SUBJECTIVITY AND THE POLICY SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT: The policy sciences approach is contrasted with mathematical behaviorism and the neoclassical economic approach, and its compatibility with Q methodology is discussed in terms of the intentionality and contextuality of behavior, and of situational specificity as opposed to the aprioristic and theoretical assertiveness required for general laws. Q method provides access to the subjective motivations which drive policy decisions, but also provides insights concerning situations in which participants do not seek to maximize valued outcomes. Epistemologically, it is argued that the policy sciences and Q methodology are staunchly nonpositivistic.

The relationship between the policy sciences and Q methodology is refreshingly straightforward. We in the policy sciences need to be able to monitor and understand subjectivity on a case-by-case basis. What is distinctive about the policy sciences, as

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contrasted with other approaches, is an appreciation for context; this appreciation leads us to reject general-law approaches that try to link objective conditions to behavioral outcomes. We therefore need information on *subjective* conditions to drive our analyses. I will try to show that our epistemological stance is similar to that of the operant subjectivity movement, that it requires inductive but systematic mechanisms for providing information on subjective states, and that Q methodology is one way of providing such information.

The Policy Sciences and the Competition

To explore the importance of subjectivity for social science theory, we can ask what social science would look like if no efforts to determine subjective states were made. This could take two forms. First, it could attempt to link one objective variable or trait with another, relying on whatever correlations seem to prevail. This was, in large part, the project of the mathematical behavioral movement in the social sciences. It failed. From an epistemological point of view, the failure can be explained by the fact that purposive behavior, which constitutes most behavior, will map the same objective conditions into different outcomes, whenever different goals and different perceptions result in different actions. Certain objective conditions still emerge as mildly correlated with particular outcomes, but these low correlations are of little value for theory application, prediction, or explanation. Moreover, there is no assurance that the correlations found over one part of the range of variables will hold over other parts.

The second approach would stipulate aprioristic subjective states, and deduce behavior by assuming the purposive behavior of utility maximization. This is basically the tack of the "economic approach"; more specifically, the "neoclassical" or "neo-Walrasian" approach of mathematical modeling based on propositions derived from assumptions of "maximizing behavior, market equilibrium, and stable preferences" (Becker, 1976). This is the major challenge facing the policy sciences today; number-crunching pseudo-behavioralism is just about dead, but "economic imperialism" has been expanding into many

areas well beyond the conventional definition of economics: the choice of spouse, the outbreak of war, the size of the family, and so on.

In some respects the epistemology of the policy sciences and the economic approach are similar. They share an appreciation for "whole systems." The equilibrium of the neoclassicist is a systemwide phenomenon; the policy scientist's notion of "context" includes both proximate conditions and the broader context. Second, they share a grounding in individual actors' *intentions* to maximize. In neoclassical economics, the adjustments to equilibrium in response to marginal costs and benefits result from individual (family or firm) maximization of utility or profit. This maximizing behavior can be applied beyond the pursuit of wealth. The approach is "economic" not in the "economistic" sense of taking only wealth and economic factors into account; it is "economic" in the sense of presuming that individuals "economize" in their use of resources in order to maximize whatever objectives they pursue.

In terms of epistemological differences, though, the aprioristic nature of the preference ordering of the neoclassical approach makes a huge difference. In theory, the approach could be applied to the pursuit of any mix of objectives, as long as they are known and stable. Yet, the requirement of a known preference ordering to be used for general theory--one that can serve without inductively-derived adjustments for each case--requires the assertion of an aprioristic, generalizable preference ordering. For example, Hirshleifer (1985:54) remarks, "It was like a breath of fresh air when Anthony Downs boldly proposed as 'axioms' that men seek office solely for income, prestige, and power and that every political agent acts rationally to achieve goals with minimal use of scarce resources." Once a uniform preference ordering is stipulated, the same choice would be rational for any actor operating under the same objective conditions. For the policy sciences, no *a priori* objective function can be taken for granted. Maslow's value hierarchy, or any other *a priori* stipulation, is regarded as very unlikely to hold universally, stripped as it is of any possibility of contextually-driven variation. The policy scientist's acknowledgement of a broader base of variation in actors'

motivations and behaviors results in far greater skepticism as to the ability to formulate explicit, generalizable models. In rejecting the feasibility of a law that accounts for and predicts the *priorities* of pursuing wealth, power, affection, respect, enlightenment, well-being, skill and rectitude, the policy sciences do not attempt to deduce actions from objective conditions. Rather, the policy sciences provide a general framework for identifying, cataloguing, and exploring the implications of multiple objectives, but to be applied in specific instances rather than as general laws.

The policy sciences' more open-ended view of the possible beneficiaries of maximization efforts also makes our approach less hospitable to general laws. In neoclassical economics, the nongovernmental individual is presumed to act for the family unit, if acting as a consumer or worker, or for the firm. In either case, it is unambiguous. In the Lasswellian conception of the policy sciences, the individual may be acting on behalf of any number of possible foci or levels of his or her identification system.

Finally, for the policy sciences, the maximization of values is a point of departure, but there is no confidence that it will yield general laws or precise answers in particular instances. Not only does the Lasswellian maximization postulate insist that less of a general nature can be presumed about the goals of maximizing, it is also given less weight in the policy sciences framework. We should still be able to understand the social process by exploring individuals' intentions, but value maximization is easily untracked by incomplete consideration and the persistence of practices and beliefs that no longer contribute "economically" (Lasswell & Kaplan, 1950: 150). The policy sciences thus give as much emphasis to conditions that block maximization as to those that ensure it. In contrast, the neoclassicists operate under the working assumption that the extent of rational maximization is great enough to build it directly into theory, and to find more rationality in seemingly non-rational or irrational behavior than the policy sciences would.

In a sense, all of these differences between the policy sciences and the neoclassical economic approach rest on the greater theoretical assertiveness

of the neoclassical framework. To power a general neoclassical model, to achieve specific results, requires packing empirical assumptions of self-interested rationality into that model. The policy sciences framework presumes less theory, because the choice of theory *for specific applications* is more inductive and eclectic. The policy scientist either discovers inductively which empirical theoretical propositions seem to apply best, or tries several different possibilities to see where each leads and whether policy should be hedged to take into account that possibility.

Thus the challenge facing the social sciences, as far down the road as I can see, is to replace the general law impulse with the exploratory impulse. But this is clearly not just a matter of changing social scientists' temperaments. It also requires the means for coming up with specifications of preference orderings for the case at hand, and theoretical insights gleaned from prior accumulation of knowledge. Both must be robust enough--and quick enough--to outperform the alternative approach of "front-loading" a deductive theory with stipulations of how people must or ought to think and feel.

Thus we need windows on subjectivity for the broad purpose of filling in the motivational engine for the policy sciences' maximization postulate. We need to gauge the objectives, which may not be stable, and the levels of identification as well. In various ways, particularly when the factorial design of Q methodology has been based on the Lasswellian elaborations, as in much of Brown's (1986) work, Q methodology can reveal these aspects. This represents a very interesting and promising symbiosis. If the challenge is to be systematically inductive, then the policy sciences framework, with all of its checklists for elaborating the social process (seven phases of decision; eight value categories; the tripartite division of identifications, demands, and expectations), can aid in the comprehensiveness of the discourse sampled, while Q method provides the means for exploring the subjectivity related to these components.

Faulty Policy Debates and the Politics of Prevention

We also need intensive methods to monitor subjectivity to determine when maximization does not prevail. Let me elaborate a single, but important, example.

Harold Lasswell's 1930 book *Psychopathology and Politics* ended with a bewildering chapter entitled "The Politics of Prevention." It was not, I hasten to point out, "The Prevention of Politics"; all the anti-Lasswellian interpretations of the piece that labeled it as authoritarian are fundamentally off the mark. The point of the chapter was that public debate is often dangerously misspecified. Insights of the political analyst in this regard were to be shared with political actors to bring them toward insight--in the psychoanalytic sense of the term--that might change their conscious objectives and tactics in the policy debate. Lasswell's main mechanism accounting for misspecification was the displacement of motives and affects from their original foci to other foci, such that the resolution of the presenting problem may not get to the root of dissatisfaction. There are, however, other mechanisms that could be added with equal plausibility. The terminology employed in the debate may induce "false conflict"; or room for compromise may be overlooked because of the presumption of a zero-sum confrontation. The articulation of diametrically opposing positions may mask the possibility that different priorities might permit each side to give in on its relatively less salient dimensions.

One segment of discourse consists of explicit statements about the nature of the debate and the discourse itself. It is often accompanied by more implicit ideas about the "real issue," but again emotionalism, misleading symbolic developments, or simply lack of adequate consideration may keep these alleged insights about the nature of the conflict from being truly useful insights. Here, Q methodology, as a means for gaining greater self insight, can contribute to the rationality of value maximization. Comparing the dimensions that emerge from analyzing the rest of the discourse with these "issue-labeling" statements may reveal whether and how the debate is misspecified.

Note that the above analysis suggests that Q methodology go a bit beyond the usual task of finding the most coherent rendition of an individual's outlook to assessing the inconsistencies in outlooks. I am aware that this flies in the face of the Q methodology stance of not imposing external criteria--such as our standards of consistency--upon the analysis. While I am sympathetic to the Q method's capacity to avoid reading in the observer's biases, I believe that the risk may be worth it if consistency analysis helps to diagnose the pathologies of particular policy debates.

Epistemological Affinity

Finally, how consistent are the basic outlooks of the policy sciences and the Q movement? One way to determine that is, of course, to do some Q sorts. But let me give you my less systematic opinion.

Both approaches are staunchly nonpositivist. The Q methodology movement has put this eloquently, as in Stephenson's (1983) analogies to quantum mechanics and the uncertainty principle. I will try to put it in humbler terms. The striking characteristic of conventional positivism is the insistence on singularity. If one insists that there are several different possibilities, the positivist will ask for the single distribution of their frequency. For example, if Q methodology comes up with different outlooks or factors, the positivist will ask either "which is the most important?", or "how many of each did you find in your sample and can we establish the representativeness of this distribution for the universe of cases?" The Q methodologist then insists that representativeness is not the issue, and that the universe itself can be defined variously. It is enough to assert that a particular configuration of beliefs and affects holds. The case *per se* is illuminating, as are cases (specimens) in medicine, psychiatry, and biology in general.

The policy sciences' parallel is that we explore and catalogue the various dynamics of the social process, trying, to whatever incomplete degree possible, to understand the conditions and trends that accentuate or dampen the operation of each such dynamic, but we do not put it all together to gen-

erate a grand covering law. If we insist that there are different dynamics that could hold, the positivist will ask for the single overarching principle to determine which *one* will hold, or the relative "weight" of each. We respond that, given the irreducibility of uncertainty and the importance of fine contextual detail, such principles do not exist. Therefore the policy scientist, like the Q methodologist, adamantly refuses to specify *a priori* what these levels of relevance (or strength of relationships) might be, on the grounds that their relevance and strength vary in specific cases because of the influence of sometimes very fine contextual detail. This refusal is extremely important in blocking off yet another way for general laws to be reintroduced.

This affinity makes it very easy for policy scientists and Q methodologists to work together, and even to merge. The collaboration, already begun, will be all the more impressive in the future.

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