What is a Policy Scholar For?

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Policy research has generated profound insights on the policy process. However, the granularity of the policy sciences makes it difficult to integrate policy analysis into the 'big questions' facing the vision of the open society, such as democratic backsliding, corruption, the polarization of electorates, the de-legitimization of expertise, and the fault-lines between governments and citizens. By integrating different dimensions, from public health to the economy and human rights, the COVID-19 pandemic has urged our discipline to identify novel responses and new approaches to tackle the big questions. The future of the policy sciences must find an anchor in a reflection on our roles as researchers, questioning our vision, tasks, and role in society: what is a policy scholar for? This is for us, reflective scholars, the truly big question behind all the other 'big questions' that open societies face today. We outline the coordinates of a possible answer by looking closely at five key verbs that define the role of the policy scholar: learning, analysing, advising, empowering and reflecting. In the conclusions, we discuss the ways in which enabling these actions can expand our public policy imagination and professional relevance.

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Introduction: Situating the Policy Scholar in the World of Big Questions

In the social sciences, policy research has a formidable track-record of producing usable knowledge on how to design public policies and more generally how to address social problems. When we compare policy research to other fields in our discipline (political science) we find granular knowledge that is more usable and attuned to policy design than the knowledge produced by comparative analyses of institutions, party systems, and electoral behaviour. However, it is exactly this granularity of policy research that creates conceptual distance from the big questions facing our societies, such as the quality of democracy, corruption, the polarization of electorates, the de-legitimization of expertise, and the fault-lines between governments and citizens.[1] Crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic and the recovery stage have raised big questions arising out of the connection between different domains of public policy – including public health, macro-economic management, regulation, and the restrictions to free movement and human rights.[2] Therefore, it is fair to ask questions like: 'how can researchers dealing with issues such as risk, pension reforms, education, regulation tell us something useful about how to improve the quality of political life in our country or community?'

No doubt the worries about the ambition and scope of policy research are pertinent. We experienced this in our project on Procedural Tools for Effective Governance (PROTEGO[3]) on the design of rule-making procedures in Europe. We collected data on the design of consultation, freedom of information, the Ombudsman and regulatory impact assessment in 28 European countries and examined the inter-relations among these administrative procedures. And yet, we felt we had to push further. Thus, we explored the

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[1] For a discussion in public administration and management of challenge of speaking to big problems see Milward et al (2016), Pollitt (2017) and Potter (2012).
[2] For two works outlining possible research agendas linking policy analysis with COVID-19 see Dunlop et al (2020) and Weible et al (2020).
[3] http://www.protego-erc.eu/

effects of these four procedures on outcomes that really matter for the quality of governance, notably trust in governance and the control of corruption (Dunlop et al 2021).

There are few doubts that the context in which policy research has to demonstrate its value is challenging. On the one hand, social scientific research (be it policy research or other) is characterised by uncertainty – it does not provide magic bullets. On the other, the social and political world is marked by ambiguity and complexity – paradoxically, the knowledge we have on ambiguity and complexity is one of the great achievements of theories of the policy process. The Covid-19 pandemic has heightened the importance of providing usable knowledge about organizational and political ambiguity and complexity (see Dunlop et al 2020; Weible et al 2020).

Faced with this challenging context, we start from our immediate professional concern: the continuing impulse for policy scholarship to be relevant in the public domain, especially at times where the recovery after the pandemic necessitates bold transitions towards sustainability that challenge dominant policy paradigms. Added to this, we have the formal impulse coming from governments, academic audits and funding bodies, that is, the impact agenda in countries such as Australia, Hong-Kong and the UK (Dunlop, 2019; Smith et al 2020). But, as will become clear, our concern is far broader. It connects with our vision and motivation as policy scholars. It is supply-driven rather than being only a response to what governments and funding bodies 'demand' from us policy researchers. It does not have to coincide with the specific (and often narrow) definition of impact favoured by government and non-academic stakeholders.

To achieve that, we must openly question what our work is for and build from the conviction (perhaps not universally shared) that policy research has a purpose beyond academia. What concepts like 'purpose', 'relevance', 'impact' and arguably even 'utility' mean is not fixed once and for all. And this meaning sometimes is found only in the eye of

the beholder (Hay, 2015). For sure, it is contextually contingent (Gerring, 2001). Following Weber (1904) – learning is formed by the fusion of two knowledge forms – policy research as science and practical business of policy as present action. The challenge is to steer a course between systematic thinking and pragmatism. Veer too far toward the pragmatic and we risk intellectual standards and moral integrity where over-claiming and short-termism take over. Go too far in the other direction and we are in the realm of hyper-specialisation which yields only a fragmented and overly abstract version of our social world (Ricci, 1984; Shapiro, 2005). Either, on their own, will disappoint.

We address this challenge by taking a broad view of research in the policy sciences, comprising both authors that engage explicitly with theories of the policy process and authors who produce conceptual and empirical knowledge on policy design. Also, we do not differentiate in terms of ontological presuppositions and methods. We deal with the present and make suggestions about the future of the policy sciences with our political scientist's hat on because this our disciplinary affiliation. The 'political science' qualifier is only to say that we are not sufficiently competent to report on the state of policy research generated by demography, economics, sociology, anthropology, ethnography, and other disciplines that are relevant for the future of the policy sciences.

To proceed, we structure this chapter around the key verbs that define what a policy scholar is, and, thinking of the future of policy sciences, should be – of course, in the context of the assumption and limitations we have just mentioned. We start with the verb "to learn" because it allows us to explore a vast territory. We then clarify what "to analyse" means for the objective of our reflection. Next, we deal with a delicate nexus between research and the policy world and look at "to advise." Following on that we turn "to empower" and conclude with "to reflect." In the conclusions we go back to the question of what a policy scholar is for. Policy research with potential to address the big questions of our time is not a chimera.

We find that it requires a precise orientation and motivation of policy scholars. A common understanding of what learning and analysis is can assist in the enterprise, especially if we free up analysis from narrow concerns. But this does not mean neglecting methods. To achieve impact, we have to interrogate ourselves deeply on our role in policy advice and on the prospect for (and limitations of) empowering – the policy scholar is not a demiurge or *comandante* of the people. The sobering lesson is that the priority for policy scholars is "to reflect" before we attend to any reformulation of our theories and methods, or tweak our approaches to make them more relevant and impactful.

1. Learning

We start with the verb "to learn." This is our guiding verb in the sense that it has implications for what we say about the other verbs. The need to learn is high, both in public policy and more generally in our post-pandemic societies. There is a classic strand of policy scholarship on learning – a strand that goes back to Dewey and his version of pragmatism (Dewey, 1933 and more recently Ansell, 2011; Dunn, 2019).

Today, however, the settings for collective learning exercises are very different from the past. In the richest economies of the world, the 1990s were a decade where-in countries like the UK there was a sense that evidence-based policy would respond effectively to the learning needs (Cabinet Office, 1999; Davies, Nutley and Smith, 2000). Today we confront the double challenge of elected politicians manifesting their distrust of expertise in very open and public ways, and the disillusionment with the simplistic 'deficit model' underlying the evidence-based movement.[4] This not merely academic disillusionment. Even international organizations like the OECD, representing advanced economies, have acknowledged that the instrumentation for evidence-based policy is highly sensitive to the 'institutional and

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[4] By 'deficit model' we mean the assumption that the public policy process lacks information and evidence, and therefore more science will improve the quality of public decisions.

contextual dimensions' of decision-making (OECD, 2008: 29). Turning to the least developed countries, the World Bank recognizes the limits of their own projects for evidence-based policy. A telling example is a recent study of 60 projects for regulatory impact assessment of proposed legislation (Kamkhaji, Ladegaard and Lundkvist, 2019). The study shows that even in the projects that met the conditions of good practice, after some years the role of evidence-based assessment of proposed laws and regulations evaporated.

On the other hand, however, the 'Fridays for Future' movement and crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic have forced politicians to listen to science (Thunberg, 2019). Further, recent years have seen the emergence of organizations that go beyond the classic typology of bridging science and policy in domestic policy, and, at the international level, the triad of science in diplomacy, diplomacy for science, and science for diplomacy (Legrand and Stone, 2018; Stone, 2020). These new types of third sector advocacy organizations (such as the Alliance for Useful Evidence, Sense about Science, and Science for Democracy) seek to promote a society-wide, political discussion on the "right to science," often beyond the domains of domestic policy and inter-state cooperation.[5] At the time of writing, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has published in draft a *General Comment on Science*[6] that goes in the direction of a broad interpretation of the right to enjoy the benefits of science.

When it comes to discussing these issues publicly, the tone of the debate is "How can we improve? Why don't we learn how to make policy A or B better? What does the experience of other countries tell us?" However, as far as social scientists are concerned, the spotlight is almost invariably on economists or political scientists with a background in party politics, elections, and political communication. For them, policies are the positions of MPs

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[5] https://www.nesta.org.uk/project/alliance-useful-evidence/, https://senseaboutscience.org/ and https://www.sciencefordemocracy.org/
[6] See https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CESCR/Pages/DraftGeneralComment_Science.aspx

or (in international organizations) governments on proposed legislation, party positioning in relation to issue salience in the public opinion, and outputs of party politics, inter-institutional relations, forms of government (for excellent studies in this tradition of political science see: Abou-Chadi et al., 2020; Campbell et al., 2019; Curini et al., 2015; Hagemann et al., 2019; Hobolt and Wratil, 2020). Absent are the notions that understanding public policy goes well beyond the legal-parliamentary dimension, that implementation is a formidable lens to understand legitimacy and trust in government, and that policies shape political arenas (recalling Lowi's [1972: 299] classic proposition: 'policies determine politics').

Political and social scientists specialised in public policy processes and/or policy analysis can and should be part of the debates in the public sphere – for the following reasons.

First, the policy eye is granular. It does not reduce policies to existing or proposed *laws*– as it is often done by party politics specialists. Policy processes have their legal dimension, but implementation is a distinct arena. Some of the most interesting politics of policy-making goes on at the level of implementation, including enforcement and compliance (Short, 2019). In televised debates, social media, and printed media, the so-called policy questions about learning are framed and reduced to "we need a new law (because we learned that what we've got is not working)." Frankly, this is miles away from taking policies seriously.

Second, the policy perspective on learning delivers (sobering) lessons about evidence-inspired and evidence-based policy. Further, learning in public policy goes beyond the issues concerning the role of evidence in public decision-making, it expands onto the dimensions of society-wide learning, as shown by the illustrious family tree of scholarship in the field (Dunlop, Radaelli and Trein, 2018: chapter 1). There are different types of learning, concerning the settings of the instruments, the policy instruments and the policy paradigms

that inform policies. We also have typologies that link learning to specific features of the policy process and allow us to make predictions on the basis of scope conditions (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2013, 2018).

Third, the policy perspective does not assume that learning is necessarily ethically, politically or normatively desirable. Policy communities often learn the wrong lessons (Dunlop and Radaelli, 2016; Dunlop, 2017). Politicians can learn by disempowering citizens. Organizations often learn from sample of one or less, with consequences that are easy to imagine (March Sproull and Tamuz, 1991).

Thus, thinking of the future of the policy sciences, the demand for more learning will be consistent. Our role should be to direct the attention of the policy-makers and the public towards the democratic quality of the learning processes, and provide robust wake-up calls when public organizations and political systems learn lessons that are dysfunctional. To illustrate: during the pandemic the Italian regulatory authorities learned quickly how to produce more certificates at lower costs (for them), but with hindsight they should have contained the growth of certifications and intrusive regulations in the first instance.

2. Analysing

Analysis is clearly integral to learning. Yet while it enjoys good currency in many quarters, and we have seen many governments calling for more analytical capacity during the acute phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, analysis is far from popular everywhere in the policy profession. Some in the profession do not even like to present themselves as a "policy analyst" if this means taking the position of the objective, value-neutral, white-coat social scientist looking at policies like objects (Zittoun, 2014). So, what's left to "analyse" then?

Methods and professional standards still have a fundamental role to play, if we want to become more visible on the big questions. The difference between a journalist, an educated

member of the public, and the policy researcher must be visible in the methods used by these categories of actors when addressing the grand governance challenges. An important lesson we have learned with the behavioural revolution in public policy and policy design (John, 2017, 2018) is that we should first of all gear our models towards how individuals in the real world behave (Kuehnhanss, 2019). The findings from cognitive, evolutionary, and experimental studies have opened pathways to better understanding about how and why citizens react to policy interventions.

But equally important is for policy scholars to think seriously about bounded rationality, heuristics and cognitive illusions when we produce analysis that bureaucrats, elected politicians and diplomats should react to or at least consider (on bureaucrats see Dunlop and Radaelli, 2015, 2016, on diplomats see Poulsen, 2015). Surviving, and indeed thriving, in the swamp of policy practice requires that practitioners understand what Argyris and Schön (1974) call their "theories-in-use" – the mental maps and habitual patterns of behaviour policy-makers use but rarely reflect upon. Analysis that reconstructs individual policy cases – of success and failure – are a core offering of policy scholars (for an exemplary account see Stevens' [2011] ethnography). If we are to help policy-makers see the bigger picture, and the impact of their cognitive biases in that, more cases that address the micro-foundations of decision-making are needed, possibly looking at the insights offered by cognitive psychology. That said, this may not be an easy sell! There is limited demand for such "speaking-the-truth-to-power" type of analysis that turns the spotlight back on the powerful (Wildavsky, 1979; Perduca and Radaelli, 2019).

Turning to the supply, the trajectory of our analysis can't be Cartesian if we want to gain trustworthiness on the big questions. Trade-offs, contradictions, and enigmas must be embraced, instead of being confined in the "unexplained" variance of our models, or assumed away in the *ceteris paribus* assumption. Charles Sabel (1994) explains in a formidable

chapter that the trade-off between monitoring and learning cannot be avoided. Learning is essential to policy improvement, and therefore we should allow public organizations to make experiments, and even fail in some of their experimentations, and learn from their mistakes. However, this degree of freedom and experimentation reduced the possibility to monitor public sector performance with the same standards. At the other extreme, a public administration tied to a high numbers of regulations inside government, with zero degrees of flexibility, will be easy to monitor but won't have the possibility to innovate and ultimately to learn how to adapt to the local circumstances and the new challenges. The early responses to the pandemic in Europe have exposed the trade-offs between the necessity to trace and contain, and the fact that the public policy responses were attempts to learn more – public policy probes that needed to be adjusted all the time.

Indeed, this truly embracing trade-off has sobering lessons for our category of "analysis" (and for our previous discussion on evidence-based policy): to move on and innovate, we don't have to wait for hundreds of policy studies. One problem with meta-analyses and systematic reviews in our field is that findings are sensitive to a number of variables we cannot control for – what works in one context may not work in another, even in the same country or region, for example because a policy entrepreneur may exist in one place but not in another. Some recent studies dissect the pathways to success by analysing fewer cases but with more depth and set-theoretic techniques (Luetjens, Mintrom and 't Hart 2019; Compton, Luetjens and 't Hart, 2019). Others have suggested "mission-driven policies" where we do not stop innovation at the first analysis documenting an episode of failure (Mazzucato, 2018). However, this raises the issue of how to trust leadership in innovation processes and the accountability of long-term mission-driven policies. Arguably of course, the biggest impact policy scholars will ever have is the teaching and training they do in universities – by making concepts and methods relevant to students. Where these students are

destined to become practitioners (classic Masters in Public Administration [MPA] programmes), the possibility for policy scholars to be influential is boosted even further. A key part of training is the tone we adopt – our role is to provide a space for uncertainty, where binaries and simplistic conceptualisations are challenged and the relevance of robust methods made apparent. Another central part of training is to use these interactions as two-way: to understand the challenges of policy practitioners we must listen to our practitioner students.

3. Advising

A central part of the public-facing work done by policy scholars is to offer advice. The rise in ad hoc advisory bodies during the pandemic has exposed the relevance of this mission, and the role of special advisors has become more visible and more politicised[7] (see the concluding chapter for a list "policy trackers" that mushroomed during the crisis to provide benchmarks for advice).

The structure and function of policy advisory systems, knowledge utilization modes and the dilemmas of technocracy have been central and recurring themes in the policy literature for decades (for example, Barker and Peters, 1993; Weiss, 1977, 1992; Pielke, 2007; Radaelli, 1999a). Here, we limit our discussion to three aspects: (1) the ever-present pitfalls of over-confidence in our claims; (2) the different roles we can adopt and audiences who may seek policy scholars' counsel; and, (3) where recent empirical evidence suggests we are falling short in executing these roles.

We have no fundamental antipathy to advisory roles, and simply wish to clarify this non-trivial yet entirely surmountable challenge. We know discussing the non-academic relevance of our work is a delicate affair; there are many detractors. On one side, academic

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[7] The reference is to Dominic Cummings, see among others Stefan Collini "Inside the mind of Dominic Cummings" *The Guardian* 6 Feb 2020. On ad-hoc task force see among others, Ernesto Galli della Loggia, "La politica senza idee e l'alibi dei tavoli" *Corriere della Sera*, 20 June 2020.

reach into the wider social and political world has always been contentious – most obviously, for the political elites whose ears we often seek. One need look no further than the UK's Brexit debates since 2016, where high ranking politicians and government minsters routinely pilloried academics and their scholarship with the infamous refrain that we have "had enough of experts" (Gove, 2016). Unpalatable as these interventions are, the spectre of over-reaching expertise is rooted in long-standing, democratically legitimate concerns about technocracy and sociocracy (Straussman, 1978; Radaelli, 1999b; more recently see Boswell, Corbett and Havercroft, 2019 and Zambernardi, 2016). Closer to home, within the academy, there are significant concerns that a focus on producing policy-relevant oriented research risks academic freedom and research integrity – whereby "their" questions become ours. More pragmatically some rightly point out that, even if we care about the external impact of our work, the powerful are ultimately very good at ignoring social science (Rogowski, 2013). None of these concerns are trivial. Offering advice and trying to have an impact is risky, difficult and often ends in failure. Yet, it is still important. At the very least, it offers policy scholars a way to defend their work as socially legitimate.

Policy scholars express their advisory potential in numerous ways (for example, see Pollitt, 2006 on the various advisory roles public administration scholars perform and Stoker, 2015: 22, table 1.1 for empirical examples of these). Two key points should be noted. First, when we choose to advise, policy scholars engage in an endeavour that is both normative and scientific. Today's scholars stand on the shoulders of giants such as Max Weber (1904), Harold Lasswell (1956) and Dwight Waldo (1948 [1984], 1971) who defined our field and argued that the social sciences are never (and should not be) value-free. Researching the socio-political world must be methodologically rigorous and scientific. But, the topics we select for study, the categories we use and the questions we ask, mean that our endeavours are critical rather than objective and detached, and for some, concern the advancement of

human dignity (Lasswell, 1959) (see for example Helen Ingram (2015) on the emancipatory potential of target populations research). Second, by following their values policy scholars ensure they do not become caught up in "fascination of the passing show" that is politics (Johnson, 1989: 136). Rather, the translation of the theoretical knowledge of science into practical advice around questions we frame, forms what Dahrendorf described as the "morals of knowledge" (1968: 233).

There are many different ways these morals can be constructed and expressed. Dunlop (2014) offers four "possible experts" whose roles depend on the issue context – its uncertainty and the extent to which authoritative expertise is socially legitimate. Successful navigation of classic advisory settings, where policy scholars are in dyadic relationships with decision-makers, require that we hone our political antenna and epistemic humility. In more socially democratic contexts, where an issue is the subject of intense public debate, effective experts are able and willing to speak the language of ordinary citizens and open their ears to others' uncodified, non-scientific positions. Where an issue is dominated by established interests, advice stands the best chance of cutting through when we are willing to take advocacy positions and push a favoured policy programme. Finally, we have more hierarchical settings where advice can be merely window-dressing to a decision already taken. Where policy-based evidence is sought, policy scholars need enhanced institutional awareness and the moral courage to blow the whistle where evidence is selectively deployed.

So, we are free to advise (or not) in various ways. We know from recent analyses of impact case studies in the UK, that policy scholars do indeed inhabit all four roles – though narrow relationships with policy-makers remains by far the most common way of expressing our morals of knowledge (Dunlop, 2018). That empirical data also demonstrates that Rothstein's (2015) verdict that we remain disengaged from work that addresses the fundamentals of human well-being may be wide of the mark. While there was little policy

advice given on what Pollitt (2016) called global megatrends – for example, climate change, demographic change, fiscal contraction and today the global pandemic – policy scholars do engage policy-makers in assessments of policy effectiveness, equality in public services and efficiency of their performance across a wide range of bread and butter issues (most frequently health and environment) (Dunlop, 2019).

Yet, we are not free to choose how contexts change and the impact that has on our advisory position and authority. Even the (deceptively) simple task of advising on the construction of measures of a policy phenomenon can easily move policy research (and the researchers) across the different settings Dunlop describes (2014) each with their own distinct political properties. The story of building cross-country regulatory indicators is instructive, as shown by the vicissitudes of one of the authors of this chapter in many different projects on this issue (Radaelli and De Francesco, 2007; Radaelli, 2020). When asked to create measures of regulatory quality for the EU Member States, Radaelli and De Francesco (2007) quickly found out that choosing certain indicators but not others, or distributing weights across the components of a composite indicator was partly a task for the advisor, but also a vehicle for researchers to ask questions to government delegates such as 'do you think this component has double the value of this other? Is this indicator closer to your definition of quality than this other indicator?'. By answering these questions, the construction of indicators becomes a process or revealing governmental preferences and reducing the ambiguity of concepts such as 'quality' – often evoked but rarely measured at the time of that project (Radaelli and De Francesco 2007)

4. Empowering

The next verb that flows from learning concerns the task of empowering. Here again, we are inspired by John Dewey's work which challenges the traditional notions of what it is

to learn and what it is to teach. Learning, for Dewey (1933), should focus on the practical life experiences of citizens. In this view, policy scholars cannot be remote or hierarchical teachers. Academic impact cannot be consultancy producing information. Our knowledge in society serves the same function as it does in the seminar room – it widens the peripheral vision highlighting issues that the powerful have not thought about, or do not want to see.

Rather, policy scholars are facilitators who not only share authoritative knowledge but are willing to socially interact with citizens to engage with their distinct epistemic, experiential, lay knowledge. The skills that need to be on display here are ability to translate expertise in different ways and to have epistemic humility – we may "know" our codified knowledge, but we do not necessarily "know" the citizen's own truths as policy targets and democratic participants. Rather than getting caught up in notions of epistemic hierarchies (which is often where our own discussions get stuck) and allowing hyper-specialisation to turn us away from the communal – we need to be thinking more about public dialogues (Flinders, 2013; Flinders and Pal, 2020; Wood, 2019).

These dialogues are often where surprises can be uncovered that challenge our own received wisdom. Hirschman (1981) reminds us that all people (academics and non-academics alike) carry intuitive, common-sense understandings of social problems. For social scientific research to rise above the crowd and have an impact "it must come up with something that has not been apparent or transparent before or, better still, with something that shows how badly common-sense understanding has led us astray" (1981: 298). Why not follow the anthropological tradition and let citizens assist us in making what we think is familiar into something (wonderfully) strange?

So, for impact to be truly social and for policy scholars to truly "get" the big issues, we must engage and learn *with* 'real people in real places' (Booth, 1997). The humility requirements for academics in this regard are high; what happens to our esteem in the public

sphere where there is "no entrance ticket in terms of expertise"? (Gibbons et al., 1994: 148). However, if we really do live in a world of diffuse expertise – then we have lots to learn by getting out and listening a bit more. In doing this we can follow the anthropological tradition and "make the familiar strange." Moreover, if this diffuse expertise is accompanied with a reduced interest in facts among the powerful then we do need to get out more (Walker, 2017). The onus here is on policy scholars to get out locally, and for universities to work through the links between public engagement and impact ,which are often kept in separate silos.

We can go further than this of course and move toward the more activist, progressive policy scholar. Such scholars are mission-oriented, whose central task to one of empowering. Clearly, we can empower policy-makers through the advice we offer (and there is a good deal of this institutionalised in polities). And yet, how much are we listening to citizens and following the research questions and addressing the issues that they care about? What is the policy scholars' version of the sociological imagination (Wright Mills, 1959)? Taking a learning ontology, ensures that as policy scholars we are seeing a world where one of our central contributions is to empower citizens through not merely filling deficits in information, but in addressing social questions that truly matter (as opposed to following the available data – Radin, 2019). This is sort of activist model of the policy scholar is actually more common than we might think – colleagues addressing social inequalities of all sorts have been working in that mode for decades.

5. Reflecting

This brings us to the final verb we want to showcase: to reflect. There are many ways we can talk about how to reflect in policy research, what a reflective researcher is, and the reflexive properties of our discipline (Schön, 1983, 1987). Fundamentally, reflection-in- and -on-action help us and others work in conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity. Reflective

practices create space for serious and routine introspection while also carrying social and political responsibilities.

A key venue for reflection is within our own academic community – with those who understand the methodological standards of validation and share a normative commitment to producing rigorous social analysis. Professional deliberation is not merely essential to guard against fundamental errors going unchecked (though clearly this is pivotal). Policy scholarship – like all scientific endeavours – cannot be considered a private enterprise (Dahrendorf, 1968: chapter 5). For ideas to develop, be scrutinised and occasionally thrown down, policy research needs the oxygen of openness. Public airing of research offers a practical way to approach and stay with scientific uncertainty; this is a key part of the social and political responsibility embedded in reflective practice. Communal reflection then is not a nice to have "add on," it is core to our work. Presentation, discussion and deliberation require the acknowledgement and embrace of uncertainty and, as such, provide the best safeguards we have against over-reaching – not only of external, non-academic parties – but of ourselves as researchers. Such deliberations embolden policy scholars, giving the confidence to take a more public part and not be tempted into a state of "inner emigration" (Dahrendorf, 1968: 246) where what we know is rarely said.

Our professional associations – most obviously the International Public Policy Association (IPPA) – and practice-oriented journals (most recently, *Research Design and Practice*) provide valuable space for policy-oriented work.[8] Moreover, there are topic-specific fora – for example, UK in a Changing Europe (UKICE) – that offer an infrastructure for this communal scepticism. They also enable colleagues to provide a cheerleading function

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[8] This space is much needed. A recent survey of the top 40 journals in ISI Public Administration category, records that only eight welcome articles written by practitioners and only one explicitly asks that findings are distilled for non-academic audiences (that is *Public Administration Review*) (Dunlop, 2019).

whereby they point out connections to bigger picture issues that have been obscure to the researcher.

In this posture – arguably extreme but exciting – the researcher descends from what Schön calls the "hard high ground" where the view is possibly clearer but the grip on reality is low into the "swampy lowlands"(1983, 1987). By making this descent, we accept being implicated in situations where professional and lay knowledge together contribute to how a society addresses its problems: accepting partisan mutual adjustment and bargaining must trump pure intellectual cogitation (Lindblom, 1965). Following Schön one more time, models and middle-range theories may have to be blended with thinking on one's feet. And, because of we are implicated, as we are today in the world dominated by the consequences of the pandemic, the researcher is aware of the consequences of asking certain questions and not others, and has a subjective interest in what the outcome is. This may be connected to modes of governance such as citizen juries and deliberative-participative policy processes (Bobbio, 2019) – an original way to think about the profession and the notion of "impact" of policy research. Reflexivity means that impact is not reduced to merely shaping policy. Actually, it would be more precise to talk of "social" or "public" impact rather than "policy impact." It also means that we must accept that the world will be changed as a result of that impact and not in ways we may like (recall Giddens' point about the double hermeneutic unique to the social sciences [1987, 1993]).

In this view, problems cannot be solved in terms of "treatment" but can be re-formulated, changed in their dimensions (such as power and economic dimensions), and addressed in ways that are contingent on time and space. The reflective researcher should not ignore but actually embrace entanglement, contradictions, humility and ambivalence when getting into policy problems. Policy research is one of the resources that can potentially shape the interaction in (more or less open) policy networks. As such, research-based narratives,

policy frames and empirical findings can potentially shape interaction. But this often happens together with other resources that shape interaction, such as legitimacy, economic resources, authority etc. Humility does not mean accepting that everything may happen (Etzioni, 1989, 2014). When combined with the acknowledgement of "mystery" that some policy situations have, humility provides more awareness and ultimately control on what we do. Policy research can open up ways of transforming a zero-sum game into a positive-sum games, suggesting adding an actor to a policy network, or providing measures and indicators to pin down the fundamental dimensions of a debate (Dente, 2014).

Elaborating on this approach, we can see a deep connection between uncertainty, science and democracy (for a foundational account see Dahrendorf, 1968). Both thrive when claims (to knowledge and truth for science; to legitimate political power for democracy) can be challenged publicly. This implies that truth (about problems) exists in certain places and times, but it is often contingent and questionable in open societies. However, we can agree on the methods to cross-check the trustworthiness of claims – the scientific method and participation in public life and fair elections respectively. On this, science and democracy share the same vision.

One reason for the limited reach of public policy research in the world of big questions is – we argue – the epistemological Cartesianism of "rational policy analysis." epitomised by volumes such as *Policy Analysis* (Weimer and Vining, 2017). Exactly because policy problems are always framed as "solvable" by way of analysis and intellectual cogitation (notwithstanding the devastating critique of social science's hubris by Lindblom and Cohen, [1979]), policy analysis is reduced to varieties of economic analysis (such as cost-benefit analysis) (Weimer and Vining, 2017: chapter 17). And therefore policy analysis either becomes an applied branch of economics that brackets away power, or is doomed to be discredited when wicked policy problems persist, big questions arise, and policy "Solution"

(with a capital 'S') do not work (Head, 2019 on what we have learned over forty years of studies on wicked problems). For a discipline eminently concerned with collective decision-making processes, taking politics out of the equation is an obvious methodological mistake, whether we consider wicked or ordinary problems (Stone, 2020 offers a review of common criticisms).

Instead, in reflexive mode, policy analysis should embrace the trade-offs, the entanglements and even the contradictions and enigmas of problem-solving. It should also acknowledge the wickedness of some problems, and consequently settle for intelligent yet imperfect ways to handle these problems (Bannik and Trommel, 2019). Tempering the search for one-stop-shop policy solutions (Scholzman, 2009; see Miller, 1962 on avoiding offering solutions) and asking the analysis to do less (Shapiro, 2016) has implications for the role of the policy researcher in the discussion of "big questions"." It echoes in some way Donald Schön's reflection-in-action, where the practitioner "allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation" (Schön, 1983: 68). It includes the notion of empathy typical of design-thinking (Mintrom and Luetjens, 2016; van Burren et al., 2020).

In a deeper sense, a reflexive posture implies the acknowledgement of being personally implicated in Schön's "situation." The philosopher Gabriel Marcel distinguished between the categories of "problem" and "mystery". In *Le Monde Cassé* (1933), he argued that the world is broken when every challenge is reduced to a "problem" and we do no longer allow room for "mystery". A problem is something external to us, something we can look at from a certain distance, dissect, inspect and analyse. Problems can be solved by techniques, methods, algorithms. In a paradoxical way, this notion of problem is meta-problematic. A

mystery, instead, can only be approached by someone who is involved – and the identity of the person asking or seeking answers is an important dimension. The problem is "before me." The mystery is "in me." If the questioner changes, the question raised by the mystery changes. We have seen in the pandemic how some of the challenges were correctly identified as problems and handled via regulations, government intervention and the provision of funds and grants. But other more subtle changes in our daily bio-politics, our deeper sense of the relationship with 'the others' and our work, our city, our planet involve mysteries that each of us has to handle individually (Baldoli and Radaelli, 2020). Thinking of the future of the policy sciences, the dyadic solution state-or-market will remain essential for certain problems, but the policy sciences should also become open to "mysteries" and trust citizens as-policy-actors to deal with them (following Bowles and Carlin, 2020).

Conclusions

In our journey through the present challenges and the opportunities for more relevant policy research, we anchored our claims and arguments with five verbs: to learn, to analyse, to advise, to empower, and to reflect. The expertise of policy researchers has potential for the new brave world of big questions that faces us in a post-pandemic future. These questions interrogate the very foundations of our models of life and co-existence, the management of the economy and the balance between human rights and safety. For the world of policy researchers, the big questions raise normative questions that affect all five dimensions we examined in this chapter. In synthesis, they call for pathways to the democratization of our expertise (Liberatore, 2001; Radaelli, 2002). In the end, the big social questions can only be addressed if we successfully answer our own big questions about the mission and role of the policy researcher. This does not mean ignoring what we have done so far. Quite the opposite, it is a return to the original vision of the founding figures of public policy. We need to

reconnect to where we are coming from, and look at the future with more ambition and mindfulness of who we are and how our expertise contributes to the policy process and the quality of governance.

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