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Understanding the policymaking enterprise: Foucault among the bureaucrats

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Introduction

Policy analysis can no longer afford to limit itself to the simplified academic models of explanation. Such methods fail to address the nonlinear nature of today's messy policy problems. They fail to capture the typically heterogeneous, interconnected, often contradictory, and increasingly globalized character of these issues. Many of these problems are, as such, appropriately described as 'wicked problems'. In these situations, not only is the problem wanting for a solution, the very nature and conceptualization of the problem is not well understood. Effective solutions to such problems require ongoing, informed deliberation involving competing perspectives on the part of both government official and public citizens. (Fischer & Gottweis, 2012, p. 6)

In 2009, as an Aboriginal senior public servant, I was looking for a way to better understand the policymaking process in light of the seemingly incorrigible policy failure in what I have termed the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy enterprise. It seemed that we were then, and I contend still are, hampered by limiting and ineffective models for understanding the nature of the policy problems that confront us and what it is that

we actually do in the policymaking enterprise. As a consequence, at least in terms of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy enterprise, we had hitched our wagon to a dying star and seemed destined to fall headlong into the void it creates, regardless of how much rebranding we undertook and how many ‘this is a fresh start’ photo opportunities we manufactured—and we have been very good at those!

Our chief practical and methodological deficits are twofold. The first is a tenacious adherence to a policymaking orthodoxy derived from the managerialist obsession prevailing in Canberra, which seemed to me to have little resonance either with the communities I came from or worked with. The second is an inability to see the role that culture plays in defining how we work, shaping everything from problem definition to policy formulation, implementation and evaluation, according to the dominant cultural perspective of the non-Indigenous other—white Australia in particular. This has blinded us to the opportunities that a better understanding of Aboriginal culture might offer as a solution to what one Commonwealth report described as a policy space characterised by ‘good intentions, *flawed policies*, unrealistic assumptions, poor implementation, unintended consequences and dashed hopes’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p. 39, emphasis added).

Since 2008, the ‘new’ policy approach for Indigenous Australia has been to make Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people more like white people. We did not call this policy ‘assimilation’, as Hasluck (1953) did in the mid-twentieth century, or ‘mainstreaming’, as Howard did in the 1990s; instead, we called it ‘Closing the Gap’. Whatever the label, as Maddison (2009, p. 2) has so appositely observed, the fundamental logic at play in Indigenous policymaking is that ‘if Aboriginal people could just be more like white people [our] problems would be resolved’. The effect has been to continue the colonial logic that positions white Australia (i.e. the non-Indigenous other) as the point of reference, and as the designated locus for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ aspirations. Now, more than a decade after this reformulation, we are about to embark on a new policy journey framed around collaboration and the romance of ‘co-design’, but this egregiously flawed logic still underpins the way we work. In concert with our rusted-on managerialism, it threatens to undermine our efforts and undoubted goodwill, and result in us becoming a living example of the Einsteinian definition of insanity. Something has to give. As policymakers, we need a better way to understand our own business. Foucault’s concept

of the *dispositif* gives us just such a way. Having let Friedman and Hayek have their way with us for these many years, it is high time we let Foucault loose among the bureaucrats.

A history of failure

In his masterful analysis of the failure of large-scale state initiatives to foster social and economic development, James C Scott (1998) identifies a profound and radical cultural dissonance that ultimately undermines the effectiveness of these interventions. Central to his analysis is an active and interventionist state. The chief means by which the state achieves its objectives is public policy (Althaus, Bridgman & Davis 2018). The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy enterprise is an example of such an intervention. The cultural dissonance at the heart of this enterprise renders the usual ways of proceeding in the formation and implementation of public policy not merely ineffective, it can often make matters far worse. In Australia, the relationship between the settler-colonial state and Indigenous peoples is a substantially transactional one in which service delivery, hence policy, is the central feature. Indeed, it might be argued that this transaction constitutes the *exclusive* ground of this relationship and that, apart from our construction and representation within the policymaking complex, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders figure scantily in the modern Australian imaginary. Aboriginal people are positioned existentially as policy objects with problems to solve rather than as a unique and constitutive part of a modern Australia whose core identity is doggedly, often belligerently, non-Indigenous and white in its form, history and function, including the operations of the state.

Given this situation, it should be no surprise that issues affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are notoriously resistant to change. Superficial reasons for policy failure in this area are relatively well documented. That these explanations have conspicuously failed to improve things speaks to the limits of contemporary instrumentalist policymaking. By claiming to be rationalist and systematic, policymaking denies, or at best sets to one side, the cultural and historical context in which it operates and that shapes the entire business of policymaking. The problem is the foundation of the policy enterprise in Western Enlightenment rationality and modes of action, which conflict in important and fundamental ways with the foundations and modes of action in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Following on from this, I want to suggest four things. First, in the face of results that are decidedly elusive, we are not well served by allegiance to prevailing positivist, technocratic and managerialist paradigms in public policy. Second, public policymaking is, at its core, a profoundly paradigmatic, value laden and cultural endeavour, with origins in a normative view of the world that must be rendered subject to the analytical gaze. Third, policy failure, particularly in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy enterprise, is primarily a failure to take account of this paradigmatic and cultural nature of the policy enterprise. Fourth, failing to take account of Aboriginal culture (norms, values and behaviours) in the policy process will continue to undermine policy efforts.

In this chapter I suggest that we need a new way to think about the practice of policymaking that liberates us from the limitations of the modernist instrumental rationality that characterises our profession. We need new ways to think about how we respond to the complex policy issues that confront us—ways that do not rest on the faulty assumptions that our understanding of these problems is settled and that any solutions can be taken for granted.

Policy well made: Policymaking rather than policy

This chapter is based on the proposition that well-made policy is fundamentally transformative. At its heart is the idea that policy and policymaking matters and can make a difference. However, the chronic policy failure that characterises the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy enterprise would seem to indicate that we have a serious problem and that our policy is neither good nor well made. This is a diagnosis that we have conspicuously avoided. In our headlong rush to improve delivery and policy implementation, it has been too easy to rush past the idea of ‘flawed policies’ completely. In fact, the question of improved policy development was dismissed in the ‘Strategic review of Indigenous expenditure’ (Commonwealth of Australia 2009). Heaven forbid that we should delve into whether we were trying to improve delivery of a fundamentally flawed set of policy widgets! However, the question of flawed policies is critically important and should not be so easily glossed over. Identifying flawed policies and how they are produced is the *condicio sine qua non* for both Aboriginal people and policymakers to

get to the more complex issue of root cause(s) of policy failure, including the fundamental issue of cultural dissonance, resulting in a more effective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy enterprise.

The questions of flawed policy on the one hand, and the transformative impact of policy well made on the other, brings the practice of policymaking squarely into the frame. According to Althaus, Bridgman and Davis (2018), there is a clear link between a better appreciation of the policy process and achieving better outcomes from policy. The crucial issue we confront in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy enterprise concerns the issue of policymaking and the apparatus through which it takes place, rather than individual policy artefacts. Flawed products are the result of flawed processes, policy products included. Consequently, a better understanding of the deeper nature of policymaking—not just its methods or techniques—stands as a singularly pressing and largely unexamined area of analysis (Colebatch 2006).

I use the word ‘understanding’ advisedly. From the point of view of both practice and theory, mere knowledge is no longer enough, at least knowledge as it is understood in modernism—that is, universalised, abstracted, detached and synoptic. What is required is knowledge in the form of practical insights and cunning intelligence, which Scott (1998) identified as the Greek concept of *metis*. In Scott’s (1998, p. 6) analysis, *metis* refers to the ‘fund of valuable knowledge embedded in local practices’. He contrasts *metis* with ‘thin, formulaic simplifications imposed through the agency of the state’, which fail to deliver effective policy outcomes (Scott 1998, p. 309; Rhodes 2017). This form of knowledge has an ‘indispensable role’ in the actual functioning of social systems that state actors, working from within an ‘imperial and hegemonic planning mentality’, either cannot see or set aside to their cost.

Decentring the analysis of policy and bringing the process of policymaking to the fore, this chapter seeks to map the terrain of the policymaking system using Foucault’s concept of *dispositif* as a guide. In doing so, it provides a desperately needed analytical model that facilitates four things: first, an understanding of policymaking as an integrated and dynamic system or enterprise; second, interrogation of policymaking at an enterprise level; third, identification of key points of interaction within the policymaking system and critical intervention points for system recalibration; and, fourth, and perhaps most importantly, it advances an overarching role for culture in policymaking.

The contemporary context

The contemporary policymaking landscape in Australia is an interesting mix of terrain. We remain dominated by the managerialism we inherited from the new public management reforms of the last quarter of the twentieth century. Predicated on predictability, authority and control, this mode of policymaking seems likely to maintain its hegemonic position, especially in light of the most recent prime ministerial address to the Australian Public Service (APS) (Morrison 2019), with its retreat to Blairite imperatives around delivery (Barber 2008, 2015). Anxiety about improved delivery is matched with an enduring anxiety about the policy capacity of the APS, although it is fair to say that this anxiety is shadowed by the delivery-at-all-costs mentality at work in Australian administrative and political classes. In terms of political imperatives, contemporary Australian political life is beset by a furious and unrelenting competition among major political players for ‘the centre’. This competition has some interesting consequences. In policy terms, it has led to virtually indistinguishable policy prescriptions from both sides of politics, as politicians and parties abandon doctrinaire ideological positions in pursuit of pragmatic outcomes. This blurring of political ideologies further reinforces the need for a deeper understanding of the philosophical, conceptual and theoretical substrata of the policymaking enterprise.

Foucault’s *dispositif* as a framework for understanding

The concept of *dispositif* first appeared in Foucault’s *The archaeology of knowledge*, in which he was concerned to set out the ‘density of the accumulation’ or the contextual dynamics in which statements as embodiments of knowledge are enmeshed, shaped and transformed (Foucault 1972, p. 141). For Foucault, the *dispositif* was the central mechanism in the construction and deployment of knowledge. He defined the concept of *dispositif* in the following way:

A thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. (Foucault & Gordon 1980, p. 196)¹

Drawing on this definition, the constituent elements of Foucault's *dispositif* are illustrated in Figure 10.1.

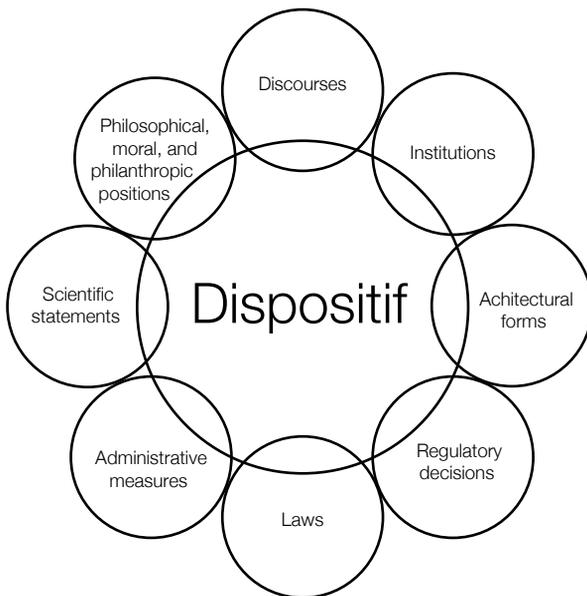


Figure 10.1. Foucault's *dispositif*.

Jäger's (2001) simplified description of the *dispositif* as consisting of three categories of constituents—discursive, non-discursive and materialisations—is illustrated in Figure 10.2. In either version, the relevance of the *dispositif* to understanding the foundational dynamics of policymaking is clear: we need to ask questions about what is said and why; what is done and why; the structures within which these practices are carried out; and, importantly, how these three domains interact.

¹ Note that Foucault uses the word *apparatus* instead of the French *dispositif*; however, the terms are synonymous in his work.

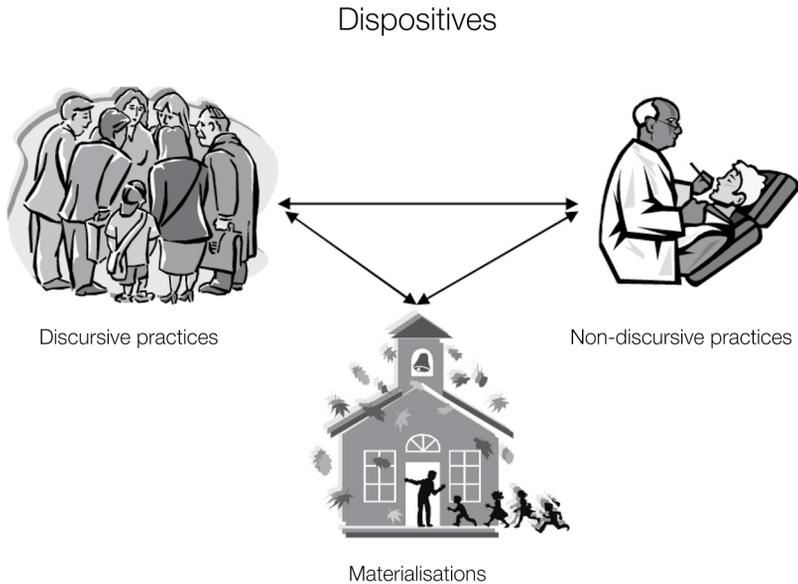


Figure 10.2. Jäger's *dispositif*.

I want to draw particular attention to Jäger's use of the word 'ensemble'. This is critical as it points to the mode of operation of the *dispositif*. It is not simply a cluster of independently functioning elements in proximity to each other, but an ensemble of independent and heterogenous elements functioning as a single entity (Stevenson 2007). The idea of ensemble also directs attention not just to the collectivity of the *dispositif* but also to the overall effect or impact of same. The point is that the disparate elements of the *dispositif* act in concert—though in differing ways to produce an effect.

Deploying the *dispositif*

Complex policy issues are deeply sociological in nature and are not easily susceptible to simplistic solutions that derive from the econo-legal mindset that dominates contemporary policymaking. We need the capacity to ask different questions, both about complex policy issues and the practice of policymaking itself, to avoid the uncritical pursuit of an ill-equipped analytical and professional practice that is failing us. We need to recognise 'we belong to social apparatuses [*dispositifs*] and act within them' (as cited in Armstrong 1992, p. 164).

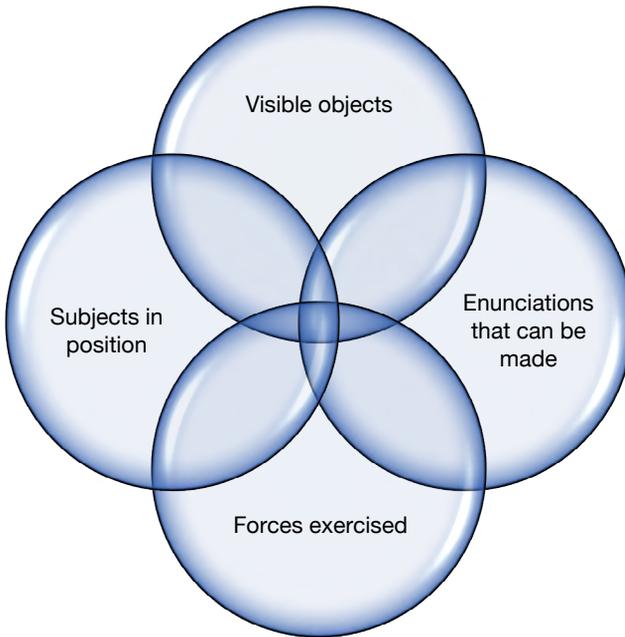


Figure 10.3. Foucault's concern (from Deleuze 1992).

If we belong to and operate within these social apparatuses, then understanding the way they work is critical. Deleuze draws our attention to the key interests Foucault was pursuing in his development and articulation of the *dispositif* as a concept: 'visible objects, affirmations which can be formulated, forces exercised and subjects in position' (as cited in Armstrong 1992, p. 159). As depicted in Figure 10.3, these modes of operation structure the *dispositif* and provide a suite of analytical lenses that help to sharpen our analytical and practical focus in respect of the policymaking enterprise. They represent four arenas of activity that describe the ways in which the *dispositif* works in policymaking. As such, they provide a useful guide to the kinds of questions that dispositive analysis generates.

Visibility and enunciation: What can and cannot be seen; what can and cannot be said

Policymakers respond to a particular version of reality in which some things can be seen and responded to, while others are obviated or not seen at all. In this sense, policymaking relies on a constructed reality in which objects are real insofar as they are meaningful to actors in particular contexts.

There are critical questions that must be asked, starting with the process that Schneider and Ingram (1993) described as the ‘social construction of target populations’. As actors within the policymaking apparatus, we must ask questions about how policy problems and people are fashioned and constructed in and through what we do. Our professional conceit is that we are engaged in a profoundly rational, value free and evidence-based enterprise; however, in practice things are much less clear-cut.

The point is that a policy reality is a socially constructed artefact, a composite manufactured through a process of bricolage that draws on a variety of raw materials within an overarching framing narrative. In other words, reality is represented to be a certain way and understanding this is central to policy analysis (Bacchi 2009). *Dispositif* analysis demands that we interrogate what we are seeing and why. It recognises that the things we see, be they policy problems, people or solutions, reflect the way that light is structured and distributed within the apparatus that we are part of, and dares to ask: why is this so and might it be different? In this respect, narrative and discourse reign supreme.

This brings us to enunciation: what is said, how it is said and why. Australian academic Carol Bacchi (2009) challenges us to think more deeply about the normative foundations of policymaking by asking the simple question, ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’, instead of asking what the problem is. In doing so, she raises the second mode of operation within the *dispositif*: ‘lines of enunciation’. Enunciation refers to affirmations or statements that are made within the *dispositif*. There are two central dimensions to this aspect of dispositive function: the first concerns the content of what is said, the second concerns how it is said.

Discourse is how objects are framed, created and brought into view. We think through language and objects are formed discursively. We understand what is seen by what is said about areas or objects of policy concern. Language matters in the policy enterprise and social construction works through words more than through structure (Schneider & Ingram 1993). We see this in Australia through the words that are chosen to refer to particular policy issues or to particular policy objects. For example, ideas of a ‘budget emergency’ or a ‘climate emergency’ are embodied, not through data or information, but in and through what is said about data and deployment of the terms themselves. Consider how the active substitution of ‘illegal arrival’ for ‘asylum seeker’ in popular and policy

discourses has served to construct policy problems and responses. In terms of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy enterprise, consider, for example, how the notion of disadvantage has become discursively attached to the idea of Indigeneity. Such is the conflation of disadvantage and Indigeneity, even among some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, that the rising Indigenous middle class is rendered invisible or even illegitimate because these Indigenous Australians resist the dominant imagery (visibility) of the Aboriginal policy *dispositif* (Langton 2013).

The second dimension of enunciation concerns the manner in which things are said. By ‘manner’, I am not referring to media or mechanisms of delivery, even though these are not without significance. I have in mind instead the manner of speaking, the more nuanced and, I argue, more powerful aspects of narrative that go to questions of tonality, demeanour, gesture and expression. The way that something is said is as critical as what is said. Meaning, hence reality, is constructed from words and how they are used, including subjective elements such as tone and inflection, as well as word choice and how these are combined. Consequently, good analysis must have regard to the *how* of discourse as well as to its *what*! Hence, discourse is the location at which knowledge and power intersect (O’Farrell 2005).

Power and force: Actions taken or not taken

Power should be understood not only in terms of hierarchy and structure, position or office, but also as a deeply social phenomenon that emerges through interaction between actors within the *dispositif*. This perspective is often overlooked in the modern public sector. Deleuze’s use of the word ‘force’ speaks to this missing perspective. In using this word, he points us not to the exercise of brute strength, or power as the possession of a particular individual, but to the physicist’s understanding of force as the outflow of interaction between objects and the effect of that interaction on objects. Force is the push and pull that results from the interaction between objects. It is not inherent in a position but emerges as influence exerted. Force refers to the outworking of power not as the possession of an individual or the residual effects of an office but as that which emerges in and from processes of interaction within the *dispositif*.

Subjectification: Questions of identity and how we are understood

Subjectification is the process by which particular meanings are incorporated into the self or identity. Through this process, individual actors are positioned within the social space that the *dispositif* represents. This dimension concerns questions of identity both as to how individuals understand themselves ontologically and as a particular position or location within a set of social relationships. It concerns the roles that demarcate individual actors and groups of actors and the place they occupy in the policymaking regime; for example, policymaker versus policy object or decision-maker versus adviser. There is a powerful clue here about the potential for transformation of policymaking. Changing subjectifications can have a significant impact on the forms of knowledge and power that operate in and through the *dispositif*. New players entering the field, discursive shifts and variable engagement by actors reflect the ebbs and flows in how people see themselves and how they are seen within a particular social apparatus.

Analytical positions of dispositive analysis

While each of these represent a crucial analytical domain in the making and implementation of public policy, there is nevertheless a risk of conversion of the dynamism and responsiveness of the *dispositif* into a bloodless managerial technique; that is, the transformation of what is fundamentally a way of seeing and a mode action into a controlled process. One characteristic of modernist ideology is its ability to appropriate new ideas, apparently give credence to them but then organise the life out of them, subjugating them to its imperial epistemological and technical frameworks. Understanding the particular analytical dispositions that the *dispositif* produces reduces this risk. These dispositions are a repudiation of universals, a focus on becoming and the place of culture.

Repudiation of universals

Central to Foucault's thinking is the repudiation of the universal—or, more accurately, the 'universal universal'.² Social apparatuses no longer make an appeal to universal and transcendent foundations that sit

2 While Foucault rejected the idea of a universal standing outside of history and, therefore, being transcendent, he acknowledged that propositions arising from an historical epoch can take on the function of universals, which remain contingent and contextual.

outside of history. In the place of these universals the *dispositif* consists of multiplicities and draws from, and focuses attention on, knowledge that arises from context and place; is accessible only through relationships and belonging; and is characterised by subjectivity and contingency, rather than transcendence. This position is directly at odds with the modernist epistemic regime centred on formal, abstracted and propositional knowledge, and that purports to embody ‘reason par excellence’ (Armstrong 1992, p. 162). In such an epistemic regime, there are a number of things that are important and that bear on the professional practice of policymaking. The first of these is *place*, which needs to be understood as much more than simply geographical or spatial location. The second is context. Rhodes (2017, p. 116) makes the following observation: ‘Human action is also historically contingent. It is: “Characterised by ineluctable contingencies, temporal fluidity and contextual specificity”’. Context needs to be understood more broadly than location. It must take account of the ideational and discursive context in relation to which policymaking is done. This should include historical context.

Lines of becoming

For Foucault, the *dispositif* is not predicated on eternal verities and their reproduction, but on the fundamental dynamic of becoming. The *dispositif* is about who and what we are becoming. In other words, there is a fundamental dynamism at work in the *dispositif* that adds to its analytical power. Foucault was deeply committed to the place that history (as opposed to the past) plays in discursive formation and the idea that every discourse has a history, or genealogy, that must be understood.³ Without this perspective, the risk of reification is high, and likely to produce static and limited analysis and an unresponsive professional practice. At a minimum, this ‘line of becoming’ drives us to consider questions of change and transformation in the policymaking *dispositif* and to interrogate the social vision that drives our policymaking endeavours. In such a frame, knowledge that purports to be either settled or standing outside of history is deeply problematic. Identities that are posited as static and are either assigned or asserted, rather than negotiated over time, are similarly suspect.

3 This understanding was achieved via a process of archaeology.

There is a deeply embedded retrospectivity in much policy analysis. We look at data that describe phenomena as they have occurred and formulate policy responses on that basis. Little if any analysis takes account of the present situation and the operant knowledge systems that underpin the lived experience of intended policy beneficiaries, positioned exclusively as beneficiaries rather than participants or co-producers. In the case of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, this positioning is indisputable. In addition, little analysis, at least in my experience, takes account of where things may be going—other than the heroic assumption that what has been in the past will be in the future. This is the chief folly of rationalist thinking: having hit upon a universal, disinterested knowledge, one ought to be able to rely on it holding true at all times and in all places and apply it accordingly. What we discover in practice is that this is not the case and that knowledge, even of the settled kind, is really an artefact of time understood broadly as both an epoch and a continuum, and place beyond mere geography, to consider social and political location.

The third dimension that the idea of ‘lines of becoming’ invites us to consider is the question of social vision and the future state that is in the process of coming into view. Ideas about what might be, and certainly what ought to be, derive from deeply held social vision that, while filtered through political ideology, is fundamentally cultural in origin. We will return to this question later, but for now it is sufficient to bring the culture question into view.

The Policy Enterprise Model

Foucault’s *dispositif* can be used in the Australian policymaking context, and it can help us map the functional terrain of contemporary policymaking, identifying the core components of this enterprise, and highlighting the points at which these components intersect and interact. I have developed the Policy Enterprise Model (Figure 10.4) to provide practitioners and analysts with a heuristic device designed to enable them to comprehend the nature of the policy enterprise. The model represents the arrangement of related elements that constitute contemporary policymaking. It locates policymaking in an interactive arena defined by five domains: policy actors, structures and systems, networks and alliances, policy paradigms and cultural context.

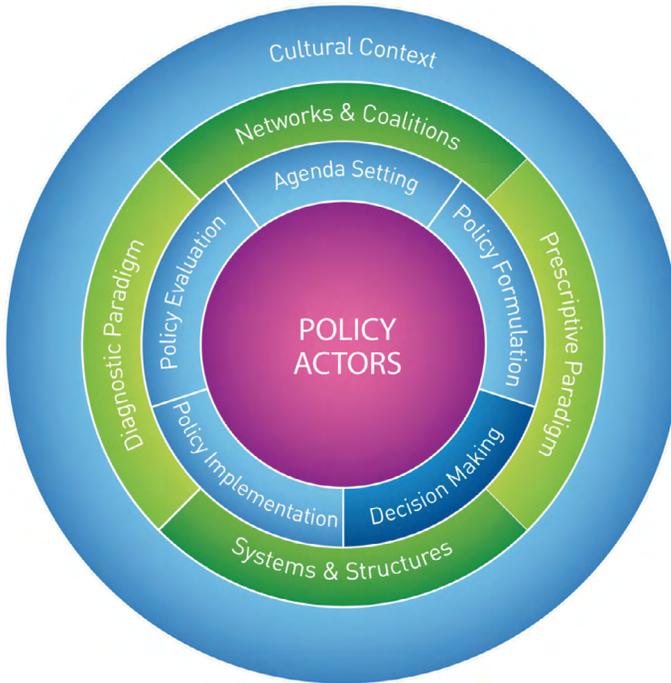


Figure 10.4. The Policy Enterprise Model.

The components

It is important to stress that this is an actor-centred model. It began as a way for thinking through the work of the public servant in policymaking terms. What is it that the public servant, as an intrinsic part of the policymaking process, actually does? The model posits the policy actor engaging in a number of discrete, though interrelated, bodies of work. In the model, these work domains are not presented as a cycle or a series of sequential phases, but as domains or kinds of work. None of this work takes place in a context-free environment, so it is important to recognise the key features of the context in which this work is done.

The immediate context consists of four elements.⁴ The first, ‘systems and structures’, refers to the institutional and organisational context that characterises particular polities. The second, ‘network and alliances’, refers

⁴ There is an extensive literature covering questions of ‘policy actors’ (see, e.g. Althaus, Bridgman & Davis 2018; Howlett, Ramesh & Perl 2009; Sabatier 2007; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993).

to particular alignments of actors within a particular policy domain. The third and fourth, the ‘paradigmatic core’, refers to two primary policy paradigms, one diagnostic and the other prescriptive. More will be said of these below.

Finally, the outer ring of this model refers to the cultural context in which policymaking is done. The model posits culture as occupying a crucial, all-encompassing position relative to the other elements. Culture sits over, around, between and underneath the other elements of the *dispositif* shaping and influencing their complexion and function. Any serious effort to understand the nature of the policymaking process, including thinking through the potential to transform this process, must pay attention to culture.

Paradigmatic core: Diagnostic and prescriptive paradigms

At its core, policymaking is a profoundly paradigmatic enterprise (Béland & Cox 2013), involving shared ways of understanding the world that embody a priori intellectual commitments and behavioural imperatives (O’Leary 2007). In such an enterprise, what and how policymakers ‘think’ influences what they do in policy terms (Campbell 2002; Finlayson 2006). This thinking takes the form of ‘taken for granted descriptions and theoretical analyses that specify cause and effect relationships that reside in the background of policy debates and that limit the range of alternatives policy-makers are likely to perceive as useful’ (Campbell 2002, p. 22). The model posits a diagnostic paradigm through which policy problems and target populations can be comprehended, and a prescriptive paradigm through which policy responses can be developed and authorised.⁵

Paradigm has been defined as a set of ‘received beliefs’ held collectively (Kuhn & Hacking 2012). Kuhn posits that knowledge develops through disruption and displacement of paradigms rather than through accretion (as cited in Lakatos & Musgrave 1970). Hence, paradigms are governmental, underpinning conceptual and methodological continuity or ‘normal science’ operating within the authorising boundaries of the paradigm to regulate methodology, knowledge and inclusion in the scientific community (Kuhn & Hacking 2012; Cairney 2012). To understand the operation of paradigms we need to examine how paradigms are structured.

5 This proposition is similar to Snow and Benford’s (1988). They identified three frames at work in policymaking: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing and motivational framing.

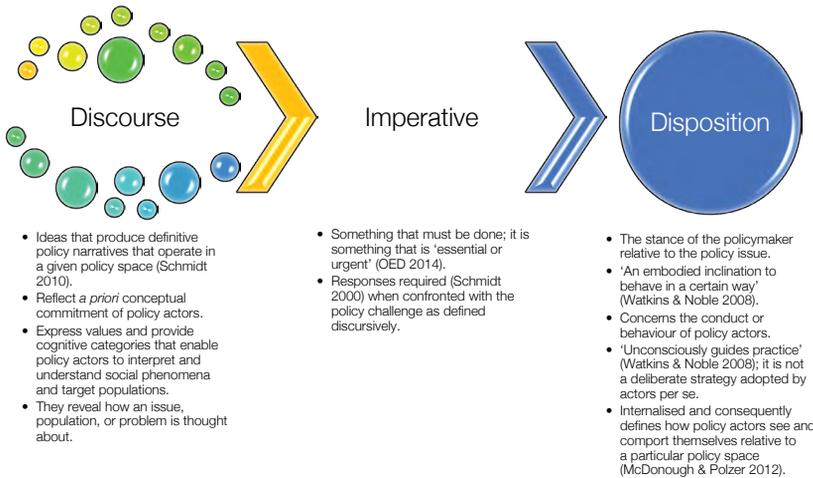


Figure 10.5. The anatomy of the paradigm.

Policy paradigms consist of three interacting elements: discourses, imperatives and dispositions, as set out in Figure 10.5. These are stable conceptual structures that identify particular kinds of ideas and questions, necessary actions and specified roles for actors in the policy enterprise (Campbell 1998; Colebatch 2006; Howlett, Ramesh & Perl 2009; Sabatier 2007; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993).

The point is that the 'reality' encountered by actors is socially and discursively constructed. In the same way, while discourses shape meaning for actors, they also generate ideas about what must be done when confronted with the reality they define. These imperatives in turn inform policy objectives within a particular policy enterprise. These policy imperatives also define the role of, and enable, the policymaker. Policymaking is, therefore, the policy actor embodying a particular role derived from the discursive framework within which the actor operates.

Cultured beings

Policy actors are members of social networks and, consequently, are cultured beings—which is to say that we are socially and culturally positioned and that we function within, and from, a cultural context. None of us operates in a sociocultural vacuum and the idea that, in the practice of policymaking, we escape the influence of this is nonsensical and, in terms of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy enterprise, dangerous.

According to Bennett (2008), 'culture is there, and it is there first'. If policymakers operate (inevitably and inescapably) in contexts in which culture exerts a pervasive influence,⁶ it follows that policymaking is inevitably a cultural enterprise (Hood 1998; Wildavsky 1987; Wildavsky, Ellis & Thompson 1997), and that the products of this activity (i.e. policies) are themselves cultural artefacts with meanings and effects that are fundamentally cultural in nature. To understand our enterprise in this way provides us with a different and valuable analytical purchase on the question of improved policymaking and, via this, better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. To pretend that what we are engaged in is a value free exercise in scientific objectivity risks exactly the kind of epistemological and practical imperialism described by Scott (1998) as sitting at the heart of the failure of the large-scale reform he examined in his magisterial work *Seeing like a state*.

Critical though it may be, the culture question stands as one of the most egregiously underdone areas of inquiry in the policy sciences. Seeking to understand why particular issues are framed and understood in particular ways, and to interrogate the underpinning social vision that animates policy work, demands serious engagement with the question of policy, as all of these questions have their origins in the cultural context in which actors operate. In this respect, culture is as inevitable as it is inescapable. Each of us is a cultured being and comprehending our own cultural positioning, as well as that of the intended beneficiaries of our efforts, is singularly important. I argue that this is indispensable because culture is an all-encompassing dynamic and there is no area of life that culture does not go (Fornas 2017, p. 2). Culture shapes behaviour (Kroeber 1963), cognition (Geertz 1983), how we govern (Geertz 1966), our public administration (Hood 1998) and the ways our social systems operate (Matsumoto 2001). To leave this question to one side because it is difficult seems fundamentally self-defeating.

6 This influence covers all behaviour including both what they think and how they act (see Finlayson 2006). This is not to say, however, that social actors are passive. Social structures, such as culture, are themselves the products of human interaction and also condition this action. This means that we shape our contexts as much as those contexts shape us.

Conclusion

Whether policy and policymaking ever lives up to its transformative potential is, of course, an open question. It requires the capacity to understand the nature of policy enterprise so as to transform it, and thereby produce policy that effectively addresses the challenges that confront Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Driven as we are by fairly unsophisticated imperatives around delivering ‘whatever works’, a sharpening of our professional vision is in order. We need to cease the credulous application of approaches drawn from the increasingly indefensible, though imperial, high modernism of the kind Scott (1998) critiques, with its entrenched scientism, obsession with metrics, narrow intellectual parameters and ignorance of the role that culture plays in the policymaking enterprise. Instead, as outlined in this chapter, we need to consider other, often overlooked, analytical lenses that take a holistic view/systems perspective, position policymaking as an interactive arena and provide a role for culture.

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