

# **Policy learning and policy failure: definitions, dimensions and intersections<sup>i</sup>**

**Claire A. Dunlop, University of Exeter**

Dunlop, C.A. (2020) 'Policy Learning and Policy Failure: Definitions, Dimensions and Intersections' in Dunlop, C.A. (ed) *Policy Learning and Policy Failure* Bristol: Policy Press.

**Abstract** Policy failures present a valuable opportunity for policy learning, but public officials often fail to learn valuable lessons from these experiences. The studies in this volume investigate this broken link. This introduction defines policy learning and failure, and then organises the main studies in these fields along the key dimensions of: processes, products and analytical levels. We continue with an overview of the special issue articles, outlining where they sit in the wider literature and how they link learning and failure. We conclude sketching a research agenda linking policy scholars with policy practice.

**Keywords** policy failure, policy learning, policy success, policy transfer

## **Introduction**

The social security system in the UK has long been regarded as overly bureaucratic and too complex for either bureaucrats or claimants to entirely understand. In 2010, the Conservative-led coalition government unveiled Universal Credit (UC) as the answer to this historic policy problem. An ambitious plan to merge six in-and out-of-work benefits, UC aims to ensure not only a simpler system but also that all work pay more than being on the dole. Entailing a huge administrative challenge, the implementation of UC has been dogged by problems from the outset; with costs spiralling and the timetable slipping, the policy was effectively 'reset' in 2013 and political pressure to abandon it mounted in the months that followed. Yet, 2013 proved to be a turning point. Looking into the precipice of the failure of a flagship reform, policymakers engaged in policy learning. Alongwith analysing the technical problems and capacity deficits they faced, civil servants learned from previous experiences of implementing complex policies and from similar problems in social security reform in Australia. Appointing senior trouble-shooters responsible for getting the programme on track and engaging a recovery

team – Major Projects Authority (MPA) – the UC has been turned around and rolled out (see Timmins 2016 for a full account).

As we can see, policy failures present a valuable opportunity for policy learning, but the case of UC is exceptional as this potential has been largely overlooked by both practitioners and researchers. Although the likelihood of policy failure is at least as high as policy success, the existing literature has focused disproportionately on the latter. Compared to the large volume of publications on ‘good practices’ and ‘best practices’, far less scholarly attention has been paid to ‘bad practices’ or ‘worst practices’ despite their widespread prevalence. As a result, public officials have failed to learn valuable lessons from these experiences. Certainly, we would not dispute that policy learning is difficult especially in situations underpinned by ambiguity (March and Olsen, 1975). But, studies of policy failure are marked by how rarely failure is averted or followed by learning (Bovens and ‘t Hart, 2016: 662; Moran, 2001). The studies in this volume stand as testament to this broken link.

Both policy learning and policy failure are classic topics in policy studies. The analysis of learning was central to the post-war beginnings of policy analysis and management science (notably, Deutsch, 1966; Hecllo, 1974; Lindblom, 1959, 1965; and Simon 1947). Analysis of policy failures (or fiascos, blunders, disasters, anomalies) came a little later in part a result of the advent of policy evaluation in the 1970s – (for example, Bovens and ‘t Hart, 1996; Dunleavy, 1995; Gray, 1996; Hall, 1981, 1993; Ingram, 1980; Moran, 2001; and Wolf, 1979). This interest has been sustained. There have been four journal special issues on policy learning since 2009 – two on learning and transfer (Dolowitz, 2009; Evans, 2009), a third on learning at the organisational level (Zito and Schout, 2009) and, most recently, a collection of articles exploring learning and policy change (Moyson, Scholten and Weible, forthcoming). Policy failure too has been the subject of intellectual energy with two recent special issues – one on the persistence of policy failures (Howlett, Ramesh and Wu, 2015) and the other foreign policy failures (Bovens and ‘t Hart, 2016) – and several book-length treatments (Birkland, 2006; Crewe and King, 2013; Schuck, 2014).

The links between the two literatures appear obvious, yet there are very few studies that address how we can: learn from failure, learn to limit failure and fail to learn. This collection offers a rare attempt to bring these two literatures together. We start by defining policy learning and failure before organising the main studies in these fields along the key dimensions of processes, products and analytical levels. The intention here is three-fold, to: provide a manageable review

of the literatures, highlight key intersections between learning and failure, and give voice to some of the questions implied by their linkages. We continue with an overview of the special issue articles, outlining where they sit in the wider literature and how they link learning and failure. We conclude by sketching a research agenda linking policy scholars with policy practice.

## **Policy learning and policy failure: organising the literatures**

### ***Defining learning and failure***

To understand learning and failure – both as independent and linked phenomena – we need to work from some agreed definitions. At first blush, this appears to be a tricky task; policy learning and failure are each conceived in very different ways by different scholars. In one view, both learning and failure have an ‘eye of the beholder’ quality – learning can be hard to perceive and demonstrate (Radaelli, 2009), and failure is often treated as similarly elusive, as something that is framed and made rather than existing in its own right (Edelman, 1964; Bovens and ‘t Hart, 2015, 2016; Zittoun, 2015). This view, that learning and failure can never be treated neutrally, is not simply a reflection that politics matters (though it does, of course), it is also in part the result of the common currency they have in life in general; we have all experienced both learning and failure. Another perspective views both phenomena as technical and so, eminently, accessible. We can generate metrics to demonstrate changes in our understandings and beliefs (Zafonte and Sabatier, 1998) and policy outcomes (Wolman, 1981). Yet another perspective treats policy learning and failure as highly complex and difficult to analyse in any systematic way (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973). These different perspectives reflect the multi-disciplinary nature of these phenomena – education studies, management sciences, psychology, sociology, political science all claim ownership of learning and failure. Policy scholars have a huge range of analytical toolkits on which to draw and, as a result, we lack any grand theories of either concept. Yet, surprisingly, this analytical eclecticism has not resulted in definitional confusion on the fundamentals. Literature reviews reveal that even those authors working in different disciplines, and with contrasting ontologies and epistemologies, alight from similar basic understandings of these phenomena. A recent review of policy learning in the social sciences identifies a minimal definition where learning is: ‘the updating of beliefs based on lived or witnessed experiences, analysis or social interaction’ (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013: 599). Recent policy failure studies have achieved a similarly broad view; a policy fails

‘even if it is successful in some minimal respects, if it does not fundamentally achieve the goals that proponents set out to achieve, and opposition is great and / or support is virtually non-existent’ (McConnell, 2015: 221). Working out from this common ground, scholars bolt-on their own analytical specifications in these key dimensions: processes, products and analytical levels.

### ***Learning and failure processes***

The process of policy learning concerns how we identify learning and in particular addresses questions of intentionality, depth of learning, and measurement; to what extent is learning planned, how far does it go and how can we measure it? For some, learning as updating is intentional; a deliberate moment to pause and draw lessons (Hall, 1993; Rose, 1991). Such opportunities are often created by the recognition that things have not gone according to plan. Yet, other analysts treat learning as more evolutionary and organic (Hecl, 1974). Here, updates in beliefs are non-linear and the logic is one of enlightenment as opposed to instrumental responses (Weiss, 1977). Learning can be a drawn out process where failure events or new evidence may need to build over time. For others still, learning can be unintended (Liberatore, 1999). Regardless of how it happens, learning is distinguished in terms of depth. Management theorists Argyris and Schön (1978) famously note the difference between ‘single-’ and ‘double-loop’ learning where the policy tool change of the former is more common than the deeper level learning associated with the alteration of political objectives assumed in the latter. Variations of this theme of depth pervade the learning literature (for example, Dolowitz [2009] on ‘hard’ and ‘soft’; Hall on paradigmatic change [1993]; Levy [1994] on ‘simple’ and ‘complex’; and Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith [1993] on policy-oriented learning). The final aspect of learning processes concerns measurement. How do we know that learning has taken place? A range of methods are used to analyse policy learning, ranging from qualitative data analysis (process-tracing and elite interviews – for example, Dunlop and Radaelli, 2016), or quantitative data analysis (for example, Moyson, forthcoming), or panel studies (for example, Witting and Moyson, 2015). Yet, we know far less about the specification of what is actually being operationalised and measured (though see Leach et al, 2014). Here, we have the curious phenomenon of measurement based on unclear and often unspecified criteria.

Now we turn failure and consider: its origins, depth and measurement challenges. As with policy learning, we can distinguish policy failures that have been willed in some way – most

obviously, policies that are allowed to fail or are malevolent (see Newman and Bird, 2017; on state crimes and elite political corruption see De Haven-Smith, 2006) – from those that are accidental and often unanticipated (Howlett, 2012). The majority of the literature focusses on the second. Turning to the depth of failure, again, Howlett pushes analysts to think clearly by examining the salience (intensity) and magnitude (extent and duration) of policy failure (2012: table 2, 544). Judgements about intensity concern metrics of visibility and coverage – is the failure high profile or dramatic in its effects? Extent and duration address the range and scope of the failure – has its impact been felt widely, by high status groups, over a long period? On measurement, policy failure has the opposite problem to that found in learning studies. What is being measured is well scoped-out in studies but the methods are limited to qualitative accounts. For example, Bovens and ‘t Hart (1996) use evaluation to distinguish between two logics of failure measurement – programmatic and political. The former is the world of facts where failures are declared on the basis of metrics – cost-benefit analysis (CBA), the comparison of objectives and outcomes etc. By contrast, political measurement logics are value-driven – impressions, experiences, incentives and stories all come into play. Policies which fair badly by both logics are the deepest failure type (Bovens and ‘t Hart, 2006: table 1, 657).

### ***Learning and failure products***

Yet, the processes that underpin policy learning and failure are often left undefined, with analysts preferring to focus on the type of phenomena being produced. The literature tends to focus on products in terms of policy preferences; policy learning has been described as the: lessons drawn about policy instruments (instrumental learning), societal construction of policy problems (social learning), or feasibility of policy objectives (political learning) (May, 1992; see also Bennett and Howlett, 1992). Some theorists have taken us beyond the realm of policy design preferences, for example, into the world of institution building and social identities (Checkel, 2001).

There has been a good deal of lively discussion about how to categorise policy failures (and successes) (Bovens, 2010; Bovens and ‘t Hart, 2016; Marsh and McConnell, 2010). One of the most widely used is McConnell’s (2010, 2015) three-fold categorization where failure is the result of: technical and substantive deficiencies that prevent goals being reached (programme

failure), or an inability to negotiate the policy process and translate an idea into reality (process failure), or partisan distortion of the policy (political failure).

### ***Analytical levels of learning and failure – micro, meso and macro***

Finally, we have the specification of analytical levels where analysts explore the relationships between processes and products. This concerns questions of who is learning or failing, and in what political arenas. Scholars examine this in relation to the familiar micro-, meso- and macro-levels, where learning or failure may be the *driver* (i.e. independent variable) or *subject* of change (dependent variable).

#### *(1) Learning and failure at the micro-level and their interactions*

Micro-level studies are concerned with the micro-foundations of human action. Drawing on economics, behavioural sciences and social psychology learning studies at this level zoom-in on models of the mind, emotions and rationality and how individuals' learning is mediated by heuristics, persuasion, identity and evidence (see for example Denzau and North, 1994; Deutsch, 1966; Kahneman, 2011, Simon, 1947). While we know a good deal about what conditions individual policy actors' learning, we know far less about its inverse – the policy impact of an individual's learning capacity.

Micro-level analyses are well-represented in the failure literature. Attention is focussed mainly on the impact of individuals on policy failure (less is known about the inverse). Again, scholars draw on behavioural psychology explaining policy failure in terms of human cognition – for example, over-reliance on analogies as evidence (Khong, 1992), personality traits (Brummer, 2016), inaccurate risk calculations (Owen, 2012), or poor leadership (Bovens and 't Hart, 1996).

These micro-level concerns of learning and failure intersect in two ways. First comes the effects of policy failure on individuals' ability to learn. For example, a recent study uses models of contingent learning from economics to explore how surprise failure – in this case the Euro-crisis – forced immediate responses from policy-makers which ultimately, over time, has resulted in a learning dividend for those actors (Kamkhaji and Radaelli, 2016). Second, we consider how an individual's learning capacity impacts on policy failure. Whether a better equipped learner prevent or mitigate failure in ways another cannot has received little attention

so far yet this concern dovetails with the leadership literature which could usefully explore the impact of leadership training on failure situations.

*(2) Learning and failure at the meso-level and their interactions*

Next comes the meso-level; the realm of group interactions in policy-making. Like most policy theories, the mid-range is the home of the bulk of policy learning and failure analyses. Learning in group settings is addressed in two main ways. First comes learning as the causal mechanism, where updates in beliefs drive change through, for example, the policy debates of advocacy coalitions (policy-oriented learning, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) or highly specialised lessons provided by epistemic communities in situations of uncertainty or think tanks in areas of complexity (Haas, 1992; Stone, 2005).

The governance literature has also rediscovered learning in recent years exploring the other side of the relationship – how organizational properties regulate learning and influence what lessons are adopted. For example, this concerns reform processes that lead to experiential learning (Olsen and Peters, 1996); delegation systems open enough to update themselves (Dunlop and James, 2007; Waterman and Meier, 1998); socialization processes that drive learning in organisations (Checkel, 2005); experimental institutions (Gerstenberg and Sabel, 2002); technocratic governance regimes (Demortain, 2011); and, models of mutual adjustment (Elgström and Jönsson, 2000).

Only one side of policy failure at the meso-level is well-studied. Though, we know little about the impact of failure on groups and institutional processes, in contrast, much attention focuses on failure as the dependent variable where studies examine the collective processes that mediate the likelihood and form of failure. Janis's (1972) famous groupthink study in foreign policy blazed the trail. In this case the close-knit, secretive nature of collective interactions sowed the seeds of policy failure. In political economy, the asymmetrical power of well-resourced groups is the ubiquitous explanation for policy (and economic) failure (Rodrik, 2014). There is also a growing literature associating failure with group activities at particularly complex stages of the policy process where the range of actors' interpretations result in friction, contestation and unintended consequences – most obviously implementation (Kerr, 1976; May, 2015; Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; Schuck, 2014; for a wider account of failure and policy stages see Howlett, Ramesh and Perl, 2009). Finally, we have bureaucratic analyses that link policy failures to weaknesses in institutional resources and turf wars (Gabriel, 1986; Peters, 2015; Vaughan, 1996).

Thinking about intersections at the meso-level, we can first consider the impact of learning processes on failure. Here, we tap into recent work exploring the idea of dysfunctional learning (Dunlop, 2014: 216, table 2; Dunlop and Radaelli, 2016). The proposition is that learning may not always be a good thing. In their account of policy failures in the Eurozone, Dunlop and Radaelli outline this disruptive potential and the fragility of learning between Member States and EU institutions (see 2016: 111, 117-219).

How can the failure of groups or collective processes mediate policy learning? We have established there is a dearth of knowledge about failure as an independent variable and much of what we do know is negative. Policy failures in implementation processes and of the technical programme variety rarely trigger learning processes at all (Moran, 2001). The same can be said of fiascos linked to a party or government that are often repeated by their rivals or replacements (Howlett, Ramesh and Wu, 2015). Even where there is policy evaluation or inquiries such collective processes are no guarantee that lessons will follow and be applied in future.

### *(3) Learning and failure at the macro-level and their interactions*

Finally, we have analysis that aggregates to the macro-level. Here, we enter the world of institutional analyses that explore learning and failure dynamics embedded in policy histories, cultural identities and society-wide memories. Learning studies at the macro-level are less numerous than those of the mid-range. Developing wide-ranging state or sector narratives requires highly specialised methodological skills – notably, the ability to marshal large amounts of (historical) data to produce precision process tracing. While institutional analyses are fewer in number, they pack an analytical punch. Many of the examples of state-centred learning analysis can be considered modern classics. Most obviously, we can point to Peter Hall's (1993) seminal work on economic policy-making in Britain where social learning lies at the heart of a paradigmatic policy break from Keynesianism. Such third order changes are macro-level earthquakes, momentous 'strategic moments' in state development (Hay, 2001: 202), whose reverberations are felt across society, its citizens, institutions, cultural practices and history.

What is the impact of macro-level variables on learning? Do certain types of societies have a greater or lesser disposition to learn than others? In another modern classic of comparative politics, in his analysis of Italy, Robert Putnam (1993) demonstrates that cultural rules impact on learning in stable and continuous ways over long periods. Distrust of state institutions and

attachment to alternative familial institutions in the south resulted in the reduced capacity for social learning.

What of policy failure at the macro-level? Again, our knowledge of this level is somewhat lopsided. And, again, it is failure as an independent variable where knowledge is limited; we know little about the impact of policy failures in societies as a whole. Elmore (1987) argues that failure at the system level presents the opportunity for learning. This seems self-evident, we need to go further and provide empirical analysis. Attention has focussed on its inverse – how societies mediate and regulate failure. One sizeable body of work concerns state corruption and the impact of cultural values and historical experiences on failure. For example, Rothberg's (2003) wide-ranging study explores the inherent instability of newly independent nation states (whose numbers have nearly trebled since the end of World War Two) and the impact of weak economic structures and social conflict on policy outcomes. In policy studies, a recent study of healthcare in India traces the failure to develop state policy capacity back to the historically rooted and sustained dominance of the private sector (Bali and Ramesh, 2015).

Turning to the intersections of policy learning and failure, we first consider the impact of policy failure at the macro-level on policy learning. While in commercial innovations, system-level failure is famously vaunted as an opportunity for rebirth and rethinking (Schumpeter's [1942] famous 'creative destruction'), societies that experience fundamental failures may run from its embrace. The West's response to the recent banking crisis provides a case in point. Here 'too big to fail' arguably became the cognitive order of the day. Society-wide failure of large parts of the financial systems of major economies became reframed as a problem of public sector profligacy (Blyth, 2013). One of the many effects of this was to dilute the power of the lessons that were drawn. This example raises some fundamental issues of power and blame avoidance that recur in policy failure studies (Balla et al, 2002; Newman and Head, 2015).

The risk here is that societies learn the wrong lessons from failure, lessons that then go on to impact on future macro-level failures. The circular potential of learning and failure has been brilliantly worked through in a recent analysis of European integration and the failure of the Eurozone (Jones, Kelemen and Meunier, 2015). Incomplete learning in the 1990s and early 2000s resulted in a weak governance architecture which unleashed the forces that took the Eurozone into deep crisis. This failure was met with a sequence of partial reform, again underpinned by shallow learning, followed by failure. Paradoxically this sustained cycle of

incomplete reform followed by crisis has resulted in further integratory pressures – leaving the EU project ‘failing forward’ (Jones, Kelemen and Meunier, 2015).

### **This issue: understanding the link between policy learning and policy failure**

Collectively, the articles in this issue demonstrate that effective research of the intersection between policy learning and policy failure requires clarity about the nature of our conceptual choices. Empirically, they confirm the difficulty of learning in a range of policy settings and of applying lessons to ameliorate failure. Yet, despite the range of challenges, an overarching theme is that the potential to learn from policy failure remains strong, and the consequence of failing to learn make further research in this area important.

Claire Dunlop (2017) begins the special issue with an exploration of how dysfunctional forms of policy learning impact policy failure at the meso-level. Using the long-running policy failure of the management of bovine tuberculosis (BTB) in England, analysis focusses on negative lessons generated by the interactions of an epistemic community of scientific experts and civil servants charged with balancing the competing interest actors to craft a workable policy. Two ideas are of note for the learning and failure literatures. First, by introducing the idea of dysfunctional or degenerate learning, Dunlop reminds us that learning is not always a ‘good thing’. The article conceptualises learning degenerations as structured into the management of scientific advisors on BTB. Offering a transferable analytical framework linking learning and organisational capacity to failure allows for more prescriptive thinking about how organisational capacity can be generated to encourage the functional learning required to avoid or correct failures.

In her article, Sarah Giest (2017) explores the impact of different types of learning on the success and failure of the transfer of the famous Silicon Valley Model (SVM) of innovation. Working with the idea of ‘adaptive learning’, this contribution underlines the importance of understanding the learning process, and critically, the depth of learning that underpins policy transfer. Giest uses four cases to demonstrate how different learning processes generated by actors at the meso-level, mainly networks of stakeholders and experts, mediate the extent to which policy transfer is a success or failure. Giest deepens our basic definition of learning as updates by exploring how these updates are effected. While updates by imitation and trial and error resulted in policy failures in the two US cases, deeper level adaptive learning outside North America helped secure successful SVMs. Giest’s analysis suggests that depth of learning

in these cases was influenced by spatial and temporal distance from the original SV case. Giest wisely tempers her conclusions noting the measurement problems associated with policy learning.

Continuing on the transfer theme, Diane Stone (2017) highlights the importance of interrogating how we define policy failure and learning. Taking us beyond our basic definitions, Stone's sophisticated conceptual article highlights the contingent nature of policy failure through an examination of the dynamics that underpin policy transfer. Rather than frame a policy transfer as a failure or success, Stone argues scholars must recognise transfer (and so failure) as a messy process involving an array of meso-level actors. Echoing our discussion of the importance of perception and interpretation in how we conceptualise learning and failure, transfer too has multiple dimensions and failure of it is rarely outright or settled. Rather than treat partial transfer as failure, this is a re-imagining of transfer where 'failure' and 'success' sit alongside each other underpinned by ongoing and dynamic learning processes. Two aspects are of particular note. First, the treatment of imperfect transfer as underscored by flawed lesson-drawing is useful as it takes us back to questions about the depth of learning. Second, Stone highlights two aspects of learning that are often over-looked in mainstream accounts: 'negative lesson-drawing' and selective learning. While we think about learning in terms of updates, we should be forensic in our exploration of the basics and, specifically, what is being updated.

Joshua Newman and Matthew Bird (2017) move us beyond a focus on process to offer a much needed analysis of policy failure as an independent variable. Comparing two transportation cases – fast ferries in British Columbia and Sydney's airport link – the article adds to our knowledge of the impact failure on group dynamics in general and on collective processes of learning more specifically. Both cases demonstrate the importance of defining policy failures as being attached to the goals outlined by the policy's proponents. The failure cases coincided with changes in government and presented the opportunity for partisanship – whereby incoming administrations that did not 'own' the projects could foster the conditions to stall learning that could have rescued the policies. Rather than explore the various remedies available, the new governments took the political route linking the failures to the outgoing administrations by piling on criticism and engaging in activities – e.g. holding inquiries – that boosted the profile of the failures. This takes us back to how we broaden out the definition of learning and define the beliefs being updated: are they substantive or political? It also raises the issue of learning and intentionality. While learning can be intentional, ignorance can also be wilful.

Adrian Kay's (2017) article addresses two gaps in the study of policy learning and failure. His study of policy change in Australian health insurance both explores how failure works as an independent variable impacting policy learning and does so by situating analysis of learning at the macro system level. Kay's study demonstrates the capacity for failure to become its own cause (to adapt Wildavsky, 1979). Here, failure delegitimised health policy institutions making them increasingly vulnerable and giving them weak learning capacity to reform in anything but a suboptimal way. The result is a cycle of failure and dysfunctional learning. Kay's article demonstrates the capacity for policy regimes to become systems whose ingrained logics individual elites and policy communities cannot tame or reform. Here we have a bread and butter policy issue of political salience and significant electoral consequences; so the incentives to learn are high. This carries implications for how we define our core concepts; failure and learning can be locked together creating a perversely resilient policy failure inescapable through updates or the presence of new policy actors.

Finally, Michael Howlett and Sreeja Nair (2017) go beyond the empirical, and push us to think about the impact of the future on policy actors. Their article introduces the idea of 'policy myopia' as a pressing source of failure in policy-making and explore the possibility of developing policies that learn to help mitigate its impacts. In their conceptualisation of myopia, Howlett and Nair note that while the problem of bounded rationality and short-term uncertainty is widely acknowledged as the central existential condition for all policy-making, the long-term problem of an uncertain, and sometimes unknowable, future is rarely acknowledged. As uncertainty deepens, so too does the probability of policy failure. In these circumstances, actors need to design policies with flexibility and adaptation built-in. Where policy solutions are robust over a range of possible scenarios and over time, we can say policies have learning capacity organised into them. Yet, in cases of radical uncertainty, where learning may not be possible (or indeed preferable) at all. This reminder of the limits of learning is important. Updating our belief systems as if a certain amount of knowledge exists in the first place.

## **Conclusions**

No special issue is exhaustive and this one is no exception. The collection tells us a good deal about how we might conceptualise learning and failure processes in terms of degenerations, transfer and uncertainty over the long-term (Dunlop, Stone, and Howlett and Nair). Yet, more work needs to be done on policy failure methods and operationalisation of learning. In terms

of analytical levels, three of the studies extend our understanding of the familiar theme of learning as the cause of failure (Dunlop, Giest and Stone), and two (Kay, and Newman and Bird) provide much needed cases studying the impacts of failure on learning. With the exception of Kay (2017) our studies are clustered around the familiar meso-level. None address micro-level arenas of failure and learning.

Much of our discussion has focussed on policy learning and failure analysis *of the policy process*. However, policy studies is a practice-oriented endeavour, and both topics have strong real-world dimensions of fundamental concern to policy-makers and practitioners as well as analysts (Taylor, 2016). Learning and failure studies are beginning to reflect this and offer analysis *in and for the policy process* that concentrates on the prescriptive techniques that can help on the ground. Intellectual endeavours on the design implications of learning and failure are still in their infancy but two streams of activity are making headway. For learning, analysis of international organisations make particularly strong offerings on how governments should learn. Different instruments and methods for cross-national learning include: benchmarking, peer review, checklists, facilitated coordination and extrapolation (Barzeley, 2007; Borrás and Radaelli, 2011; Schäfer, 2006). The prescriptive turn in failure studies is less concerned with how not to fail and more focussed on its inverse – how to succeed in policy-making (Rutter, 2010; Rutter, Marshall and Sims, 2012; Timmins, 2016).

Bringing together policy learning and failure literatures demonstrates that there are many points of intersection to help us push the research agenda forward. And so, we finish by sketching out some possible topics for the future that focus on linking research with policy practice. First, we consider the impact of learning on failure. This is where most of our studies are grouped. While it seems uncontroversial to assert that learning can often be a good thing, and can help us produce better public policy, time and resource poor policy actors need to know that these lessons are going to be worth learning. Think about this at the individual level. Fast thinking is wired into human cognition, the slow reflection associated with learning is an exertion that comes with costs (Kahneman, 2011). Only when policy-makers understand that the lessons before and after failure are worth generating will they take the hit and get reflective. One key practical challenge is to make the learning updates produced after failure clearer and more applicable to the policy world. For example, this could mean working across disciplines with evaluation scholars, psychologists, historians etc to compare the impact of presenting information in different formats – numbers, stories, case studies etc. At ease working with concepts that span the disciplines, policy scholars are well-placed to do this.

What about the impact of learning on failure at the group level? Groups and organisations in policy-making can learn much from the business world. The most successful organisations are ones that ‘structure in’ learning from failure or develop a mindful approach (Langer, 1989; Weick, 1995, 2009). Of course, it is simpler to appreciate the benefits of learning from failure in commercial environments where goals and structures of authority are usually clearer than the public sector where policy objectives are often multiple and competing, and authority is diffuse (McConnell, 2015). Timely and fulsome analyses of even the simplest problem are easily complicated in such interaction-dense environments (Howlett, Ramesh and Wu, 2015: 210).

Uncovering and applying the lessons of failure at a macro, social level is one area where there are many blueprints. For example, moving beyond the policy literature, we can take inspiration from the work on post-conflict societies and, specifically, the use of public reconciliation commissions and inquiries to take whole populations beyond seemingly intractable disputes (Malley-Morrison, Mercurio and Twose, 2013; Marier, 2009).

What about the impact of failure on the learning environment? We know little about policy failure as an independent variable and its impact on learning at all levels. Thinking about how policy failure affects individual policy-makers’ cognition, the early policy termination literature suggests there will be psychological discomfort from closing a policy programme or agency (de Leon, 1978), yet systematic empirical evidence is needed. Again, we can take a cue from the renewed interest in findings from behavioural psychology that demonstrate we are risk averse but also poor risk calculators. For policy analysts, one challenge is to work with policy-makers to understand pre- and post-failure mindsets and how they might encourage or inhibit learning and constructive engagement.

The impact of policy failure on groups and their learning processes is another area of analytical darkness. Again, we can look to psychology where it has been long established the failure has a destabilising impact on groups (Wolman, 1960). The implications of these group dynamics on the prospects for organisational resilience or, post-crisis reforms or, stability in post-failure policy-making environments are significant and require attention.

Finally, we need to understand more about failure on a social scale. For example, can a society become accustomed to persistent failure (or success) in a policy area? Following Dror (2014), Bovens and ‘t Hart (2016) argue that society at large may be the key to strengthening the link between learning and failure. One implication of this is that societies could collectively

determine what should be framed as a failure and indeed be allowed to fail. Of course, such opening-up of policy-making, where learning and failure become public goods, requires that conditions for this reflexive type of learning are in place. Where deliberative mechanisms are merely symbolic or privileged the loudest voices, we end up with a dysfunctional learning form where framing contests create false consensus (Pellzoni, 2001) and risk a dialogue of the deaf.

## References

- Argyris, C, Schön, D, 1978, *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley
- Bali, A, Ramesh, M, 2015, Health care reforms in India: getting in wrong, *Public Policy and Administration*, 30, 3-4, 300-319
- Bennett, C J, Howlett, M, 1992, The lessons of learning: reconciling theories of policy learning and policy change, *Policy Sciences*, 25, 3, 275-294
- Birkland, T, 2006, *Lessons of disaster*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press
- Blyth, M, 2013, *Austerity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Borrás, S, Radaelli, C M, 2011, The politics of governance architectures: creation, change and effects of the EU Lisbon strategy, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 18, 4, 463-484
- Bovens, M, 't Hart, P, 1995, Frame multiplicity and policy fiascoes: limits to explanation, *Knowledge and Policy*, 8, 4, 61-83
- Bovens, M, 't Hart, P, 1996, *Understanding policy fiascoes*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction
- Bovens, M, 't Hart, P, 2016, Revisiting the study of policy failures, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23, 5, 653-666
- Bovens, M, 't Hart, P, Peters, B G, (eds), 2001, *Success and failure in public governance: a comparative analysis*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar
- Bovens, M, 2010, A comment on Marsh and McConnell: towards a framework for establishing policy success, *Public Administration*, 88, 2, 584-585
- Brummer, K, 2016, 'Fiasco prime ministers': leaders' beliefs and personality traits as possible causes for policy fiascos, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23, 5, 702-717
- Checkel, J T, 2001, Why comply? Social learning and European identity change, *International Organization*, 55, 3, 553-588
- Checkel, J T, 2005, International institutions and socialization in Europe: introduction and framework, *International Organization* 59, 4, 801-826
- Crewe, I, King, A, 2013, *The blunders of our governments*, London: Oneworld
- De Haven-Smith, L, 2006, When political crimes are inside jobs: detecting state crimes against democracy, *Administrative Theory and Praxis* 28, 3, 330-355
- de Leon, P, 1978, Public policy termination: an end and a beginning, *Policy Analysis*, 4, 3, 369-392
- Demortain, D, 2011, *Scientists and the regulation of risk*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar

- Denzau, A D, North, D C, 1994, Shared mental models: ideologies and institutions, *Kyklos* 47, 1, 3-31
- Deutsch, K W 1966, *The nerves of government*, New York, NY: The Free Press
- Dolowitz, D, 2009, Policy transfer: a re-assessment, *Policy and Politics*, 37, 3, Special Issue
- Dror, Y, 2014, *Avant-garde politician: leaders for a new epoch*, Washington, DC: Westphalia Press
- Dunleavy, P, 1995, Policy disasters: explaining the UK's record, *Public Policy and Administration* 10, 2, 52-70
- Dunlop, C A, 2014, The possible experts: how epistemic communities negotiate barriers to knowledge use in ecosystems services policy, *Environment and Planning C – Government and Policy* 32, 2, 208-228
- Dunlop, C A, 2017, Pathologies of epistemic learning: what are they and how do they contribute to policy failure?, *Policy and Politics*, 45, 1
- Dunlop, C A, James, O, 2007, Principal-agent modelling and learning: the European Commission, experts and agricultural hormone growth promoters, *Public Policy and Administration* 22, 4, 403-422
- Dunlop, C A, Radaelli, C M, 2013, Systematizing policy learning: from monolith to dimensions, *Political Studies*, 61, 3, 599-619
- Dunlop, C A, Radaelli, C M, 2016, Policy learning in the Eurozone crisis: modes, power and functionality, *Policy Sciences* 49, 2, 107-124
- Edelman, M, 1964, *The symbolic uses of politics*, Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press
- Elgström, O, Jönsson, C, 2000, Negotiation in the European Union: bargaining or problem-solving?, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 7, 5, 684-704
- Elmore, R F, 1987, Instruments and strategy in public policy, *Policy Sciences*, 7, 1, 174-178
- Evans, M, 2009, Policy transfer in critical perspective, *Policy Studies*, 30, 3, 243-268
- Gabriel, R, 1986, *Military incompetence*, New York, NY Hill and Wang
- Gerstenberg, O, Sabel, C F, 2002, Directly-deliberative polyarchy: an institutional ideal for Europe? in Joerges, C, Dehousse, R (eds), *Good governance in Europe's integrated markets*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 289-341
- Giest, S, 2017, Overcoming the failure of 'silicon somewheres': learning in policy transfer processes, *Policy and Politics*, 45, 1
- Gray, P, 't Hart, P, (eds), 1998, *Public policy disasters in Europe*, London: Routledge
- Gray, P, 1996, Disastrous explanation or explanations of disaster? A reply to Dunleavy, *Public Policy and Administration* 11, 1, 74-82

- Haas, P M, 1992, Introduction: epistemic communities and international policy coordination', *International Organization*, 46, 1, 1-36
- Hall, P A, 1981, *Great planning disasters*, London: Penguin
- Hall, P A, 1993, Policy paradigms, social learning and the state: the case of economic policy-making in Britain, *Comparative Politics* 25, 3, 275-296
- Hay, C, 2001, The 'crisis' of Keynesianism and the rise of neo-liberalism in Britain: an ideational institutionalist approach, in Campbell, J L, Pedersen, O K, *The rise of neoliberalism and institutional analysis*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 193-218
- Heclo, H, 1974, *Modern social politics in Britain and Sweden*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press
- Heikkila, T, Gerlak, A K, 2013, Building a conceptual approach to collective learning: lessons for public policy scholars, *Policy Studies Journal* 41, 3, 484-511
- Howlett, M, 2012, The lessons of failure: learning and blame avoidance in public policy, *International Political Science Review*, 33, 5, 539-555
- Howlett, M, Nair, S, 2017, Policy myopia as a source of policy failure: adaptation and policy learning under deep uncertainty, *Policy and Politics*, 45, 1
- Howlett, M, Ramesh, M, Perl, A, 2009, *Studying public policy: policy cycles and policy subsystems*, Canada: Oxford University Press
- Howlett, M, Ramesh, M, Wu, X, 2015, Understanding the persistence of policy failures: the role of politics, governance and uncertainty, *Public Policy and Administration* 30, 3-4, 209-220
- Ingram, H M, 1980, Policy failure: An issue deserving analysis, in Mann, D E (ed), *Why policies succeed or fail*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, pp. 11-32
- Janis, I L, 1972, *Victims of groupthink* Houghton New York, NY: Mifflin
- Jones, E, Kelemen, R D, Meunier, S, 2015, Failing forward? The Euro crisis and the incomplete nature of European integration, *Comparative Political Studies*, doi:10.1177/0010414015617966
- Kahneman, D, 2011, *Thinking, fast and slow*, New York, NY: Penguin
- Kamkhaji, J, Radaelli, C M, 2016, Crisis, learning and policy change, *Journal of European Public Policy*, DOI 10.1080/13501763.2016.1164744
- Kay, A, 2017, Policy failures, policy learning and institutional change: the case of Australian health insurance policy change, *Policy and Politics*, 45, 1
- Kerr, D H, 1976, The logic of 'policy' and successful policies, *Policy Sciences*, 7, 3, 351-363
- Khong, Y F, 1992, *Analogies at war*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

- Langer, E J, 1989, *Mindfulness*, Boston, MA: Addison-Wesley
- Leach, W, Weible, C, Vince, S, Sidikki, S, Calanni, J, 2014, Fostering learning through collaboration: knowledge acquisition and belief change in marine aquaculture partnerships, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 24, 3, 591-622
- Levy, J S, 1994, Learning and foreign policy: sweeping the conceptual minefield, *International Organization*, 48, 2, 279-312
- Liberatore, A, 1999, *The management of uncertainty: learning from Chernobyl*, Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Publishers
- Lindblom, C E, 1959, The science of 'muddling through', *Public Administration Review*, 19, 79-88
- Lindblom, C E, 1965, *The intelligence of democracy*, New York NY: The Free Press
- Malley-Morrison, K, Mercurio, A, Twose, G, 2013, *International handbook of peace and reconciliation*, New York, NY: Springer
- March, J, Olsen, J P, 1975, Organizational learning under ambiguity, *European Journal of Political Research* 3, 2, 147-71
- Marier, P, 2009, The power of institutionalized learning: the uses and practices of commissions to generate policy change, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16, 8, 1204-1223
- Marsh, D, McConnell, A, 2010, Towards a framework for establishing policy success: a reply to Bovens, *Public Administration*, 88, 2, 586-587
- May, P J, 1992, Policy learning and failure, *Journal of Public Policy*, 12, 4, 331-354
- May, P J, 2015, Implementation failures revisited: policy regime perspectives, *Public Policy and Administration*, 30, 3-4, 277-299
- McConnell, A, 2010, Policy success, policy failure and grey areas in-between, *Journal of Public Policy* 30, 3, 345-362
- McConnell, A, 2015, What is policy failure? A primer to help navigate the maze, *Public Policy and Administration*, 30, 3-4, 221-242
- Moran, M, 2001, Not steering but drowning: policy catastrophes and the regulatory state, *Political Quarterly*, 72, 3, 414-427
- Moyson, S, forthcoming, Policy learning over a decade or more and the role of interests therein: the European liberalization policy process of Belgian network industries, *Public Policy and Administration*
- Moyson, S, Scholten, P, Weible, C, forthcoming, Policy learning and policy change: assessing their relation from different theoretical perspectives, *Policy and Society*, Special Issue
- Newman, J, Bird, M G, 2017, British Columbia's fast ferries and Sydney's Airport Link: partisan barriers to learning from policy failure, *Policy and Politics*, 45, 1

- Newman, J, Head, B, 2015, Categories of failure in climate change mitigation policy in Australia, *Public Policy and Administration*, 30, 3-4, 342-358
- Olsen, J P, Peters, B G, (eds), 1996, *Lessons from experience: experiential learning in administrative in eight democracies*, Oslo: Scandinavian University Press
- Owen, D, 2012, *The hubris syndrome*, London: Methuen
- Pellizoni, L, 2001, The myth of the best argument, *The British Journal of Sociology* 52, 1, 59-86
- Heikkila, T, Gerlak, A K, 2013, Building a conceptual approach to collective learning: lessons for public policy scholars, *Policy Studies Journal*, 41, 3, 484-511
- Peters, B G, 2015, State failure, governance failure and policy failure, *Public Policy and Administration* 30, 3-4, 261-276
- Pressman, J L, Wildavsky, A B, 1973, *Implementation: how great expectations in Washington are dashed in Oakland*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press
- Putnam, R, 1993, *Making Democracy Work*, Princeton University Press
- Radaelli, C M, 2009, Measuring policy learning: regulatory impact assessment in Europe, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16, 8, 1145-1164
- Rodrik, D, 2014, When ideas trump interests: preferences, worldviews, and policy innovations, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 28, 1, 189-208
- Rothberg, R I, 2003 *When states fail: causes and consequences*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press
- Rutter, J, 2010, What worked? London: Institute for Government, available at <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/blog/1274/policy-making-what-worked/> accessed 14 October 2016
- Rutter, J, Marshall, E, Sims, S, 2012, *The 'S' factors*, London: Institute for Government available at <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/The%20S%20Factors.pdf> accessed 14 October 2016
- Sabatier, P A, Jenkins-Smith, H C, 1993, *Policy change and learning: an advocacy coalition approach*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press
- Schäfer, A, 2006, A new form of governance? Comparing the open method of co-ordination to multilateral surveillance by the IMF and the OECD, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13, 1, 70-88
- Schuck, P H, 2014, *Why government fails so often, and how it can do better*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press
- Schumpeter, J A, 1942 [1994], *Capitalism, socialism and democracy*, London: Routledge

- Simon, H, 1947, *Administrative behavior: a study of decision-making processes in administrative organization*, New York, NY: The Free Press
- Simon, H, 1955, A behavioral model of rational choice, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 69, 99-118
- Stone, D, 2005, Knowledge networks and global policy, in Stone, D, Maxwell, S, (eds), *Global knowledge networks and international development*, London: Routledge
- Stone, D, 2017, Understanding the transfer of policy failure: bricolage, experimentalism and translation, *Policy and Politics*, 45, 1
- Taylor, M, 2016, *Why policy fails – and how it might succeed*, Royal Society of Arts (RSA) annual lecture 12 September 2016, London: RSA, available at <https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/matthew-taylor-blog/2016/09/why-policy-fails-and-how-it-might-succeed> accessed 14 October 2016
- Timmins, S, 2016, *Universal credit: from disaster to recovery*, London: Institute for Government, available at <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/5064%20IFG%20-%20Universal%20Credit%20Publication%20WEB%20AW.pdf> accessed 12 October 2016
- Vaughan, D, 1986, *The challenger launch decision: risky technology, culture and deviance at NASA*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press
- Waterman, R H, Meier, K J, 1998, Principal-agent models: an expansion?, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 8, 2, 173-202
- Weick, K E, 1995, *Sensemaking in organizations*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Weick, K E, 2009, *Making sense of the organization*, New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons
- Weiss, C H, 1977, Research for policy's sake: the enlightenment function of social research, *Policy Analysis*, 3, 4, 531-545
- Wildavsky, A B, 1979, Policy as its own cause, in Wildavsky A (ed), *The art and craft of policy analysis*, Macmillan, pp. 62-85
- Witting, A, Moyson, S, 2015, Learning in post-recession framing contests: changing UK road policy, in Schiffino, N, Taskin, L, Raone, J, Doni, C, (eds), *Organising after crisis: the challenge of learning*, Brussels, Belgium: Peter Lang
- Wolf, C Jr, 1979, A theory of nonmarket failure: framework for implementation analysis, *Journal of Law and Economics*, 22, 1, 107-139
- Wolman, B, 1960, Impact of failure on group cohesiveness, *Journal of Social Psychology* 51, 2, 409-418
- Wolman, H, 1981, The determinants of program success and failure, *Journal of Public Policy*, 1, 4, 433-464

Zafonte, M, Sabatier, P A, 1998, Shared beliefs and imposed interdependencies as determinants of ally networks in overlapping subsystems, *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 10, 4, 473-505

Zito, A R, Schout, A, (eds), 2009, Learning and governance in the EU policy-making process, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16, 8, Special Issue

Zittoun, P, 2015 Analysing policy failure as an argumentative strategy in the policy-making process, *Public Policy and Administration*, 30, 3-4, 243-260

---

<sup>1</sup> This article and special issue arises from the ‘Policy Failure’ workshop hosted by Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP), National University of Singapore, 19-21 February 2014. All the special issue authors wish to thank the workshop organisers – Michael Howlett, M. Ramesh and Xun Wu – and all the other participants for their intellectual generosity and support. As guest editor, I want to extend my sincere thanks to all the anonymous referees whose comments inspired our authors and helped improve the articles. Thanks also to the team at *Policy and Politics* who have made this such a rigorous and fun experience! Particular thanks go to Sarah Ayres, Sarah Brown, Felicity Matthews and Rebecca Tomlinson for their patience, humour and insight. With regard to this introduction, many thanks to two anonymous referees whose feedback helped improve the manuscript. Of course, any errors or omissions in this paper remain my responsibility.