Rediscovering Pragmatism and the Policy Sciences

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Harold Lasswell, the principle architect of the policy sciences, wrote sparingly about the link between the policy sciences and pragmatism. Indeed, it was not until 1971 that Lasswell acknowledged what before he had not disclosed: His vision of the policy sciences was a product of the ideas of John Dewey and other pragmatists (1971, p. xiii–xiv). Significantly, while Dewey left the University of Chicago in 1904, his influence on philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists prevailed well into the late 1930s, mainly through what came to be known as the Chicago School (Boyer, 2018; Bulmer 1984).

In 1994, *Social Sciences and Modern States, National Experiences and Theoretical Crossroads* (1994, 2008), by Wagner, Weiss, Wittrock, and Wollman, appeared. This book was one of the first serious efforts to assess four decades of progress of the policy sciences. This important volume, although it included an historical review by contemporary Lasswellians such as DeLeon (1994; also see 2006), concluded that the "policy sciences" were neither new nor unprecedented. Citing efforts by Aristotle, Plato, and Machiavelli to provide policy advice to the political leaders of the day (e.g., Aristotle's tutelage of Philip of Macedon), the authors note that in seventeenth and eighteenth century Germany, the term *Polizeywissenshaften* was widely used in German-speaking countries. Although the nineteenth century saw programmatic efforts at research-based policy improvement in Europe and in the United States, *The Policy Sciences: Recent Developments in Scope and Method* (Lerner & Lasswell, 1951) was the first systematic attempt to promote the policy sciences in North America, although similar proposals had been made earlier by Robert Lynd in *Knowledge for What? The Place of Social Science in American Culture* (1939).

The Conflation of Pragmatism

Lasswell's policy sciences were a product of the Chicago School of pragmatist social science and philosophy. Regrettably, however, most observers have conflated pragmatism with being practical. This notion of pragmatism is mistaken. Abraham Kaplan, one of the productive and respected pragmatists of his generation, contends that pragmatism has been widely misunderstood, partly due to the pragmatists themselves (wandering, turgid prose leaves few survivors), and also because concepts such as "practice" and "action" have been understood in a regrettably restrictive sense. "There is a vulgar pragmatism in which 'action' is

opposed to 'contemplation,' 'practice' to 'theory,' and 'expediency' to 'principle'…. this vulgar doctrine is almost the direct antithesis of pragmatism, which aims precisely at dissolving all such dualities" (Kaplan, 1964, pp. 43–4). Practice is the consummation of theory; theory originates in and guides practice.

## The Pragmatist Maxim and the Associationist Fallacy

The difference between the meanings of practical and pragmatic can be clarified by considering the pragmatist maxim of C. S. Peirce: "Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object." (Peirce 1877, 1997 pp. 26–49). Given this conceptualization of the meaning of pragmatism (and another version developed later), Lasswell was unlikely to be a proponent of purely technical decision processes, processes that conform to some notion of technical rationality, because for Lasswell *social processes* define the context in which technical decisions occur. Each kind of process has effects with different practical bearings, effects that are meaningful together but not alone. By focusing on social as well as technical decision processes, policy scientists adopt what Lasswell called a *contextual orientation* toward decision processes. To adopt a contextual orientation is to identify ways that decisions affect and are affected by elements of the social process—participants, perspectives, situations, values, strategies, outcomes, and effects (Lasswell, 1971, pp. 15–17).

For this reason, according to Lasswell, the policy sciences yield knowledge *of* and *in* the policy-making process. Although it may not be readily evident, this dictum is an expression of both Lasswell's *contextual orientation* and the *pragmatist maxim*, which together link decision processes and social processes. Otherwise, technical and social processes are prone to the association fallacy, that is, a faulty inference that one process is associated with another process, when it is not. The fallacy is that, simply because decision processes may be logically associated with social processes, does not mean that they are in fact related.

The associational fallacy is sometimes illustrated by the process of guilt by association, where person B is guilty by association with person C, because both are engaged in fleeing the scene of a crime, A, notwithstanding that the aim of B is to escape arrest, while the goal of C is to avoid possible harm at the hands of the criminal. In public policy, the association fallacy has a similar form. The social process of policy-making (B) and the technical process of policy analysis (C) are associated with a common function, for example, the adoption of a policy (A). However, this is the fallacy of relevance by association. The process of adoption (A) is a property of the process of policy-making (B); the process of adoption (A) is also a property of the process of policy analysis (C), for example, by using cost–benefit analysis to recommend the adoption of a policy.

Therefore, the (technical) process of policy analysis (B) and the (social) process of policy-making (C) appear to be mutually relevant by association because both share a common process of adoption (A). A cost–benefit analysis may be performed by a university research team to prescribe the adoption of a health care

program after summing and subtracting total costs from total benefits to obtain net benefits. At the same time, an analysis of pros and cons may be performed by the staff of a government ministry to evaluate the same program. Because processes of adoption (A) occur in both contexts, B is inferred to be relevant to C by association, when in fact it is not.
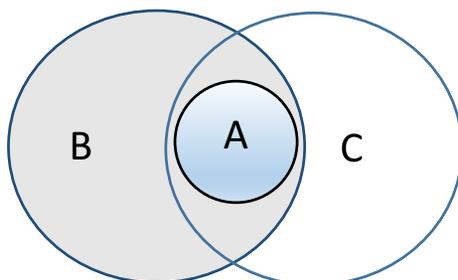
The fallacy cannot be resolved unless policy analysts and policy-makers actually collaborate on the adoption (A) of a policy. Consider again Peirce's pragmatic maxim: "Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object." When the object of our conception is cost–benefit analysis, the practical effects are making a technical choice between alternatives, a choice that is rational because the preferred option has the greater net benefits.

By contrast, when the object is the analysis of pros and cons in an agency setting, the practical effects are making a choice between alternatives that are most coherent, that is, have the proper (coherent) mix of factors involving efficiency, power, timing, mobilization, communications, and so on. If we fail to engage in the analysis of the practical bearings of both, we will commit the fallacy of policy relevance by association, which is perhaps the fundamental weakness of economic policy analysis and the main reason why much economic policy analysis fails when it in fact becomes associated with the social process of policy-making.

To minimize such failures of association, Lasswell proposed *continuous decision seminars* that link social and decision processes, which may approach consistency of practical effects if they are joined in a common function or purpose (Lasswell, 1960), or as Hoppe (1999) puts it, if the process moves from "speaking truth to power" to "making sense together."

Centrality of the Decision Process

A central feature of the policy sciences is Lasswell's decision process. Lasswell's decision process is a product of John Dewey's functionalist theory of social and behavioral change, on one hand, and Chester Barnard's concept of

the decision as the basic unit of analysis in policymaking (*The Functions of the Executive* 1933). Lasswell's decision process was originally articulated in *The Decision Process*: *Seven Categories of Functional Analysis* (1956), a slim 23-page monograph that has been cited less than 500 times in the past 60 years and rarely read. Contrary to critics of his decision process, Lasswell set forth a teleological, normative, and future-oriented theory of decision making that was complex and adaptive. Lasswell, the pragmatist, believed with Dewey that "Knowing and doing are indivisible aspects of the same process, which is the business of adaptation (Menand 1997:13)."

Lasswell's decision process was composed of sets of functions, or purposive acts, oriented toward values including human dignity, enlightenment, wealth, power, and rectitude. Earlier, in *Power and Society: A Framework for Political Inquiry*, Lasswell and Kaplan (1950), the pragmatist methodologist and philosopher of science, identified a virtually exhaustive range of eight base-values: power, wealth, enlightenment, well-being, skill, affection, respect, and rectitude. These base-values are potential future achievements realized through the decision process.

Lasswell represented the decision process as a set of seven sequentially ordered decisional functions, each underwritten by the coercive and persuasive powers of governments. Because decisional functions are never completely successful, they require adaptation to new circumstances, a cyclical process involving feedback loops to correct for imperfect relations between knowledge and action.

Intelligence

Outcomes of the intelligence function include gathering, processing, and disseminating information for the use of participants in the decision process, for example, regulatory agencies, judicial bodies, and legislatures. Values of enlightenment, wealth, and skill are among the effects of gathering, processing, and disseminating information.

Promotion

Outcomes of the promotion function include agitation and propaganda for the use of leaders, political parties, and interest groups. Values of power and skill are among the effects of agitation and propaganda.

Prescription

Outcomes of the prescriptive function include the routinization and institutionalization of enforceable norms by executives and legislators. Values of power, respect, and skill are among the effects of executive orders, legislative statutes, and other enforceable norms.

Invocation

Outcomes of the invocation function include enforced conformity to prescriptions by staff in line agencies. Among the effects of enforced conformity to prescriptions are wealth, health, and well-being.

Application

Outcomes of the application function include the characterization, or written documentation, by appellate court judges of conditions under which prescriptions are applied. Values of skill, respect, and rectitude are effects of cases written by appellate court judges.

Termination

Outcomes of the termination function include the adjudication of claims of parties affected by the cancellation of prescriptions. Values of power and well-being are among the effects of adjudicating cases before small claims courts.

Appraisal

Outcomes of the appraisal function include the assignment of legal or administrative responsibility for the assessment of policy objectives. Values of wealth, power, and enlightenment are effects of the assessment of objectives by means of investigative.

David Easton (1950) termed Lasswell's theory of the decision process *decisional functionalism.* The concept of *decision* originated in the work of one of Lasswell's students, Herbert A. Simon, who had adopted the concept from Barnard (1938), author of *The Functions of the Executive*. Easton (1950, p. 471) describes Lasswell's adoption of the decision making approach "as a new path for a rigorous search after verifiable generalizations about political behavior." Barnard had written the preface to Simon's dissertation at the University of Chicago.

The Maximization Postulate

The process of practical reasoning driving Lasswell's decision process is specified in his *maximization postulate.* The maximization postulate states that "living forms are predisposed to complete acts in ways that are perceived to leave the actor better off than if he had completed them differently. The postulate draws attention to the actor's own perception of the alternative act completions open to him in a given situation" (Lasswell, 1971, p. 16). Although the maximization postulate might be seen as an expression of subjective expected utility, the postulate is rather designed to capture the idea that subjectively meaningful acts based on practical reasoning have causally relevant effects (Brown, 2002; Brunner, 1991, pp. 77-78). The maximization postulate is therefore a statement about the

operation of interpretive understanding (*Verstehen)* in motivating individual acts (Kaplan, pp. 142–43).

By adopting the concept of *decision*, Lasswell shifted his focus away from political elites and democratic movements toward authoritative governmental decisions. Decisions in general could be highly variable and even chaotic; they were not his focus. It was rather "Authoritative decisions [that] are part of a process, or of a context of interaction, that has achieved a high degree of stability, not chaos" (McDougal, Lasswell, and Reisman 1967, p. 298). Authoritative decisions, and not the rules or general principles of Henri Fayol (1916), became the focus of theory and research. By 1941, several years before Herbert Simon completed his dissertation, Lasswell was sufficiently convinced of the usefulness of the concept of decision that he adopted it from Barnard and further developed the concept for the study of policy (Easton, 1950, p. 472).

Decisions within the intelligence function, which resemble a Delphi forecast, involve five intellectual tasks (Lasswell, 1971, p. 39): goal clarification, trend description, analysis of underlying conditions, projection of developments, and invention, evaluation, and selection of alternatives. The intelligence function is performed in three phases—information gathering, processing, and dissemination—the effectiveness of which depends upon the process of coding, assembling, storing, decoding, retrieving, and interpreting, information (McDougal, Lasswell, and Reisman 1972, p. 368). These technical decisions are situated, or contextualized, within a social process comprised of organizations, groups, and individuals that make decisions from different perspectives while deploying a range of strategies for achieving future outcomes.

Pragmatist Foundations of the Decision Process

The seven original decisional functions were later revised in Lasswell's *A Pre-View of Policy Sciences* (1971), his last major work on the decision process before his death in 1978. Here as elsewhere, decision making is not viewed as an activity or stage, but a function. This distinction is of pivotal theoretical importance, because Lasswell views a function as a purposeful (or teleological) act. The meaning of the term corresponds to Dewey's definition of a function as "any process sufficiently complex to involve an arrangement or coordination of minor processes which fulfills a specific end in such a way as to conserve itself" (Dewey 1910, p. 466).

The policy sciences grew out of Lasswell's experiences at the University of Chicago, where he earned a BA in Philosophy and Economics in 1922 and a PhD in Political Science in 1926. Lasswell and other members of political science, sociology, and psychology departments were heavily influenced by Dewey's pragmatism, which included his instrumentalist theory of knowledge, his functionalist theory of social and behavioral change, and his anticipatory ontology of post-positivist objective relativism. At Hopkins, Dewey studied logic and scientific method with Charles Sanders Peirce, who with William James, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and George Herbert Mead were among the founding pragmatists (Menand 1997, 2001, pp. 337–75).

In addition to Dewey's functionalism, an essential feature of Lasswell's decision process is abductive policy reasoning, where, following a state of doubt or surprise, a future value such as community enlightenment is chosen, followed by a search for reasons and evidence that plausibly may enable the realization of that value. In the case of community enlightenment, reasons and evidence might assume the form of a theory of social capital. This actionable causal mechanism may enable education policy-makers and citizens to take actions that will achieve the value of community enlightenment.

The pragmatist origins of decisional functionalism and the policy sciences have been overlooked or misunderstood by critics and advocates alike. Regrettably, most critics of Lasswell's writings on the decision process have understood Lasswell and others to be proponents of a linear "stage" theory of the policy process. Sabatier (2007, p. 6), for example, concludes that "Lasswell (1956), Jones (1977), Anderson (2011), and Brewer and DeLeon (1983) divided the policy process into a series of stages." Omitted are the teleological, normative, and value-oriented qualities of these stages, as well as their adaptive properties.

Given that feedback loops that characterize decisional functions, the decision process is complex and adaptive. Menand (1997, pp. xxiii–xxiv) describes Dewey's conception of the adaptive function:

> We learn... by doing: We take a piece of acquired knowledge into a concrete situation, and the results we get constitute a new piece of knowledge, which we carry over into our next encounter with our environment. When we hypostatize knowledge embalming it in a textbook [or a policy memo or report] we cut thought off from experience, and we damage our relations with the world. Knowledge is not a mental copy of a reality external to us... But it is an instrument or organ of successful action.

Ascher and Hirschfelder-Ascher (2004) reinforce this point by emphasizing that Lasswell's philosophy of science rejects simplistic epistemological notions of cause as a correspondence between thought and fact, subject and object, contemplation and action.

Lasswell explicitly linked his views of causality and functional explanation to Dewey and the pragmatist tradition of practical reasoning. Dewey (1933/1991; 1938/1982) defined practical reasoning, or what both he and Lasswell defined as "intelligence," as reasoning for a purpose, for some future value that arises in a specific context. This definition of practical reasoning is central to Lasswell's theory and to the theory of action of Peirce and Dewey. Abduction, or what Peirce called the "method of hypothesis," supplies an explanation of policies based on the future purposes of action.

Functions, viewed in this way, originate in a tradition of practical reasoning associated with Aristotle and developed by later interpretivist theorists including Heidegger, Weber, and Gadamer. Georg Henrik von Wright (1971) documents this tradition in his widely regarded treatise on theories of explanation and understanding. Acts of practical reasoning are decisions to achieve some future value in

the face of doubt, and not the application of rules (e.g., transitivity) or principles (e.g., Pareto optimality) in advance of action. This is not to gainsay these rules and principles, only to accord them their proper epistemological role. In this context, achieving a purpose is a consequence of making decisions, or choices, about future states of affairs, rather than applying rules or principles in advance of action. Policy-making "is not a body of rules, but . . . a process of making authoritative decisions about the production and distribution of values in the community . . . Rules alone could not explain why past decisions had been made or how future decisions were likely to be made" (McDougal et al., 1967, p. 729).

Volitional Functionalism

Lasswell's *maximization postulate* states that "living forms are predisposed to complete acts in ways that are perceived to leave the actor better off than if he had completed them differently." This postulate is an expression of practical reasoning. When a person presses a light switch in order to achieve a future state, a lighted room, the lighted room would not have occurred if the switch had not been pressed. Similarly, policy-makers may decide to create a future state, an enlightened electorate. The enlightened electorate, the future outcome, follows the decision to gather, analyze, and disseminate intelligence about the effects of civic education on political participation. The use of information about the causal mechanism linking civic education and political participation is a necessary step in the process that begins with the desire for an enlightened electorate, entails the sequence specified in the causal mechanism, and ends with the desired outcome, an enlightened electorate. It is the future state, an enlightened electorate, which is the causally relevant reason for the decision, while the act of gathering, processing, and disseminating information is the cause.[1]

Lasswell's maximization postulate involves two kinds of premises: *volitional premises* and *epistemic premises* (Bromley, 2006, pp. 14-15). A volitional premise is a proposition concerning an end of action, while an epistemic premise refers to types of knowledge. Knowledge, defined as plausibly true belief or warranted assertibility (Dewey), provides the ingredients of a causal mechanism that helps realize the volitional premise. Significantly, this conceptualization avoids the concern expressed by Brunner (1991) that the maximization postulate might be misinterpreted as a form of Paretian expected utility, which was not Lasswell's intention. On the contrary, a pragmatist conception of policy holds that

> . . .new public policy starts with a consideration of particular desired outcomes in the future (the volitional premise). The epistemic premise—of the form, "If Y then X"—connects the desired outcome (Y) with the necessary action (X) to achieve that outcome. . . . the epistemic premise is both a prediction and a prescription. (Bromley, 2008, p. 15)

Peirce passed the concept of abduction down to Dewey and other students (including Thorstein Veblen) in a class in logic and scientific method at Johns

Hopkins. Although Dewey did not use the concept in his writings, he did discuss the process without naming it. In *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), he presents a five-step process of inquiry in which the first stage is doubt. This same state of doubt a trigger for inquiry in the writings of other pragmatists, including Peirce (1877, 1997), who linked it to abduction. Without using the term abduction, Dewey referred to the phenomenon as a "problem situation," which present-day policy analysts have referred to both as a diffuse set of worries that precedes efforts to define a problem and as an "ill structured" problem (Dunn 2018, pp. 66–78). In this context, identifying a future value and an actionable causal mechanism to achieve, it is a way to reduce doubt and achieve the "fixation of belief," that is, knowledge (Peirce).

Conclusion

In contrast to the popular notion that pragmatism is merely about applying theory to practice, the basic proposition of pragmatism, as stated by Dewey, is that "knowledge is an instrument or organ of successful action" (Menand 2001, p. 361). Because abduction involves the *choice* of future values, it may be appropriately termed *volitional pragmatism* (Bromley, 2008). Volitional pragmatism refers to the ways that individuals use reasons to justify their choices. Any reinvention of the policy sciences and pragmatism must begin with an instrumentalist theory of knowledge and action and volitional functionalism.

Note

1. This is the "activity theory of causation" that Cook and Campbell (1979: 25-28), drawing on Collingwood (1940), von Wright (1971), and other advocates of qualitative methodology, use to explain the nature of causality in policy experimentation. Dewey (1916) held essentially the same view.

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