



SC1: Public Policy

Module 6

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Contents

Module 6	1
Optimal Policy-Making	1
Introduction	1
Case studies	3
Normative models	3
Case studies	5
Activity 6.1	6
Case studies	9
Activity 6.2	9
The normative-optimum model	10
Activity 6.3	10
Other models and approaches	11
Case studies	12
Case studies	13
Activity 6.4	13
Case studies	16
Decision-making models and the policy cycle	16
Activity 6.5	17
Module summary	18
References	19
Further reading	20

Module 6

Optimal Policy-Making

Introduction

This module focuses on the process of actually preparing for and making policy decisions. Decision-making has traditionally been the key area of focus in policy studies. Several major models have been used, though two primary models – the rational and the incremental – have dominated the discussion. Today, the focus is much less narrow; decision-making models are seen as only a small part of a much wider policy process.

You will note that some of the relevant discussion was introduced in the second module. The process of assessing or appraising a proposed policy (or proposed policy alternatives) is an essential lead-up to the policy decision (assuming there is a conscious decision). As Mulgan (1989) suggests, “we need a means of organising the mass of evidence so that it can be comprehended and evaluated” (p. 37). While Mulgan is talking about a model to describe the political process, the comment applies equally to the complex context of policy decision appraisal and decision-making. A policy-making environment has one of the following characteristics. It is:

- **Certain** – information is sufficient to predict the outcomes of each policy alternative under consideration
- **Risky** – there is a complete lack of certainty, but some awareness of the probabilities associated with the possible outcomes of policy alternatives under consideration
- **Uncertain** – information is completely insufficient to assign probabilities to the outcomes of the alternatives under consideration.

(Wood, Wallace & Zeffane, 2001, p. 487)

This module will examine the characteristics of both the rational and incremental models and explore the major areas of dispute between their proponents. As a result of the debate over the validity of these models, some degree of compromise has been reached. The modifications made to these models will be discussed and other models will be presented, particularly Dror’s optimal model (1989). We need to bear in mind that no matter what the model, our aim should be optimal policy-making.

Formulation, or decision-making, is the core stage of the policy-making process. If a narrow definition is adopted, “making decisions about plans or courses of action for the future”, then this is the stage at which policy-making really occurs.

As indicated, most of the policy literature has concentrated on this stage – how policy decisions are made. It is thus appropriate to deal with these models at this stage. First, though, it is important to reconsider why

models might be useful. As discussed in Module 1, descriptive models describe situations as they actually are occurring, normative models state how situations should be, giving prescriptive formulas for how decision-making should be conducted. Policy-making models often have both descriptive and prescriptive elements; how descriptive or prescriptive the models are can be determined through analysis.

Some questions to focus on:

- What models exist to help policy makers process the complex inputs to decision-making?
- How useful are these models?
- Is there an ideal or perfect model?
- What faults does each model have?
- How do these models help fit in with the idea of a cyclical policy-making model?

Upon completion of this module you will be able to:



Outcomes

- *explain* the purposes of decision-making models
- *describe* the rational policy-making model and explain its strengths and weaknesses as a model
- *describe* the incremental policy-making model and explain its strengths and weaknesses as a model
- *describe* the normative-optimum model of policy-making and explain its strengths and weaknesses as a model
- *describe* two or more other models and explain their strengths and weaknesses as models
- *describe* other approaches to understanding policy-making and explain their strengths and weaknesses as models
- *compare* and contrast the various policy-making models addressed in this module
- *evaluate* the relationship between these models and the cyclical approach to policy-making.

Case studies



Case study

Case study comments

Case 7: The environment of the refugees in Somalia is described as being “turbulent” (p. 123). It would be risky or uncertain at best.

Case 12: The environment could be interpreted as one of risk. There seemed to be an escalating problem with housing that could not be completely predicted, but it does not appear that every consequence that occurred was unpredictable. It appears that many of the impediments to successful policy implementation were in existence for many years (such as the problems with land acquisition).

Normative models

The rational and incremental models are two predominant models of policy-making in the literature. Traditionally, the rational model was seen to be more prescriptive or normative and the incremental model as more descriptive. However, this can be disputed, and the process of debate has led to considerable modification and softening of the dichotomy between the two. In the literature and in our context, these models are usually applied in their traditional sense before modifications, unless otherwise stated. The detail in each model is extensive and the information provided below is limited. We strongly recommend that you seek out more detailed information about the models.

Rational model

The best-known is the rational-comprehensive model, developed by Herbert Simon. It is the most normative of the rational policy-making models – it offers prescriptive recommendations about how policy should be made. The model’s main premise is that decision-making involves selecting alternatives to meet previously stated goals. In its purest form, all possible alternatives and all possible consequences must be considered. It has six basic steps:

1. A problem must be identified.
2. The values, goals and objectives of the decision-maker must be determined, and ranked in order of priority.
3. All the options for achieving the goals must be identified.
4. The costs and benefits of each option must be determined.
5. Costs and benefits must be compared.



6. On the basis of this comparison, the rational decision-maker selects the course of action which maximises the outcome in line with the values, goals, and objectives identified in step 2.

(Davis, Wanna, Warhurst & Weller, 1993, p. 161)

While it is accepted by many theorists that this model, in its pure sense, has limitations, it still forms the basis for many government initiatives. Many budgetary control programmes in the 1970s and 1980s were based on this approach. The emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness which accompanies many government decisions today reflects a rational approach because it suggests that alternatives can be objectively considered in terms of cost-benefit analysis.

It has been suggested that the rational approach is value-free – that expertise is brought to bear on problem definition and research and that decisions are made neutrally.

Critics of this view suggest that a weakness common to rational approaches is that they are limited by how they define the problem. For instance, all options cannot be identified and are often ignored, neglected or simply not thought of. Narrow perspectives, values and power can limit the rational approach to policy-making.

The model assumes the manager acts “in a world of complete certainty” (Wood et al., 2001, p. 489) but also in a neutral, value-free world. This provides a desirable prescription, but an impossibility in view of time and human capacity. It assumes that objectives are value-free and neutral. If they were, it might be easy to identify them quickly, then move on to identify alternatives, evaluate them and make a decision. Wildavsky (1987) presents an argument, below, in which he asserts that objectives are a human intervention, one which is not free of values:

...Objectives are not just out there, like ripe fruit waiting to be plucked; they are man-made, artificial, imposed on a recalcitrant world... the very act of defining objectives may be considered a hostile act. If they are too vague, no evaluation can be done. If they are too specific, they never encompass all the indefinable qualities that their adherents insist they have. If they are too broad, any activity may be said to contribute to them. If they are too narrow, they may favour one segment... over another.

(Wildavsky 1987, p. 216, cited in Bridgman & Davis, 2000, p. 45)

Simon made a rather important modification to his rational-comprehensive approach. Accepting that in reality all options and consequences could not be considered, he came up with the concept of bounded rationality. This concept accepts the limited ability of humans to deal with vast amounts of data and probabilities in a totally objective way. Another way of appreciating the problem would be to say that people “act only in terms of what they perceive about a given situation” (Wood et al., 2001, p. 490) – and their perceptions are likely to be limited. As March and Simon state:

...Most human decision-making, whether individual or organisational, is concerned with the discovery and selection of

satisfactory alternatives; only in exceptional cases is it concerned with the discovery and selection of optimal decisions.

(March & Simon 1958, pp. 137–142, quoted in Wood et al., 2001, p. 490)

This idea was further developed with the introduction of the concept of “satisfying”, choosing an option that is “good enough”. Importantly, in deciding to eliminate alternatives, or in accepting limited alternatives, the questions of whose values and whose discretion, which facts and whose power is involved, become critical. These are applicable to all models, however.

Case studies



Case study

Case study comments

Case 2: Rational decision-making processes are apparent in this case, although there is much evidence of other, less-clear policy-making processes. The policy was a clear change from existing policy, a radical change introduced by the relevant minister (Dawkins). There were many articulated aims, including development of a user-pays system, improvement of economic performance and increased international competitiveness through enhanced skill levels (p. 28). Task forces and working committees were established to think through the issues in the best way possible (pp. 29–32). Discussion papers were prepared to elicit further comment from the wider public. See the list of alternatives considered on page 41 along with the criteria used. Alternatives were ranked by a set of criteria. If it were not for some of the occurrences in this case (see other case comments) one might think it was a perfect example of rational decision-making.

Case 7: The authors criticise rational decision-making in their opening pages, expressing the opinion that policy-making is much more complex and dynamic than it suggests. They suggest that the writers of the policy documents provide specific detail that reflects “political considerations, guess-work and imaginative accounting”, and that they lack sufficient understanding of the context of the policy (p. 121). “Rational”, in this sense, is a relative term. They suggest that no ground for policy is neutral (p. 122) and criticise the notion that decisions are an absolute from which everything else can proceed (p. 122).

Case 8: There is not much discussion about the decision-making process in this case, but it is worth mentioning the author’s comment that the decisions made about the dam represent “bad logic”. This draws attention to the fact that rationality is a relative term – what is rational for one person may not be rational for another (p. 144).

Case 9: One might ask whether any rational decision-making

occurred when the choice was made to promote shrimp farming in the southeast of Bangladesh. It appears that there were disastrous environmental effects and poor gains for the local farmers (p. 148). This case study also draws attention to the need to question the effects and achievements of foreign aid and casts doubt on the rationality of foreign aid programmes.

Activity 6.1



Activity

1. Many of the current trends in policy-making suggest more rational approaches. Can you think of some examples of policies that have been formulated in this rational manner?
2. Can more rational approaches to policy-making ensure better policy?

Incremental model

The incremental model was developed by Charles Lindblom (1959). Lindblom's early version of this model explained policy-making as "muddling through". In response to many criticisms, Lindblom (1979) adapted it until he came up with a much more detailed model. He sought to modify the model from being purely descriptive to having some prescriptive elements – disjointed incrementalism, partisan mutual adjustment and strategic analysis, discussed below.

Lindblom (1959) believed many small steps would likely lead to a good decision, or that at least minimal damage would be done because change would be marginal. Also, an opportunity would be provided to test the water with minimal chance for error. The concept of "successive limited comparisons" starts from the existing situation and brings about changes incrementally (Ham & Hill, 1984, p. 80). This contrasts with the rational model, which starts at the root, beginning with basic issues on each occasion and making decisions from the ground up.

The basic approach of the incremental model is that decision-making tends to be unplanned and reactive. Marginal changes are made to existing policy. Decisions are not based on pre-set objectives, but are based on the means available to decision-makers. The focus is on the known and manageable. The incremental model is often criticised for favouring inertia and the status quo.

Lindblom's model, however, in many ways simply addresses, albeit from a different angle, the reservations that Simon had about rational models, including his own rational-comprehensive version (Ham & Hill, 1984). Lindblom explicitly lists some of these as failures of the adaptation of the rational-comprehensive method. In Braybrooke and Lindblom's view, Simon's rational-comprehensive method is not adapted to:

- man's limited problem-solving capacities
- inadequacy of information

- costliness of analysis
- failures in constructing a satisfactory evaluative method
- the closeness of observed relationships between fact and value in policy-making
- the openness of the system of variables with which it contends
- the analyst's need for strategic sequences of analytical moves
- the diverse forms in which problems actually arise.

(Braybrooke & Lindblom, as cited in Ham & Hill, 1984, p. 80)

While Simon was modifying his model to take into account the human limits to completely rational policy-making, Lindblom was doing almost the opposite. He introduced elements to his model to address the criticism that it was not appropriate just to allow policy to be formulated by “muddling through”. He developed a number of modifications to explain how incremental policy-making was a useful method, including the fact that the slower adjustments and disconnected activities had the potential to produce good policy. In this way, he was redefining his policy as one that might have some normative value.

Lindblom developed a number of terms to explain the new elements in his model. His terminology appears to be self-explanatory, but there are subtle distinctions worth describing.

Partisan mutual adjustment – this suggests that throughout a policy-making process (whether formal or informal), the groups and individuals involved will make successive adjustments to their positions in response to the changing circumstances of their policy area.

Disjointed incrementalism – this suggests constant incremental changes. In incrementalism there is a fluid link between means – how policies will be executed – and ends – what policies should be achieving. There is no reason to assume a single set of agreed-upon ends or objectives, and thus the means of doing things is also influential in deciding what will be done. The disjointed incrementalism approach allows for disjointed changes, not just a series of minor adjustments in a single direction, towards single objectives. It can thus be said that the problem is constantly subject to redefinition and analysis and that evaluation is an ongoing part of the policy formulation process. It allows policy-makers to move away from problems rather than moving toward goals (Smith & May, 1980, p. 151). It is interesting to note that Etzioni highlights a risk of incremental changes being circular instead of advantages accumulating. (Ham & Hill, 1984, p. 85)

Strategic analysis – this suggests that strategic analysis is necessary in instances of major breakdowns in policy, or for new policy areas.

Partisan mutual adjustment and disjointed incrementalism together allow for diverse participants and their perspectives in the policy process. They can include a fragmented policy-making process across a range of institutions or involving many individuals and groups, such as in federal systems and/or pluralism. This is much closer to the policy system view of Considine (1994) discussed in Module 5.



Table 6.1 provides a working tool to compare incrementalism with rational approaches.

Table 6.1: Two models of policy analysis

Rational policy-making	Incremental policy-making
Clarification of values or objectives distinct from and usually prerequisite to empirical analysis of alternative policies	Selection of value goals and empirical analysis of the needed action are not distinct but are closely intertwined
Policy formulation is therefore approached through means-end analysis: first the ends are isolated, then the means to achieve them are sought	Since ends and means are not distinct, means-end analysis is often inappropriate or limited
The test of a good policy is that it can be shown to be the most appropriate means to desired ends	The test of a good policy is typically that various analysts find themselves agreeing on it (without their necessarily agreeing that it is the most appropriate means to an agreed objective)
Analysis is comprehensive Every important relevant factor is taken into account	Analysis is limited drastically: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • important possible outcomes are neglected • important alternative potential policies are neglected • important affected values are neglected
Theory is relied upon heavily	A succession of comparisons greatly reduces or eliminates reliance on theory

Source: Lindblom (as cited in Bridgman & Davis, 2000, p. 55)

As these models evolved, they became more like each other. The rational model softened its belief in pure and complete rationality, and Lindblom introduced some elements of rationality into incrementalism. Smith & May (1980) describe the debate between the two models as artificial.

They say:

... [I]n spite of prolonged dissension between rationalist and incrementalist models of decision-making, both they and the several versions of a rapprochement have in common epistemological features the significance of which outweigh any specific points of variance (p. 154).

Case studies



Case study

Case study comments

Case 2: Details of this case point to the fact that it does not display the features of incremental approaches described above. Rather than involve a lot of small incremental changes in response to immediate demands from a range of participants, it was aimed at introducing policy change that was rather radical and enduring. The policy-makers were not just trying to vary the status quo, but rather were moving towards a new status quo.

Case 7: It would be too simple to say that this case supports an incremental approach; it offers something more complex. However, there are useful elements that can be linked – a constantly changing policy and an array of participants in the policy process. For example, there was reference to policy that was not static but constantly changing (though not necessarily in incremental steps). Also, the policy choices were not just made by decision-makers, but instead there was a complex web of changing circumstances, many players with many voices and viewpoints, and quick, sometimes ad hoc reactions (p. 129). Sometimes this was incremental and marginal for corrective reasons (p. 133), such as to overcome the next emergent problem.

Case 12: The policy decisions made in this case appear to be incremental in many ways, lacking radical change. There was no major change that completely shifted the nature of housing policy overnight. Instead, there were ongoing changes over many years that responded to the current situation. However, there is little background material about how policies were developed and the duration of the period suggests some major revisions of policy might have been subject to rational analysis.

Activity 6.2



Activity

1. To consolidate your understanding, outline the major features of each of the two policy-making models.
2. Think of a policy example from your experience and briefly indicate how it can be explained by Lindblom's incremental model and/or Simon's rational-comprehensive model. (Note: both models might be useful in explaining the same policy.)
3. How much do you think the models have in common after modifications have been made?

The normative-optimum model

Dror endeavours to provide an optimal method for improving and strengthening decision-making, particularly by adapting a model to suit the circumstances (Ham & Hill, 1984, p. 85). He called this model “a normative-optimum model for policy-making”. Whether he achieves such an outcome is questionable, but he does remind us that optimal policy-making is a desirable goal and one to which most theorists probably strive.

Dror’s model is very comprehensive, providing several stages. Through his normative-optimum model, he seeks to accommodate qualitative rather than merely quantitative aspects of policy. He aims to increase the rational content of decision-making models, but acknowledges that:

...Extrarational processes play a significant role in optimal policy-making on complex issues.

Dror (as cited in Smith & May, 1980, pp. 153–154)

While there is much that is rational in the model, care is taken and caveats are made along the lines of “some clarification of values”, “preliminary estimation of pay-offs”, and “explicit arrangements to stimulate creativity” (Smith & May, 1980, p. 154).

The model’s meta-policy-making stage requires the policy-maker to consider the best approach in a given context. For example, it may be more appropriate to take an incremental approach or a rational approach on different occasions. The extra-rational dimensions allow for some intuitive processes, though they should be as informed and rational as possible. Thus, the model presents some similarity to Vickers’ art of judgement model. Finally, post-policy-making incorporates evaluative or feedback dimensions which are not included in most other models.

Dror (1989), as indicated by the title of his model, seeks to provide a prescriptive model aimed at achieving optimal public policy. However, the model has been criticised for its vague variables, its weak, residual categories for non-rational sources of information, and its statements of commitment to rationality and non-rationality without means of achieving them (Smith & May, 1980, p. 154).

Activity 6.3



Activity

List the main features of Dror’s model.

1. What is your opinion of the model?
2. How is it a modification of each of the rational and incremental models?

The preparation for the policy decision is as much a part of the decision-making process as the decision itself – should one be clearly made. The way decision-makers go about making the decision and the underlying

values and assumptions they have, will impact upon how the decision is made. In many cases there may not even be a clear decision-making process, it may simply be another small response to the circumstances, though policy is being shaped and modified as it happens.

Other models and approaches

Other models have emerged since the development of the rational and incremental models. Theorists sought other ways to describe or prescribe the policy-making process, often striking a compromise between the two major models.

Two commonly discussed models to emerge from the debate about incrementalism and rationalism are Etzioni's mixed scanning and Vickers' art of judgement models. Whether they successfully span the apparently irreconcilable differences between the incremental and rational approaches has been a matter of considerable discussion. Analysis should make the models' features clear and allow you to determine their validity for yourself.

Vickers' art of judgement model

Vickers' model is, in some ways, more difficult to grasp. Its essence lies in appreciating the value of intuition and of judgement heuristics. Intuition is "the ability to know or recognise quickly and readily the possibilities of a given situation". Judgement heuristics are "simplifying strategies or 'rules of thumb' that people use when making decisions" (Wood et al., 2001, pp. 490–491).

The art of judgement model describes policy-making as a "continuous interaction between systems and environment". (Subramaniam, 1971, p. 338). Rather than seeking goals, the decision-maker seeks to maintain norms. The decision-maker uses his or her "appreciative system" continuously to deal with the constant interaction between reality judgements and value judgements. Reality judgements relate to the decision-maker's estimate of past events and future probabilities; value judgements relate to the unexpressed opinions and probable reactions of other people. The process can be useful in accommodating conflicting interests. It accepts that skills such as being able to predict problems and educate one's appreciative system can be developed through experience. It suggests that senior public servants may thus have developed appreciative systems that make them able to deal quite successfully with policy issues. (Wood et al., 2001, pp. 337–347).

Case studies



Case study

Case study comments

Case 2: The author of this case paints a clear picture of what she thought was interesting about the case, including the comments: “effective policy-making requires an artful mixture of process, people, politics and analysis” and “these people variously contributed drive, political judgement and public persuasion, ideas and theory, rigorous analysis and an understanding of administrative practicalities” (p. 53). These seem to suggest that there is room for “artful judgement”. Certainly some of the players on the committee and task force as well as the minister himself had appreciative systems that could foresee where resistance and problems were likely to occur.

Etzioni’s mixed scanning model

The mixed scanning model was developed by Amitai Etzioni. The model allows policy-makers a combination of detailed scanning (from the rational model) for fundamental decisions and truncated scans (from the incremental model), for altering only part of the policy afterwards. What this really means is that when a big and fundamental decision is being made, Etzioni thinks it more appropriate to take a rational approach – to look for alternatives and detailed appraisals of how they might work, how effective they may be, what the costs and benefits might be. If the policy is to be altered only in some marginal or partial way, then Etzioni suggests an approach more like the incremental model. It is not necessary to undertake thorough and extensive research or scanning, but instead a less-thorough and partial scan of the policy changes can be undertaken. Etzioni was seeking to avoid the extremes of rationalism and incrementalism as was Dror (Smith & May, 1980). Etzioni claims that:

...[E]ach of the two elements in mixed-scanning helps to reduce the effects of the particular shortcomings of the other; incrementalism reduces the unrealistic aspects of rationalism by limiting the details required in fundamental decisions and contextualizing rationalism helps to overcome the conservative slant of incrementalism by exploring longer-run alternatives.

(Smith & May, 1980, p. 153)

The major criticism is how to distinguish fundamental from other decisions. This is a matter of judgement and is likely to depend on the situation. Smith & May (1980) argue that rationalism and incrementalism are based on diametrically opposed principles “which are not reconciled by mixed scanning’s sampling of either side” (p. 153).

Case studies



Case study

Case study comments

Case 4: While perhaps not fitting neatly into Etzioni's model, some variations to policy are discussed in this case that show incremental adjustment. For example, the FCC modified its rules to allow local service providers "to interconnect their private lines with the interstate facilities of local telephone companies" (p. 77). In other respects, the case probably demonstrates more radical departures from existing policy, or suggestions for more radical departures, that might be the result of more extensive appraisal and wider scanning for ideas. The emphatic suggestion to remove some provisions from the 1984 Cable Act might be a case in point (p. 76).

Activity 6.4



Activity

1. List the main features of Etzioni's model.
2. What is your opinion of the model?
3. How is it a modification of each of the rational and incremental models?
4. List the main features of Vickers' model.
5. What is your opinion of the model?
6. How is it a modification of each of the rational and incremental models?

Other approaches

Newer models of decision-making in business literature focus on emphasising neutrality, with brainstorming, the Delphi technique and nominal group techniques seeking to overcome the influence processes that work in group decision-making contexts. Efforts to minimise criticism, allow creativity, or ensure anonymity in suggestions can help to overcome the influences of higher status, the loudest voices, majority domination and alliances, and work towards a more objective solution. Allowing creativity in decision-making may have some application to policy-making, as it does to business. There are four steps:

1. **Preparation and problem definition** – choosing which problems are good to focus upon, then being broad and open in deciding how to frame the problem and consider options.



2. **Incubation** – looking at the problems in diverse ways and allowing unusual alternatives.
3. **Illumination** – responding to flashes of insight and being open to recognising when all the pieces of the puzzle suddenly fit together.
4. **Verification** – not just relaxing after illumination, but using logical analysis to confirm that good decisions really have been made.

(Wood et al., 2001, p. 492)

Sometimes decisions are made simply because decisions have already been made. This can be interpreted in two ways.

1. There can be an **escalation of commitment** – the tendency to continue with a previously chosen course of action even when feedback suggests it is failing.

(Wood et al., 2001, p. 497)

2. There can be an **implicit favourite** – without knowing it, a decision-maker or several decision-makers can have an unstated favourite outcome. Inevitably, their judgement about alternative outcomes, their selection of outcomes and their criticism of other outcomes will be biased. They will see their implicit favourite in a good light and the alternatives in a poor light.

The **garbage can model** is an interesting decision-making model that allows us to recognise that sometimes the solution comes before the problem. The theory accepts that decision-making is “sloppy and haphazard” (Kreitner & Kinicki, 1995, p. 305) and that it involves four independent streams of events that create:

...[A] collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer and decision-makers looking for work.

(Wood et al., 2001, p. 497)

This means that political or personal reasons might interfere with proper problem identification and that individuals’ agendas (whether conscious or not) might affect perceived problems and solutions. In this way it can be linked to the implicit favourite model. The garbage can model certainly questions rational decision-making and instead allows for a complex array of rationales for human action and choice.

Artificial intelligence methods that use computing technology are increasingly being put forward as a means of decision-making, particularly in business contexts. Given that policy-making is all about making decisions and also that policy-making theorists have identified the weakness of humans in processing all the possible information, artificial intelligence may provide some hope for enhancing policy-making methods. However, we have yet to see artificial intelligence used extensively in policy-making. Artificial intelligence occurs when computers are programmed to think like a human brain but process much more data in a shorter time frame. However, there is no reason to suppose

that this will not occur – especially as policy decisions can be so complex. **Ethics**, another significant issue, will be explored further in Module 7.

Consultation and participation with affected parties are together another important feature of modern policy-making, though these processes are sometimes more symbolic than real (see Module 7). Many newer approaches suggest that much policy-making is undertaken so that politicians can be seen to be doing something about a situation, or to create a sense of occasion, nationhood, or progress (among others). The key to understanding symbolic approaches is to recognise that humans understand their world in a symbolic way, through stories, legends, logos and so on. Politicians often implicitly recognise this; many a cynical commentator has said that a policy is there to make a politician look good. How policies are presented to the media is sometimes a good indication of their symbolic aspects. If departments and/or politicians wish to promote particular policies, it is often because they will make the party, cabinet, department or nation appear progressive and proactive. In fact, some of the newer approaches to case analysis in policy-making use metaphors such as “theatre” and “performance” to explain events in the policy arena. Dobuzinskis (1992), for example, uses modernist and postmodernist metaphors to describe a false sense of control in policy-making, and criticises the delusory nature of our generally modernist policy-making paradigms.

Modernists tend to have a paradigm that paints the world as a very concrete and real place that can be constantly improved. They seek new ideas at the expense of old ones. There is a sense that we can completely understand the world around us and by understanding it, learn how to control it. Postmodernists see the world as more complicated and multi-faceted, with constantly changing forces and uncertain realities. While modernists would want to improve the world and dismiss the past, postmodernists are happy to accept the old with the new and blend them into some form of transient reality. There is no sense that a solution can be found and put in place that will satisfy everyone and be enduring. These are very different approaches and, by using metaphors, Dobuzinskis argues that the modernist view is no longer entirely workable. A postmodernist view that allows for constant change, multiple viewpoints, multiple needs and demands and an appreciation of symbolism through metaphors is perhaps more appropriate. Metaphors themselves seem a strange thing to introduce into a subject about public policy, but people do react to symbolic stimuli and often it is the slogans and gestures of politicians that win popularity as much as the content of their policy statements.

Case studies



Case study

Case study comments

Case 2: Dawkins appears to have had an implicit favourite in this case. The desired ends were strategically concealed so that a more rational process was seen to occur. Whether this was intentional is difficult to say, although at least one interpretation would say that it was.

Case 9: Perhaps the idea to support shrimp farming was a solution waiting for a problem. It certainly appears not to have been useful.

Decision-making models and the policy cycle

In each stage of the policy process the values of participants are relevant. The incremental model openly acknowledges the values of different participants, while the rational model stresses an objective, values-free approach. The acknowledgment that competing values are involved in policy-making enables us to appreciate that people will be competing to have their values expressed in the resulting policy. For example, a pluralist approach accepts that there are many different people and groups competing to have their opinions heard, though who has the most power is an issue that some of the other theories of the state identify as unequal. Rational models not only treat objectives as value-free, but they also do little to acknowledge the power struggles that are likely to underlie the policy process. They tend to assume that agents (perhaps politicians or bureaucrats) are legitimately endorsed to make informed policy decisions on behalf of the populace.

During the policy formulation stage of the policy process it is likely that all the policy-making actors will have some role to play. Policy formulation is not a task solely for politicians – public servants advise politicians; citizens and pressure groups also seek to have input, and sometimes organisations such as industry groups, business councils, or farmer groups are incorporated into decision-making committees. Professionals may be engaged to help develop policies though their professional values may not be subject to scrutiny but rather accepted as compatible with policy aims or simply overlooked.

It is worth examining whether policy-making models extend past policy formulation to analyse other stages of policy-making such as appraisal, evaluation and implementation.

Policy is not formulated at a discrete stage of the policy-making process. Discussions about implementation will reveal that policy cannot be determined and then simply put into action. There will always be more decisions to be made and they will, in essence, comprise an ongoing

method of policy formulation. It may, then, not be so simple to describe this type of policy formulation in terms of the above models. This point of view reflects the policy-action continuum covered in Module 2 and is valuable in helping us to understand how some methods involved in the models above might extend beyond formulation. Certainly, we could appreciate that incrementalism and the detailed adjustments in the second stage of Etzioni's mixed scanning enable the adaptation of continuous policy-making. The approaches described in this section seek to explain policy formulation, but, like the rational and incremental models, they do not necessarily state precise boundaries between policy-making stages and may not even consider policy stages at all. Whenever this is the case, it is useful to try to attempt to apply them to all policy-making stages, not just policy formulation, as they may better inform us about the dynamics of policy activity at those stages as well.

Activity 6.5



Activity

1. How applicable do you think the different models are to public policy-making today?
2. How descriptive are they?
3. Which model do you think would be the most suitable for ensuring good public policy-making?
4. What is the prescriptive value of each model?



Module summary



Summary

There are many policy-making models to draw from and no need to rely solely on one to explain everything in a policy-making situation. They can be seen as competing ways of describing or prescribing the way policy-making occurs, or should occur. Each has some merit, though each also has limitations and shortcomings. The most appropriate strategy as a policy analyst or policy adviser is to understand the models and use features from them when they are useful. Having an understanding of all these methods will enable you to have a richer understanding of the very complex phenomena of policy-making.

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Further reading



Further reading

The following readings relate to policy-making models. This is only an indication of possible readings, not a comprehensive list. You may find many other relevant sources for further reading.

Carley, M. (1980). *Rational techniques in policy analysis*. Aldershot: Gower.

Chapter 2 explores the idea of rationality in policy-making.

Dror, Y. (1989). *Public policy-making re-examined* (New ed. incorporating 1968 original). New York: Chandler.

This is Dror's seminal work on his optimal policy-making model.

Etzioni, A. (1967). Mixed scanning: A "third" approach to decision-making. *Public Administration Review*, December 27(5): 385–392.

This is the source article for Etzioni's mixed-scanning approach.

Ham, C., & Hill, M. (1984). *The policy process in the modern capitalist state*. Brighton: Wheatsheaf.

Chapter 5 explores the key differences between rational and incremental decision-making.

Hill, M. (1993). *The policy process: A reader*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

The two readings in Part V explore some of the issues that arise in comparing incremental and rational approaches. The first of these is a re-publication of the Smith & May reading listed below.

Hogwood, B. W., & Gunn, L. A. (1984). *Policy analysis for the real world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chapter 4 gives an overview of policy-making models and their strengths and weaknesses.

Howlett, M., & Ramesh, M. (1995). *Studying public policy: policy cycles and policy subsystems*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.

Chapter 7 compares the incremental and rational models.

Lane, J.-E. (1995). *The public sector: Concepts, models and approaches* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

or

Lane, J.-E. (2000). *The public sector: Concepts, models and approaches* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.

Chapter 3 introduces some brief descriptions of key policy-making approaches.

Lindblom, C. E. (1959). The science of “muddling through”. *Public Administration Review*, 19(2): 79–88.

Lindblom, C. E. (1979). Still muddling, not yet through. *Public Administration Review*, 39(6): 517–525.

These are the Lindblom articles that established his original model of incrementalism and his modifications to it in view of later criticism.

McGrew, A. G., & Wilson, M. J. (Eds.). (1982). *Decision-making: Approaches and analysis*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

All the readings in Section 2 of this book relate to the idea of rationality in decision-making models. One is a reprint of the Smith & May article below.

Smith, G. & May, D. (1980). The artificial debate between rationalist and incrementalist models of decision making. *Policy and Politics*, 8(2): 147–161.

This is a leading article summarising the terms of the debate about the incremental and rational models. If it is not available, see McGrew & Wilson or Hill, above, in which the article is reprinted.