Political Development and Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1975).
10. The expression is from Lasswell and Kaplan, *Power and Society*, p. xxi; the importance of the concept is demonstrated by Abraham Kaplan, *American Ethics and Public Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963).
11. See Theodore J. Lowi (1972), "Four systems of policy, politics, and choice," *Public Administration Review*, 32 (4): 299.
12. In 1973, Jeffrey L. Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky, *Implementation . . .* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), claimed in their Appendix that there was no extant literature on implementation; the revised (1979) edition of the book notes that the implementation "literature is growing so rapidly that the bibliography can only be suggestive rather than comprehensive" (p. xv).
13. Arnold J. Meltsner, "Creating a policy analysis profession," in Stuart Nagel, ed., *Improving Policy Analysis* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1979), pp. 235–250, offers some pertinent observations.
14. Lasswell and Kaplan, *Power and Society*, state that policy science should not be directed towards "the glory of a depersonalized state or the efficiency of a social mechanism, but human dignity and the realization of human capacities" (p. xxiv).
15. Barry Commoner, *The Politics of Energy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), Chaps. 1 and 2.
16. The energy situation offers as ready an example as one might want; compare the analyses and policy recommendations presented in Robert Stobaugh and Daniel Yergin, eds., *Energy Future* (New York: Random House for the Harvard Business School, 1979), Sam H. Schurr et al., *Energy in America's Future* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press for Resources for the Future, 1979), and *ibid.* Other examples are easy to discern: for instance, the basic dispute as to whether U.S. defense policymakers can "trust" their Soviet counterparts and the effect of that trust on the American defense budget; or whether welfare is a right or a privilege.

17. Laurence L. Lynn, Jr. "The user's perspective," in Giandomenico Majone and Edward S. Quade, eds., *Pitfalls of Analysis* (New York: John Wiley, 1980), Chap. 8.
18. Although many have discussed the role of the client in policy analysis, Arnold Meltser, *Policy Analysts in the Bureaucracy* (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), is still one of the best sources.
19. Brewer, "The policy sciences emerge."
20. Carol H. Weiss (1977), "Research for policy's sake: the enlightenment function of social science research," *Policy Analysis*, 3 (4): 531-546.
21. J. David Roessner (1979), "Federal technology policy: innovation and problem solving in state and local Governments," *Policy Analysis*, 5 (2): 181-200, presents convincing arguments as to the need for analysis in this area.
22. See Ronald D. Brunner and Weston E. Vivian (1980), "Citizen viewpoints on energy policy," *Policy Sciences*, 12: 147-174, for some evidence on this issue.
23. This is an admitted but supportable prejudice; see Arthur Cyr and Peter deLeon (1975), "Comparative policy analysis," *Policy Sciences*, 6 (4): 375-384.
24. The distinction is offered by Harold D. Lasswell (1970), "The emerging conception of the policy sciences," *Policy Sciences* 1 (1): 3, 5.