Conducting Interpretive Policy Analysis

UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS OF AN INTERPRETIVE APPROACH: THE IMPORTANCE OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

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What is policy analysis? What does a policy analyst do? Where is she employed?

Common answers to these questions would be that a policy analyst researches a policy issue to advise a policymaker on some decision relative to that issue. The policy analyst provides to the policymaker information that the latter lacks and is unable, for various reasons, to obtain personally. This information has traditionally been some form of technical or other expert knowledge required to craft a policy or to assess the likelihood of and evaluate its projected outcomes, but it may also entail procedural knowledge useful for implementation activities.[1]

Policy analysis has traditionally been undertaken in advance of legislative or other policy-making decisions or acts, but the sphere of activity has also extended to evaluating policies after they have been enacted, and to the evaluation of implementation activities themselves. So Fischer (1995, p. 2), for example, treats policy evaluation as the applied social scientific **[p. 2 ↓]** activity "typically referred to as 'policy analysis' or 'policy science.'" In this view, policy analysis is "designed to supply information about complex social and economic problems and to assess the processes by which a policy or program is formulated and implemented." It can focus on a policy's anticipated outcomes or, in retrospect, on its actual results. Ideally, as Fischer notes, we expect policy analysis to provide both policymakers and citizens "with an intelligent basis for discussing and judging conflicting ideas, proposals, and outcomes."[2]

Professional training in these applied social scientific analytic modes typically takes place in graduate programs in public policy, public administration, planning (urban,

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city, and regional), social work, education, and other issue-focused departments or schools (such as environmental studies). Even more broadly, as Heineman, Bluhm, Peterson, and Kearny (1990, p. 5) note, physicians, attorneys, and chemists could be said to engage in policy analysis when their work shapes policy decisions. Business and management schools have long taught "business policy" as a central aspect of their curriculum. Even in its current incarnation as business "strategy," this decision-making process follows the same steps as the policy process, even using the same terms (formulation and implementation; see Hatch, 1997, pp. 105-110). Traditional strategic analysis in the business world draws on many of the same tools as traditional policy analysis in assessing and shaping policies with respect to individual and organizational stakeholders, and these traditional approaches face many of the same limitations.

Although policy research can be university-based, it is also supported or conducted by and within independent agencies and consulting firms across the political and topical spectrum (e.g., the Rand Corporation, which also has its own training program; the American Enterprise Institute; the Brookings Institution; and Abt Associates), as well as by legislative aides for state and federal representatives and committees, and by interest groups (e.g., Sierra Club; Peace Officers Research Association of California). Private sector businesses and corporations have increasingly been employing policy analysts to monitor governmental regulations that may affect their activities.

The analytic reports of working policy analysts typically circulate in-house (within whatever agency, community group, or governmental entity commissioned the study, and perhaps among policy-relevant stakeholders). In a revised form, reports may find wider audiences through research papers presented at conferences of such professional associations as APPAM (the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management), IPSA or APSA (International Political Science Association, American Political Science **[p. 3 ↓]** Association) and regional affiliates (especially in their public policy and public administration sections), and ASPA (American Society for Public Administration), and through more conceptual, theoretical treatments published in such journals as *JPAM (Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*), the *Policy Studies Review, Policy Studies Journal*, and *Policy Sciences* (not to mention conferences and journals devoted to specific policy areas). Policy analyses are also written initially (and sometimes exclusively) in an academic mode, for conference presentation and journal publication. Whereas the intended reader of "in-house" reports is the policymaker

(including implementors), the intended reader of the academic paper is the research community.[3]

In short, policy analysis is conducted at federal, state, regional, and local levels of government; in private, public, and nonprofit realms; by liberals and conservatives; and by single interest groups and those that cover a broader spectrum. This text is written with the understanding that policy analysts work in many capacities:

The text is also written with the understanding that policy analysis is a form of research, and so it speaks to those training or involved in the academic pursuit of policy research as well as to those training or involved in the practices of policy analysis.

Both analytic acts and the spheres of activity, however, have been conceptually curtailed and directed by the research and analytic methods available in training programs and acceptable to policy analysis scholars. If, for example, cost-benefit analysis is accepted as the tool, that is what policy analysts are trained to do. By "accepted" I mean that a method is the basis of papers delivered at associational meetings and published in mainstream journals, thereby developing expectations for professional training and hence becoming the subject of textbooks and the focus of graduate school and other training curricula.[4]

Authors of two recently published textbooks, for example, list a policy analytic process of eight steps and six steps, respectively, one that is fairly commonly identified. The first steps of both are: establish the context, formulate/define the problem, specify objectives/determine evaluation criteria, and explore/evaluate alternatives (Bonser, McGregor, & Oster, 1996; **[p. 4 ↓]** Patton & Sawicki, 1993). This appears to suggest that the policy analyst generates issue knowledge in a void, from his head. Nowhere does it ask which or whose policy knowledge should be included in these steps or how to access such knowledge.

If, however, we could get out of this cycle of expectations and back to the kinds of acts (including decisions) that the policy process actually entails, we would see that policy actions are not restricted to the sorts of questions amenable to cost-benefit analysis, decision analysis, and so on. There is a realm of activity that policymakers need to have evaluated, systematically, rigorously, and methodically, which centers not only

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on values but also on other forms of human meaning, including beliefs and feelings. Rebuilding bridges to make them earthquake-ready, or adopting welfare programs, entails judgments about what people *in the situation* find meaningful. For example, a recent health policy survey sought to explore attitudes across American race-ethnic groups about sending infirm elderly parents to nursing homes. The question was meaningless, however, to those who take it as a given that parents will be cared for at home until death: they had no conceptual framework within which to understand the question, which had been generated from the context of a different meaning system of values, beliefs, and feelings. In another example, an American-initiated comparative study of U.S. and Japanese policies included the seemingly innocuous, factual question, "What is your age?" Because of American sensitivities about age, the question was placed at the end of the questionnaire, allowing the researcher and the informant time to establish some rapport that would "cushion" the impact of the question's "personal" nature. When administered in Japan, however, this placement cost researchers key information relative to the elderly informants' status (age being more venerated in Japan than in the United States, broadly speaking), which led to mis-cues in the appropriate phrasing of preceding questions. Moreover, the comparative reliability of these data could be challenged: because of the link between age and status, Japanese answers are more likely to be chronologically accurate (the elderly having no reason to make themselves appear older), whereas Americans are more likely not to respond or to bias their answers toward lower numbers, given the societal value placed on youth.[5] In both cases, survey research missed what was meaningful to policy-relevant publics.

Policy analyses that seek to avoid these sorts of errors and pitfalls require another set of analytic tools, ones based on philosophical presuppositions that put human meaning and social realities at their heart. To understand the consequences of a policy for the broad range of people it will affect **[p. 5 ↓]** requires "local knowledge"—the very mundane, expert understanding of and practical reasoning about local conditions derived from lived experience.[6] Had researchers in either of these examples first sought to understand the values, beliefs, and feelings of informants (about parental aging, about age), and then used that local knowledge in designing the surveys, these problems would likely have been avoided.

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The lack of attention to (at best) or outright devaluing of (at worst) local knowledge has been common in development policies. In the 1970s, for example, policies to remedy drought in a specific region had nomadic tribes-people dig more wells. Policy analysts did not understand that, because of the meaning of livestock to a tribesman's reputation, adding wells would encourage him to increase his herd size, thereby leading to an exacerbation of the problem the policy was intended to resolve.[7] Examples from other policy areas abound. Schmidt (1993) writes of the disastrous collapse of a bridge after site-based engineers' "intimate knowledge" about cement requirements under local conditions was dismissed by policymakers in Washington. In connection with nuclear fallout from Chernobyl and sheep grazing in northern England, Wynne (1992) describes the local, implicit knowledge held by shepherds, which was ignored by experts advising policymakers, with detrimental economic results. Had policymakers understood what busing meant to white parents, they might have pursued differently the policy that led to "white flight," which undermined the policy's purpose (Paris & Reynolds, 1983, pp. 180-181).[8] To acquire such local knowledge, policy analysts need interpretive methods.

Interpretive Presuppositions

Interpretive methods are based on the presupposition that we live in a social world characterized by the possibilities of multiple interpretations. In this world there are no "brute data" whose meaning is beyond dispute. Dispassionate, rigorous science is possible—but not the neutral, objective science stipulated by traditional analytic methods (as represented by the scientific method). As living requires sensemaking, and sensemaking entails interpretation, so too does policy analysis.[9]

Traditional approaches to policy analysis—using the tools of microeconomics, decision analysis, and others—are conducted under the assumptions of positivist-informed science: that it is not only necessary but also actually possible, to make objective, value-free assessments of a policy from a point external to it. When policy language is examined, for example, a comparison is often made between the words of legislation and the projected **[p. 6 ↓]** or implemented actions in the field, under the assumption that policy words can and should have univocal, unambiguous meanings that can and

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should be channeled to and directly apperceived by implementors and policy-relevant publics.

These are not the assumptions of this book. This text assumes, rather, that it is not possible for an analyst to stand outside of the policy issue being studied, free of its values and meanings and of the analyst's own values, beliefs, and feelings. The argument assumes that knowledge is acquired through interpretation, which necessarily is "subjective": it reflects the education, experience, and training, as well as the individual, familial, and communal background, of the "subject" making the analysis. Not only analysts, but all actors in a policy situation (as with other aspects of the social world), interpret issue data as they seek to make sense of the policy. Furthermore, human artifacts and actions, including policy documents, legislation, and implementation, are understood here to be not only instrumentally rational but also expressive—of meaning(s), including at times individual and collective identity.[10]

The conceptual bases for these ideas were developed by the mostly German neo-Kantian (or neo-idealist) philosophers in the late 19th century, the phenomenologists and hermeneutic scholars of the early part of the 20th century, and some of the critical theorists of the mid- and late-20th century. They were largely arguing against, first, the insistence of the late-19th-century empirio-criticists that scientific knowledge about the human, social world could be derived only through the five senses—an approach that separates values from facts, leaves values outside of the realm of scientific analysis, and takes no account of Kant's assertion regarding the role of a priori knowledge in understanding. Second, they argued against the early-20th-century logical positivists' and analytical philosophers' reduction (as the critics saw it) of analytic concern to language and its forms of logic. In brief, phenomenologists understood that something —variously called "mind," "consciousness," a *weltanschauung*, "paradigm," "frame," or "lens"—"filters" sense perceptions and organizes perceived physical stimuli (light or sound waves, sensations of taste, touch, smell) in a process of sensemaking. Prior knowledge —whether derived from education, training, experience, or some other form of personal background—was understood to play a central role in sensemaking. Hermeneuticists argued that human meaning was projected into the full range of human artifacts (language, music, art, literature, architecture, acts and interactions, physical objects, and so on) by their creators, and that these artifacts could be studied to gain

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knowledge of those meanings using the same analytic methods that **[p. 7 ↓]** had been developed to understand biblical texts (the original arena of hermeneutic analysis).[11]

These ideas became increasingly known in the United States when many of their proponents arrived as refugees from the Nazis. Here, their ideas intersected at times with the work of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, contributing to the development of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology.[12] These ideas began to enter the realm of the policy sciences in the 1970s and 1980s, through the work of Murray Edelman, Martin Rein and Donald Schon, John Dryzek, Frank Fischer, Bruce Jennings, David Paris and James Reynolds, Douglas Torgerson, Mary Hawkesworth, and Deborah Stone.[13] Articles published in the pages of the journal *Policy Sciences* during the 1980s and first part of the 1990s were also influential[14]—although, as Torgerson (1985) notes, some of these ideas can be traced to the work of Harold Lasswell. (Certainly, Lasswell and his colleagues were interested in the communication of meaning, although they took their content analysis in a different methodological direction than that used by contemporary interpretive analysts; see Lasswell, Leites, & Associates, 1949; Lasswell, Lerner, & De Sola Pool, 1952.)

This conceptual work was bolstered by parallel developments in the areas of program evaluation and policy implementation, particularly through the work of Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln (1989) and several of the essays in the works of Palumbo and Calista (1987, 1990).[15] At the same time, many policy analytic theorists were influenced by interpretive work from other fields, in particular developments in symbolic anthropology, especially the work of Clifford Geertz (1973, 1983); in the philosophy and history of science, including the arguments of Kuhn (1962), Latour (1987), and Rorty (1979); in literary theory (e.g., Fish, 1980); and in contemporary political philosophy (e.g., Habermas, 1987; Ricoeur, 1971; Taylor, 1971; and others).[16]

By and large, the work to date in interpretive policy analysis has focused on its underlying philosophical positions. Much of it has taken the shape of an argument against the positivist philosophical presuppositions underlying traditional policy analytic approaches, concerning the reality of the social world and our ability to know and understand it. In the traditional view, science and social science are seen as mirroring

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nature and the social world, rather than as constituting human interpretations of those worlds.[17] The interpretive approach is less an argument (in the context of policy analysis, at least) contesting the nature of reality than one about the human possibilities of knowing the world around us and the character of that knowledge.

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Interpretive approaches to policy analysis focus on the meanings that policies have for a broad range of policy-relevant publics, including but not limited to clients and potential clients, legislators, cognate agencies (supportive and contesting), implementors (such as implementing-agency executives, administrators, and staff), and potential voters. Luker (1984), for example, argues that debates about abortion policy are less disagreements about facts than they are contests over the threatened loss of public sanctioning of a set of values, beliefs, and feelings. Her analysis focuses on women arguing and enacting these positions, rather than on policymakers or agency personnel. Interpretive approaches, like hers, explore not only "what" specific policies mean but also "how" they mean—through what processes policy meanings are communicated and who their intended audiences are, as well as what context-specific meanings these and other "readers" make of policy artifacts. In doing so, they consider the acts of legislators and decision makers, and the actions of implementing agencies, to be potentially as central in communicating policy meanings as the enabling legislation itself. In including agency actions, policy analysis draws on ideas from organizational studies (including that aspect of public administration) as much as it does on ideas about policy processes developed within political science.

Interpretive analyses often focus on "puzzles" or "tensions" of two related sorts. The first is the difference between what the analyst expects to find and what she actually experiences in the policy or agency field. The expectations that one brings to a policy analytic project derive from one's prior experience, education, or training. When there is a "mismatch," the ensuing puzzle or tension creates the opportunity to explain why the policy or agency is doing things "differently." The impulse, often, is to assume that the different way is "wrong": "They" don't know how to do things "right." An interpretive approach urges us to treat such differences as different ways of seeing, understanding, and doing, based on different prior experiences. This does not mean that all positions

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are necessarily "right," but it does call on the analyst (if not contending parties) to accord different views and their underlying feelings serious respect. They are not likely to be changed by appeal to facts alone (and coercive change is not an option). If we can uncouple "different" from "wrong," we can, in this view, proceed in another fashion.[18] In analytic projects, the tension between expectations and present experience is a potential source of insight, and should be dwelled on, even cherished, although many analysts might be tempted to resolve the tension immediately. That tension is produced by the juxtaposition of the analyst's "estrangement" from the analytic situation and her growing **[p. 9 ↓]** familiarity with that situation. By prolonging the balance between "stranger-ness" and "insider-ness," the analyst is able to move back and forth between seeing things as they are and seeing them as they are not.

A commonplace example might be school board hearings, in which parents argue based on their remembered experiences as students, whereas teachers and principals argue based on more recent developments in, for example, learning theory. In land use planning issues, city planners have visions of things as they should be based on good design principles, whereas residents foresee a host of problems ensuing from living with the plan's implementation. In both cases, a policy analyst would be far more productive in helping the parties understand the differences underlying one another's positions—that they are situated knowers arguing from different standpoints (rather than attributing stupidity or "blindness" to reality to the opposing side)—than by providing econometric data.

The second sort of puzzlement that can spark interpretive analysis derives from the tension captured in the admonition to "Do as I say, not as I do," invoked so often by parents speaking to their children. Children (and sometimes workplace subordinates) are admonished in this way in the face of the very anticipation that they will do precisely what they see their parents (or superiors) do, rather than following what they are told to do. And, indeed, psychological research (e.g., Rosenhan, Frederick, & Burrowes, 1968) bears this out: when faced with a contradiction between word and deed, we tend to believe that the deed is closer to the truth (or to the individual's intentions) than the word.

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In policy terms, this translates into believing that what implementors do, rather than what the policy "says" in its explicit language, constitutes the "truth" of policy (and thereby the state's) intent. This is one of the points that Lipsky (1979) and his colleagues (Prottas, 1979; Weatherley, 1979) made in analyzing street-level bureaucrats, their agencies, and their clients. Policy analysis, in this view, cannot be restricted to policy language or ideas only as understood and intended by their authors. Others whose understandings of the policy are or will be central to its enactment are also of analytic concern. Interpretive policy analysis explores the contrasts between policy meanings as intended by policymakers —"authored" texts—and the possibly variant and even incommensurable meanings —"constructed" texts— made of them by other policy-relevant groups. Much of policy analysis, especially ex post implementation or evaluation analysis, requires the establishment of policy intent as a benchmark against which to assess enactments or outcomes. This is the sense of the policy as established by its creators—the authored text. But what interpretive analysis leads us to see **[p. 10 ↓]** is that it would be erroneous to assume that this is the only meaning appropriate or relevant for assessment. As implementation problems are often created by different understandings of policy language, it is as important for analysts to access these other interpretations—the local knowledge held by communities of meaning in constructed texts.[19]

Communities of Meaning and Policy Frames: The Architecture of Policy Arguments

Through a process of interaction, members of a community—whether a community of scientists or environmentalists or some other group—come to use the same or similar cognitive mechanisms, engage in the same or similar acts, and use the same or similar language to talk about thought and action. Group processes reinforce these, often promoting internal cohesion as an identity marker with respect to other communities: the familiar "us-them" phenomenon. Although the language of "community" has its roots in a geographic locale—connoting similarities of position deriving from shared property-

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based interests, political views, race-ethnicity, class, religion, or other commonalities —it is borrowed into a policy context with broader reference points, which are not place-specific: "location" within an organizational structure, professional training and membership, sex and gender, and myriad other possible dimensions lead to a set of values, beliefs, and feelings that can bind people together in communities of meaning.[20] Cognitive, linguistic, and cultural practices reinforce each other, to the point at which shared sense is more common than not, and policy-relevant groups become "interpretive communities" sharing thought, speech, practice, and their meanings.[21] Such communities may be fluid, changing from issue to issue (although often with some overlap, e.g., according to positions along a spectrum of political or religious ideology). In Chapter 2 we shall explore how to identify these communities.

The preceding discussion suggests the existence of at least three communities of meaning in any policy situation: policymakers, implementing agency personnel, and affected citizens or clients. But we know from implementation and organizational studies that agencies may contain any number of internal communities of meaning: directors, managers or administrators, groups of professionals, lower-level employees, and street-level bureaucrats.[22] And from community studies we know that communities and neighborhoods have internal divisions. We also know that the issues of policy debate do not die once a piece of legislation has been passed: they survive and resurface in subsequent debates, as well as in implementation actions **[p. 11 ↓]** (Baier, March, & Saetren, 1986; Yanow, 1993). Moreover, there are many other policy-relevant groups —community residents, cognate and competing agencies and professionals, interest groups, potential clients, unheard or silent voices; which ones are of analytic and decision-making concern will depend on the specific policy issue in question—each one of which may interpret the policy differently from legislators' intent (if that can even be established as a single meaning). Rather than assuming, then, that policy problems are objectively "factual" in character and searching for the single correct formulation of a policy statement, policy analysts might take the alternative view that problem statements are contending interpretations of policy issues made by different communities of meaning.[23] This is what Luker (1984) did in analyzing abortion policy debates.

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The central question, then, for interpretive policy analysts is, How is the policy issue being framed by the various parties to the debate? A "frame"— with its metaphoric origins in a picture frame, the photographer's framing of a scene through the viewfinder, the skeletal frame of a house under construction—sets up an interpretive framework within which policy-related artifacts make sense. Whether a hand gesture is seen as a wave or as a cry for help—the driving force of Stevie Smith's poem "Not waving but drowning" (Smith, 1972)—depends on how it is framed. Frames direct attention toward some elements while simultaneously diverting attention from other elements. They highlight and contain at the same time that they exclude. That which is highlighted or included is often that which the framing group values. Frame conflict occurs not only because different interpretive communities focus cognitively and rationally on different elements of a policy issue, but because they value different elements differently. The different frames reflect groups' values contending for public recognition and validation.[24]

Joseph Gusfield's analysis of Temperance, Prohibition, and Repeal (1963) provides an extended example. Prohibitionists, largely native-born, rural, Protestant, and middle class, finding their values under attack from the increasing numbers and public presence of immigrant, urban, Catholic lower classes, used legislative politics to attempt to quiet "the fear that their own abstainer's culture was not really the criterion by which respectability was judged in the dominant areas of the total society" (p. 110). Ratification of the Prohibition amendment was understood as a public affirmation of "dry" norms. The vote for Prohibition represented symbolically the power, prestige, and hence dominance of those norms and the people who practiced them, despite the difficulties of its enforcement. While opponents framed Prohibition as, among other things, an attack on individual liberties, proponents **[p. 12 ↓]** argued for it in an expression of status and identity. Prohibitionists used legislation to make a public identity statement, to themselves as well as to their opposition, that validated one set of meanings—of values, beliefs, and feelings—over another.

Frames are often expressed through language. There is a complex interrelationship among language, cognition (or perception), and action. It is not entirely clear which one shapes (or causes) the other: do we understand (or see) housing as decaying because the concept is available to us, or do we develop the language of decay because we understand housing to be falling apart? Or does that understanding come about

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because we observe and know our bodies to decay?[25] That debate, long-standing in cognitive linguistics, perceptual psychology, and philosophy, will not be resolved here, but it is important for our discussion. Policy frames use language, especially metaphoric language, and in so doing shape perceptions and understandings. Housing policy in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s, for example, encapsulated in the phrase "urban renewal," was framed as protecting residents from housing "decay." The notion of "decay" has its metaphoric source in natural settings—wood decays, teeth decay—and housing policy language drew on common understanding of those metaphoric origins.

Importantly, frames also entail courses of action. We know how we would proceed in the case of tooth decay: We would consult a dentist, a specialist in that field, for treatment. In the case of housing decay, then, we proceed accordingly and consult a "housing doctor," a specialist in urban renewal.[26] Or, in another example from the 1960s and 1970s, "broken homes" were treated in welfare policy in a fashion analogous to broken china: policies were designed to patch them up, to glue the pieces back together. In this instance, there was no frame conflict at that time (although today we treat the same family configuration as "single parent families," a frame that contains no sense of a need for governmental reparative intervention). In the case of housing policy, however, a contending view did emerge shortly after many neighborhoods were bulldozed. "Urban renewal" was seen as rending the "social fabric" that had been "woven" by neighborhood residents and that "bound" them together. Indeed, at least one study tracked the psychological dislocation felt by "slum" residents who were relocated to new public housing (Fried, 1963). Contending frames entail not just different policy discourses—different language, understandings, and perceptions—and potentially different courses of action, but also different values, and different meanings.[27] The role of the interpretive policy analyst is to map the "architecture" of debate relative to the policy issue under investigation, by identifying **[p. 13 ↓]** the language and its entailments (understandings, actions, meanings) used by different interpretive communities in their framing of the issue.[28]

For example, in his analysis of the electromagnetic frequency (EMF) cancer controversy, Stephen Linder (1995) identified five communities of meaning with

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their attendant discourses and expectations of policy intervention (what he calls "construction[s] of a public remedy," p. 213). At the time of his analysis, scientific evidence to support the causal linkage was inconclusive. The five interpretive communities framed the EMF problem as:

Linder identified these five thought-speech-interpretive communities and their respective stances by analyzing the language used by PUCs, state health departments, citizens' groups, and others as it appeared in agency reports, hearings testimony, reportage, opinion pieces, and so on. Each frame entailed not only a construction of the EMF issue but also anticipation of appropriate governmental action. To map the architecture of the EMF debate he needed to access this intimate, local knowledge of their own situations and what was meaningful to them.

Whether we treat "frame" as a noun or as a verb also has implications for the form of our analytic study.[29] "Frame" as a noun suggests a comparative analysis across communities of meaning, at a (relatively) fixed point in time, of the various ways in which a policy issue has been "framed," that is, interpreted and understood. "Frame" as a verb suggests a more dynamic analysis of changes in issue "framing" over time, possibly within a single community of meaning. These two types of study suggest different constituencies: the duration and depth of the latter suggest perhaps a more academic interest in understanding interpretive processes; the former suggests more of an issue focus, whether for academic or policy-making purposes (or both).

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Symbolic Relationships and Tacit Knowledge

An interpretive approach to policy analysis, then, is one that focuses on the meanings of policies, on the values, feelings, or beliefs they express, and on the processes by which those meanings are communicated to and "read" by various audiences. How might a researcher-analyst identify these meanings? Interpretive philosophies, such as phenomenology and hermeneutics, contend that human meanings, values, beliefs,

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and feelings are embodied in and transmitted through artifacts of human creation, such as language, dress, patterns of action and interaction, written texts, or built spaces. In the context of policy analysis, this means focusing on policy or agency artifacts as the concrete symbols representing more abstract policy and organizational meanings.

A symbol is something—usually concrete—that represents something else—usually an abstraction. For example, a dove is a symbol of peace.[30] A symbol is a social convention: a group of people (a state, a society, a tribe, an organization, a community, a workgroup) agree on it as a stand-in for the meaning(s) it conveys. Policy, agency, and community analysis treat public, not private or personal, symbols and their meanings. And these are historically and culturally specific: at another time, in another place, for another group of people, a dove could be dinner or simply a grayish white bird.

Symbols serve to unite those who share their meanings, while setting them apart from other people or groups who do not. Knowing these names, traditions, and other symbols is itself important as a symbol of membership in the nation, community, organization, or group. "Not to know them is not to belong" (Hunter, 1974, p. 67).

Because of this context specificity, a symbol may accommodate several meanings. The home provided by housing policy may represent security, status, shelter, and wealth. Different individuals, reflecting the different groups of which they are members, may interpret the same symbol differently. In the EMF example, Linder (1995) discovered that the artifact that held different meaning for different people was the EMF power lines themselves, as expressed in the language used to talk about them: they represented, symbolically, the presence of technology in a residential area and a range of attitudes toward the meaning of "science" (and technology). The power of symbols lies in their potential to accommodate multiple meanings.[31]

Human artifacts stand in a symbolic (that is, representational) relationship to the meaning(s) they embody or engender. The symbols embody **[p. 15 ↓]** three dimensions of human meaning-making: emotive/aesthetic (pathos), cognitive (logos), and moral (ethos), corresponding to feelings, values, and beliefs (Gagliardi, 1990). They come to be more visible and tangible evidence of the values, beliefs, and feelings

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that a group holds, believes in, and practices. Artifactual symbols include three broad categories of human action: language, objects, and acts. As shown in Figure 1.1, the artifact is the concrete manifestation or expression of the more abstract value, belief, feeling, or meaning.

Figure 1.1 Meanings (values, beliefs, feelings) are embedded in policy artifacts (language, objects, acts) in a symbolic (representational) relationship.
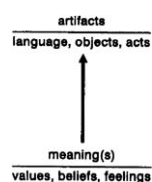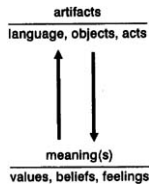

The process of creating, sustaining, and changing artifacts and their meanings is a dynamic one, and so a second arrow needs to be added to the figure, moving from artifact to meaning. Each time we engage, invoke, or use an artifact, we reinforce, maintain, or change its underlying meaning(s) (Figure 1.2).

Meanings, being abstract, are difficult to know about or discover directly. They are hard to "pin down," to make concrete and imageable. In part, this is because values and meanings are often known tacitly, rather than explicitly. We typically do not speak to one another about our values and beliefs in everyday encounters in the post office or on the street (e.g., "Hello, I'm John and I value freedom and individuality"); or if we do, we often present what we think we believe or value, or think we ought to value, or what we would like the other person to perceive as our value, yet these may not be the values we act out. For example, Mary, observing John, may ask him to corroborate or correct her interpretation. But asking John to state his values absent an action context may elicit a story about the values he preaches rather than those he practices, and the two are often different.[32]

[p. 16 ↓]

Figure 1.2 The use of artifacts maintains or changes their underlying meanings.

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Nevertheless, we do know a great deal about what others value and believe: although not spoken of directly, others' values, beliefs, and feelings are tacitly known, and communicated through the artifacts that express them—the objects, language, and acts of everyday life. These have acquired meaning in certain contexts, and members of those contexts share those meanings. We know—because we have learned through socialization and other forms of teaching—how to interpret the meanings of artifactual symbols in their contexts. We communicate, in other words, through "artifactual interaction," our often daily engagement with symbolic language, objects, and acts, interpreting the more concrete symbolic representations (for example, John's clothes, posture, gestures, reported observations, and the like) that embody our and others' values, beliefs, feelings, and meanings. We are able to understand one another without always making meanings explicit, by drawing on tacit knowledge of the symbols' meanings. This is especially true of nonverbal language (posture, dress, gestures, and so on) and built space and its "props" (e.g., landscaping, furnishings, decor).[33] As Polanyi (1966, p. 4) noted with regard to tacit knowledge, we "know much more than we can tell." The consequence of Mary's holding a certain value or belief or feeling in a particular way may be understood by observing her actions and interpreting them, inferring from action to meaning(s). By interpreting such symbols, we strive to understand the meanings they are vested with and their moral (belief), cognitive (value), and affective (feeling) bases. Our understanding may be wrong—we have made an interpretation that is not in keeping with the actor's intent; but in acting on that interpretation, we may discover our error.

[p. 17 ↓]

All language, objects, and acts are potential carriers of meaning, open to interpretation by legislators, implementors, clients or policy "targets," concerned publics, and other stakeholders. At the same time, in their use, they are tools for the re-creation of those meanings and for the creation of new meanings. Through artifactual interaction, we re-

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embody them with meaning at the same time that we use them to communicate those meanings and to create extensions of those meanings.

It is important to emphasize the contextual nature of such knowledge. Although symbolic meanings need not necessarily be "local" meanings in a geographic sense, they are "local" in a policy issue sense. It is also important to note that it is only provisional knowledge, subject to change as circumstances and individuals change or as our (mis)interpretations are corrected.[34] This lack of universality and eternity stands in marked contrast to positivist notions of the certainty of knowledge.

This focus on interpretation of meanings made by actors in policy and agency contexts lies at the heart of an interpretive ontological, epistemo-logical, and methodological stance. In this sense, the methods of interpretive analysis that focus on the ways in which meanings are made and conveyed are, at the same time, the subjects of study. The medium of communication is intimately connected with the message it communicates.[35]

Texts, "Text Analogues," and Interpretive Communities

We complicate the picture further if we consider not only public policies as texts that are interpreted as they are enacted by implementors, but also those enactments themselves as "texts" that are "read" by various stakeholder groups: clients, potential clients, legislators, other agency personnel, other citizens, and, at times, "foreigners" as well. It is helpful here to borrow some concepts from literary theory and criticism, which have long been concerned with how texts convey meaning. Reader-response theory— a literary theory of textual meaning developed since the 1970s—refutes earlier theories that the meaning of a text derives from the text alone (its language, form, or both) or from its author's intentions. Rather, a text's meaning derives also from what the reader brings to it (see, e.g., Iser, 1989). In one view, meaning resides not in any one of these —not exclusively in the author's intent, in the text itself, or in the reader alone—but is, rather, created actively in interactions among all three, in the writing and in the reading.

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In this sense, not only is legislative and other language a text that is interpreted by implementors and others, but those interpretations—in the **[p. 18 ↓]** form of implementing agency language, objects, and acts—themselves become "texts" that are "read" by those actors and others. A text or "text-analogue" (Taylor, 1971; see also Ricoeur, 1971)—that is, act, object, or spoken language treated as text—is interpreted by its "readers"—agency staff, clients, and so forth. But these interpretations prompt or come in the form of responses—acts, language, or objects—which themselves are then treated as texts and interpreted.[36]

Reader-response theory underscores the methodological approach outlined here for exploring where meaning resides, directing the researcher-analyst not to policy language or legislators' intent alone, but to "readers'" interpretations as well. This means that interpretive analysts no longer see or treat clients (for example) as passive "targets" of policy "missiles" (the military metaphor underlying traditional policy analysis), but as active constructors of meaning as they "read" legislative language and agency objects and acts.[37] Implementation difficulties, in this view, may no longer be fixed by repairing ambiguous policy language, because in this view not only is language inherently multivocal—capable of carrying multiple meanings—but clients' and others' interpretations cannot be predetermined or controlled.

Two additional levels of textual interpretation need to be mentioned here, although I will not develop this idea until Chapter 6. First, in producing a report, the analyst is himself engaged in interpretive acts. Whether reporting on observations, on interviews, or on documents, the analyst presents his interpretation of what he has seen, done, heard, and/or read. Second, the reader of this report also interprets. And so we have not only the immediacy of first-level interpretations (made by actors in the situation) and the less proximate characteristic of second-level interpretations (made by the nonparticipating researcher-analyst), but the reader's even more distant third level, as illustrated in Figure 1.3.[38]

What this underscores is that policy analysis cannot be conducted from a position external to what is being studied. Although interpretive analysis uses systematic, rigorous methods, these methods do not lead to universal, objective claims. Much as

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Heisenberg argued in the context of physics that the presence of an observer affects the actions of the observed, here, too, one cannot escape interpreting.[39]

This implies a different role for policy analysts from the traditional production of numerical analyses of policy "facts": clarifying the varying interpretations of policy meanings made by different groups, as well as understanding the various elements through which these meanings are communicated. Some interpretive analysts would also add a third role: ensuring that underrepresented groups are enabled to make their interpretations **[p. 19 ↓]** heard. This last position argues for interpretive policy analysis as a more democratic mode (see, for example, Schneider and Ingram, 1993, and the essays in Fischer and Forester, 1993) than traditional policy analysis, which rests on the technocratic expertise of its practitioners.[40] This is not the traditional view of a policy process as a legislative (or even institutional) agenda controlled solely by public decision makers determining the course of future policies. Interpretive analysts develop and practice an expertise in the methodical processes of accessing local knowledge and mapping the architecture of policy debates, but they treat policy, agency, and community members—the actors in the situation—as the substantive experts of their own domains. Interpretive policy analysts, in this view, put their skills to the service of many groups, not just elected officials. Out of this conversation among multiple voices, perhaps (and ideally) the interpretive analyst can help generate new ideas for policy action—possibly by synthesizing opposing arguments or reframing the debate at another level (Roe, 1994)—rather than merely advising on the choice of one existing proposal over the others.

Figure 1.3 Sensemaking and levels of interpretation.
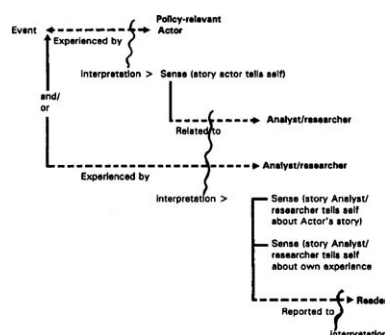
[p. 20 ↓]

Steps to an Interpretive Policy Analysis: Mapping Issue Architecture

Because of the abstract, less accessible, and less observable nature of meanings, interpretive research proceeds from an identification and analysis of the more concrete, more observable, and more accessible artifacts which embody the more abstract meanings. The first two steps in interpretive policy analysis are to identify the artifacts that are significant carriers of meaning for the interpretive communities relative to a given policy issue, and to identify those communities relevant to the policy issue that create or interpret these artifacts and meanings. Conceptually, either of these can precede the other; each leads to the other. In practice, both are conducted at the same time, weaving back and forth between artifact and interpretive community. Informed by the assumption that we live in a world of multiple possible interpretations, the analyst needs to explore the existence of different interpretations of each artifact (thereby leading to different interpretive communities) or the existence of different interpretive communities (some of which may find meaning in different artifacts).

The third step conceptually, but also conducted in the process of the first two, is to identify the communities' "discourses": how they talk and act with respect to the policy issue. The goal of this step is to be able to say something about the meanings—the values, beliefs, feelings—that are important to each policy-relevant community, as well as to extend the analysis of the artifacts. Since these meanings are largely known tacitly, and are therefore hard to access directly, it is necessary to identify the artifacts —the language, objects, and acts—in which they are embedded, and which represent them in a symbolic fashion (as diagrammed in Figure 1.1).

But since we are speaking of interpretive communities that may find different meanings in the same policy artifacts, this diagram needs modification, as shown in Figure 1.4.

The third step, then, is to identify the various meanings carried by specific artifacts for those different interpretive communities. In the fourth step the analyst identifies the meanings that are in conflict between or among groups and their conceptual sources.

Although a researcher might stop at this point, this is where intervention begins. What that intervention might look like will depend on the specific context of analysis, including the particular policy and the role of the analyst. A policy analyst advising a policymaker might take the next step of showing the policymaker the implications of the different and conflicting meanings for the implementation of the proposed policy. Is implementation **[p. 21 ↓]** likely to founder because one or another group will not "buy in" to the proposed program, because of what that program means to that group? A policy analyst advising community groups or agencies might show that the differences of opinion between them and other groups or agencies derive from different experiences, backgrounds, and so forth, and that these represent different ways of seeing rather than groundless obstinacy or any of the other myriad ways people have of dismissing opposing views. Pal (1995), for example, shows how policy analysts can play a role in helping members of contending interpretive communities "understand that they have epistemological and ethical differences, not merely differences over priorities" (p. 202), which shape as well as derive from their access to and treatment of local knowledge.[41]

Figure 1.4 Symbolic artifacts accommodate multiple meanings.

The last step analytic practice might take could be in the form of negotiation or mediation, in which conflicting interpretations would be identified and explained as such.

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It is an educative process that takes as its goal the fostering of discussion honoring the reality of entrenched viewpoints, **[p. 22 ↓]** while nonetheless seeking engaged discourse and debate among policy-relevant publics. The role of the analyst may be to guide the policymaker's choice of one of the existing options. But she may also play a role in enabling the reframing of those options or the policy question itself, thereby leading to a new understanding among contesting parties that points to new avenues for action.[42]

	Interventions/Actions	

Note: Steps 1 and 2 lead to each other; 1, 2, and 3 are typically done at the same time.

These steps are summarized in Table 1.1.

The distinctions among these steps are conceptual. In practice they are often intertwined: analysis proceeds by tacking back and forth among them.

Similarly, while I treat the three broad categories of artifacts—language, objects, and acts—as distinct analytic lenses, in practice there is overlap among them: each often entails the use of the others. Each category allows an analytic focus that shifts or disappears when looking through another lens, however; so for the sake of analytical clarity I will treat them separately to organize the data analysis methods presented in Chapters 3 through 5.

Summary

Interpretive policy analysis:

[p. 23 ↓]

NOTES

1. See, e.g., the discussion in Fischer (1990).

2. Fischer (1995, p. 3) notes the semantic confusion in the policy literature concerning the terms "policy analysis," "policy science," and "policy evaluation." I follow his lead here in treating these as synonyms for the practice of social scientific analytic activities applied to the domain of public policies. In this sense, as he notes, evaluation research is but one of the methods used in policy analysis. For a succinct history of the development of policy analysis as a field of study and practice, see Heineman et al. (1990), chap. 1.

3. John Van Maanen has drawn my attention to Hammersley's (1993) argument that the potential influence of the two is different: in-house reports potentially have more direct consequences, whereas academic papers are directed more toward theoretical development and hence are often more historical than contemporary. The matter of the usage and practical impact of policy analyses has been a central issue in the field, and this argument joins other explanations of why analytic reports have often not been taken up by policymakers. See, e.g., Lindblom and Cohen (1979) on this point.

4. Latour (1987) provides an extended description of this process in the context of laboratory science; it holds for a wide variety of academic-based practices.

5. This example is based on a discussion of functional and conceptual equivalence in Peng, Peterson, and Shui (1991, p. 101).

6. "Local knowledge" is also the title of a collection of essays by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983). "Practical reasoning" is a term associated with the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*; see Hawkesworth (1988, pp. 54-57) and Ruderman (1997) for discussions of this concept and some of its contemporary exponents.

[p. 24 ↓]

7. Thurston Clarke, *The last caravan*, New York: Putnam, 1978; cited in Paris and Reynolds (1983, p. 199, n. 9).

8. See also Chock (1995), Colebatch (1995), Hofmann (1995), Linder (1995), and Pal (1995) for other examples of the importance and use of local knowledge in a policy context.

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9. This is not a call, in other words, for more interpretation on the part of policy analysts. As Feldman (1988) has noted, "interpretation is already … and … necessarily happening" (p. 146). It is, however, a call for recognition of that fact in the academy, in its courses, its textbooks, and its research.

10. For an excellent statement and critique of the assumptions of a policy analysis informed by positivist philosophy, see Hawkesworth (1988). See also Paris and Reynolds (1983), especially chapters 1 and 6, which include a critical view of the shortcomings of one form of interpretive analysis. For a critique grounded less in philosophical underpinnings and more in traditional policy analytic practices, see Stone (1988). For discussions that link the philosophical background to methodological concerns, see Bulmer (1986) and Polkinghorne (1983).

11. For background on these thinkers and their ideas, see, e.g., Berger and Luckmann (1966), Bernstein (1976), Burrell and Morgan (1979), Dallmayr and McCarthy (1977), Fay (1975), Filmer et al. (1972), Polkinghorne (1983), and Rabinow and Sullivan (1979). See also Schutz (1962). For philosophical sources of a post-positivist or interpretive approach to policy analysis, including one based on critical theory, see Ascher (1987), Brunner (1982), Dryzek (1982), Fischer (1980), Hawkesworth (1988), Healy (1986), Jennings (1983, 1987), Maynard-Moody and Stull (1987), Paris and Reynolds (1983, especially chaps. 1 and 6), Torgerson (1986b), and Yanow (1996b, chap. 1).

12. On symbolic interactionism, see Charon (1985). On ethnomethodology, see Garfinkel (1977).

13. See Edelman (1964, 1971, 1977), Rein (1976, 1983a), Schon (1979; Rein and Schon, 1977; Schon and Rein, 1994), Fischer (1980), Dryzek (1982), Jennings (1983, 1987), Paris and Reynolds (1983), Torgerson (1985, 1986a, 1986b), Hawkesworth (1988), and Stone (1988).

14. See, e.g., Ascher (1987), Brunner (1982, 1987), Healy (1986), and Yanow (1993, 1995a).

15. See especially the essays in both Palumbo and Calista volumes by Fox, Linder and Peters, Nakamura, and Yanow, and by Ferman in the 1990 edition.

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16. There have been parallel developments in interpretive sociology (among them Gusfield [1963, 1981] and Luker [1984]) and in history (e.g., Davis [1983] and Darnton [1984]). And in economics, McCloskey's work (1985) on rhetoric follows similar paths, as does Bruner's (1990) in psychology. The scope of this intellectual ferment is so broad that I can only point the interested reader to some of the works in these different fields. There are many more that could equally well have been mentioned.

17. The notion of science as a "mirror of nature" comes from Rorty (1979).

18. See Minow (1990) on different ways of treating "difference." See also Roe (1994) on treating entrenched differences seriously and according them respect, and Bernstein (1983) on the question of relativism.

19. I am bypassing here the critical question of whether intent can even be established, as well as the point that policy language often contains elements of prior debates, such that more than one intent may be embedded there. See Baier et al. (1986) and Yanow (1993). This line of reasoning parallels that of "original intent" arguments with respect **[p. 25 ↓]** to the Constitution and the Founding Fathers, engaged publicly around the nomination of Judge Robert Bork to the Supreme Court. See Teuber (1987).

20. And individuals may, and do, belong to multiple interpretive communities. This approach reflects the two senses of "paradigm" described by Kuhn (1962): it is both a worldview and the community of practitioners sharing and articulating that view. Members acquire it through education and training, experience, and practice of their trade, profession, or craft, as well as from familial, communal, and societal or national backgrounds and personality. This also reflects a phenomenological approach (see, e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966, Part II; Schutz, 1962).

21. Incorporating thought and speech and practice perhaps accounts for the duality present in Kuhn's (1962) use of paradigm and in some accounts of the hermeneutic circle: both refer to the worldview articulated by members as well as to the community that articulates that view. See Lave and Wenger (1991) on communities of practice.

22. See Raelin (1986) and Lipsky (1979).

23. See, e.g., Dery (1987) on the facticity of policy "facts."

24. The use of "frame" in such a cognitive sense seems to have originated with Bateson (1955). For applications to a policy context, see Rein and Schon (1977) and Schon and Rein (1994). See also Goffman (1974) for a more general social scientific application.

25. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests that concepts derive from experience. For example, if we did not have the erect, vertical bodies we do and did not consider our brains to be the driving force that we think they are, we might put the "heads" of our corporations (note the Latin root, *corpus*, meaning "body") other than on the top floor at headquarters (body language again)—as, indeed, people in other cultures, such as Ghana and India, have done. See Lakoff and Johnson (1980) on the relationship between orientation metaphors and bodily experience. Cicourel (1964, pp. 34-38) discusses the methodological implications of Sapir-Whorf.

26. Schon (1979) discusses housing decay as a metaphor of disease and health.

27. See, e.g., Rein (1976, 1983b) on values and policy analysis.

28. Pal (1995, p. 202) also talks about mapping the architecture of policy arguments, as we shall see more extensively in Chapter 2.

29. I am indebted to Ralph Brower for articulating this distinction.

30. The following discussion is taken from Yanow (1996b, chap. 1).

31. Langer (1957) distinguishes between "sign" and "symbol." In her view a sign— e.g., a traffic light, a stop sign—is task- or action-oriented. Both are representative; but a sign is more immediately instrumental (p. 63). Although this precise distinction is not universally accepted across philosophy, semiotics, and anthropology, it does point to something of the conceptual range of symbology.

32. Vickers (1973) and others have noted this sort of discrepancy. Again, the admonition "Do as I say, not as I do" echoes this distinction. Argyris and Schon (1974) refer to it as the difference between one's "espoused" theory (what I say) and one's "theory in use" (what I do).

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33. See, e.g., Goffman's (1979) wonderful treatment of the language of advertising in the communication of gender meanings, the work of Hall (1959, 1966) on time and space, and Appleyard (1981) and Lynch (1960, 1972) on the vocabulary of street design.

34. This is one understanding of the process described by the "hermeneutic circle": that we begin with one provisional interpretation and then correct it as we learn more.

35. This, of course, was Marshall McLuhan's notion (1964). Edelman (1995) explores such interconnections in the realm of art and politics. **[p. 26 ↓]** The stance outlined here is represented in some of the work in organizational culture (e.g., Gagliardi, 1990; Turner, 1990). Schein (1985) presents organizational culture as a layering of artifacts, values, and assumptions (p. 14), without noting their representational relationship and the necessity of artifacts for the communication of culture. Deal and Kennedy (1982), by contrast, appear to emphasize only the artifactual component of organizational culture. My argument here is that artifacts are a necessary but not sufficient component of culture. They are linked as embodiments or symbolic representations to their meanings (values, beliefs, feelings). This is a mutually reinforcing and re-creating relationship, carried out through our daily interaction with the artifacts of our creation. But see Hatch (1993) for a different interpretive approach in the context of organizational culture.

36. The reference in the preceding paragraph to Iser is unintentionally ironic, because he argues there, in response to Stanley Fish, that it is inappropriate to extend the metaphor of text analysis to acts—a view not shared by Ricoeur, Taylor, or, apparently, Fish.

37. The extension of Program, Planning, and Budgetary Systems (PPBS) from the U.S. Department of Defense to various social policy arenas brought the language of target groups, delivery systems, and policy impacts to the realm of housing, health, education, and welfare. Much of the language of policy analysis is marked by this military metaphor—seeing clients as "targets," for instance—brought and introduced, perhaps, by Robert McNamara when he moved from the Department of Defense to the Ford Foundation, along with the PPBS that he brought with him. DeHaven-Smith (1988) has also noted the imagery of social policies as missiles. Criticisms of PPBS recapitulate the inter-pretivists' argument that the social world needs a science based

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on attributes of humans, rather than one based on the natural and physical worlds of trees and falling objects (whether apples or missiles).

38. Schutz (1967) referred to the first two dimensions as first and second order interpretations; Geertz (1983, p. 57) calls them experience-near and experience-distant. Van Maanen (1995, pp. 5-23) discusses the three "moments" of ethnography: collecting information, constructing a report, and its reading by several audiences.

39. See Hubbard (1989, p. 127) for an argument about the applicability of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle to social science.

40. Lather (1986) makes a similar argument, although not limited to policy analysis.

41. Pal refers to this as "localized information" (p. 203), specifically with respect to human rights abuses, his case example.

42. This is, in brief, the implication of the work of Schon and Rein (1994) and Roe (1994), as well as of essayists in Fischer and Forester (1993). I thank Michel van Eeten for this clarification.

43. See note 6.

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