Policy Networks

Defining Policy Networks
Explanations of the development of public policy have gradually moved away from separate focus on traditional models of bureaucracy/hierarchy and markets as sites of policy-making. In their place, a plethora of conceptions of the ‘policy network’ have emerged. While British and American scholars usually conceive policy networks as a model of state/society relations in a given issue area, some new approaches tend to treat policy networks as a whole alternative form of governance. The concept of policy networks contributes to a new approach to the development of policy-making models, analysis and explanation.

As Borzel (1998) points out, ‘network’ has become a fashionable catch-word in recent years across disciplines as diverse as microbiology, computer science, ecology, sociology, economics and business administration, as well as in public policy. It is frequently used as a ‘new paradigm for the architecture of complexity’. The assumption that runs through much of this thinking is that if an issue or problem is complex, any solution is likely to require a ‘network’ approach.

Borzel provides a useful definition. A policy network or community is a:

‘set of relatively stable relationships which are of non-hierarchical and interdependent nature linking a variety of actors, who share common interests with regard to a policy and who exchange resources to pursue these shared interests acknowledging that cooperation is the best way to achieve common goals’.

However, she points out that this definition is in itself not uncontroversial and concedes that it does not cover all applications of the term by authors who variously regard policy networks as a mere metaphor, a valuable analytical tool or as a method of social structure analysis.

Two Schools of Thought
The Interest Mediation School

Within the field of public policy there are two main schools of thought around the notion of policy networks. In the Anglo-Saxon literature, or ‘interest intermediation school’, the concept expresses a model of state/social relations building on pluralist and corporatist views. This school explores policy networks as a generic term for all different forms of relationships between interest groups and the state. More specifically, the network typologies in this literature understand policy networks as power dependency relationships between the government and interest groups, in which resources are exchanged.

Rhodes is a prominent exponent of this view and originally suggested that there are five types of networks, graduated along a continuum according to the degree to which their members are integrated. Rhodes focused on the structural relationships between institutions while others place more emphasis on interpersonal relations as a key aspect of the policy network.
Rhodes Five Early Network Definitions

1. highly integrated policy communities  
2. professional networks  
3. inter-governmental networks  
4. producer networks  
5. loosely integrated issues networks

Within the interest intermediation school, policy networks are generally regarded as an analytical tool for examining institutionalised exchange relations between the state and organizations of civil society, allowing a more ‘fine grain’ analysis by taking into account sectoral and sub-sectoral differences. The basic assumption is that the existence of policy networks, which reflect the relative status or power of particular interests in a policy area, influences (though does not determine) policy outcomes.

In further exploring the operation of policy networks Rhodes and Marsh expanded on Rhodes’ original idea and developed a typology (see Table below) that offers formal definitions for demarcating the world into two different types of network:

- policy communities
- issue networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIMENSION</th>
<th>POLICY COMMUNITY</th>
<th>ISSUE NETWORK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
<td>very limited number, some groups consciously excluded</td>
<td>large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of interest</td>
<td>economic and/or professional interests dominate</td>
<td>encompasses a range of affected interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of interaction</td>
<td>frequent, high-quality interaction of all groups on all matters related to policy issues</td>
<td>contacts fluctuate in frequency and intensity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity</td>
<td>membership, values and outcomes are persistent over time</td>
<td>access fluctuates significantly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensus</td>
<td>all participants share basic values and accept the legitimacy of the outcome</td>
<td>some agreement exists, but conflict is ever present</td>
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The Governance School

Unlike the interest mediation school, the German or ‘governance’ school understands policy networks as an alternative form of governance to hierarchy (bureaucracy) and market which can mobilize political resources in situations where these resources are widely dispersed between public and private actors. In this way the network concept draws attention to the interaction of many separate but interdependent organizations which coordinate their actions through shared resources and interests. The linkages, which differ in their degree of intensity, normalization, standardization and frequency of interaction, constitute the structures of a network.

Some authors suggest that the processes of differentiation at work in modern societies - in economic, social and cultural arenas - is leading to greater pressure for policy innovation and change which in turn produces political overload and ‘governance under pressure’. Simply put, governments can no longer carry the entire policy workload and they now depend more and more on the contribution of private actors in policy-making. Governments have become increasingly dependent upon the cooperation and joint resource mobilization of policy actors outside of their hierarchical control.

In this view, policy networks are best understood as ‘webs of relatively stable and ongoing relationships which mobilize and pool dispersed resources so that collective (or parallel) action can be orchestrated towards the solution of a common policy’ (Kenis and Schneider). Such policy networks reflect a changed relationship between state and society. There is no longer a strict separation between the two.

Understanding Policy Networks

Policy networks can possibly best be understood as:

- A web of relatively stable and ongoing relationships mobilizing and pooling dispersed resources to collective ends;
- Informal interactions between public and private actors with distinctive but interdependent interests striving to solve collective action problems in a coordinated but non-hierarchical way;
- Reflecting a changing relationship between state and society - instead of hierarchical - government/bureaucracy, policy is increasingly made involving a plurality of public, private and non-government organizations; and
- Normatively superior to markets and hierarchical bureaucracy

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Policy Network Approach

As with any approach, it is necessary to ask whether the policy network concept produces decisive outcomes? Can it deliver policy coherence and consensus?

Borzel is highly skeptical in this regard. She acknowledges that the policy network approach has an advantage in that it does not necessarily have the dysfunctional consequences of other models - markets can fail and hierarchies produce ‘losers’. However, it is recognized that horizontal coordination through the use of policy networks can result in significant problems in reaching consensus, with some participants potentially defecting from the process while structural dilemmas can lead to other serious constraints. Borzel suggests that the dysfunction of horizontal self-coordination can be overcome when such coordination takes place in the ‘shadow of hierarchy’ or within network structures. By combining the autonomy of actors typical for markets with the ability of hierarchies to pursue selected goals and to control their anticipated consequences, policy networks can overcome the major problems of horizontal coordination.

According to the governance school, an increasingly complex and dynamic environment where hierarchical coordination is rendered difficult if not impossible, and where the potential for deregulation is limited because of the problems of market failure, increasingly governance becomes feasible only within policy networks, providing a framework for the efficient horizontal coordination of the interests and actions of mutually dependent public and private actors.
However, further difficulties and conflicts arise through the emergence of two distinct streams within the governance school:

- Rationalist/institutionalist stream
- Cognitive/communicative action stream (which embraces ‘advocacy coalition’ and ‘discourse coalition’ models)

The nature of the tension between the two streams basically centres on the limitations of assumptions about rational actors seeking to maximize their self-interests in their dealings with others. Emerging policy network studies are challenging the rationalist approaches which assume that individuals are motivated solely by self-interest. Instead, negotiations in policy networks are based as much on communication and trust and aim at achieving joint outcomes which have a proper value for all actors. If this is accepted, the policy network approach needs to take into account the role of consensual knowledge, ideas, beliefs and values and processes of policy deliberation or policy change through policy learning.

One of the remaining problems or reproaches made about the policy network idea is that the argument lacks explanatory power. The general inability of the interest intermediation school to formulate hypotheses which systematically link the nature of a policy network with the character and outcome of the policy process seems to confirm the judgment that policy networks are not more and not less than a useful toolbox for analyzing public policy.

Borzel concludes by questioning the very legitimacy of policy networks and suggests that the idea may be Euro-centric. In her view, it still remains to be shown that policy networks not only exist in policy-making, but also are also relevant for policy process and policy outcome. Secondly, she raises a normative issue - under what conditions will policy networks enhance the efficiency and legitimacy of policy-making?

In this light, the salience of the policy network idea needs careful interrogation particularly at a time when governance models bridging government, markets and institutions and interests in civil society are being somewhat uncritically embraced in the public policy mainstream.
References

