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Chapter · January 2016

DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-31816-5_253-1

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Comparative Public Policy

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Synonyms

[Comparative policy studies](#); [Comparative political studies](#); [Comparative politics](#); [Comparative public administration](#); [Public policy studies](#)

Definition

Comparative public policy is an area of interdisciplinary study which uses public policy as its major unit of analysis for comparison across different systems and institutions, usually countries or governments. It typically asks questions about how, why, and to what effect different governments pursue different or similar policies. It faces problems of contested identities of method versus field and the lack of a coherent and comprehensive theoretical framework. These problems are being addressed by its emerging research, which also contributes to the creation of integrated and impactful knowledge in social science.

Introduction

Comparative public policy is an important area of study cutting across major disciplines in social science (Adolino and Blake 2011; Castles 1998; Heidenheimer et al. 1990; Rose 2005). It carries both academic and policy significance. In recent years, it is gaining strength and influence because of the growing awareness of the limitation of isolated and compartmentalized knowledge of traditional academic disciplines in policy applications and the pressing need to acquire theory-guided and empirically proven knowledge for resolving serious policy problems under a globalized environment.

Many traditional disciplines of social sciences often select their research questions based on their disciplinary interest and conduct the analysis following their own logic of theoretical inquiry. A single theoretical lens inevitably narrows the comprehensiveness and scope of its inquiry. While compartmentalization of knowledge can be taken as specialization of knowledge and gives the advantage of theoretical strength of a disciplinary approach, compared with an interdisciplinary approach, their outputs of research are often too partial and fragmented for providing a complete analysis of a public problem to meet the expectations of scholars and practitioners of policymaking (Raadschelders 2005; Riggs 1991, 1998; Welch and Wong 1998).

Advance in comparative public policy research holds the promise of moving both theory and

practice forward not only in public policy but also in many major disciplines in social science related to public policy (Fitzpatrick et al. 2011; Heidenheimer 1985; Pontusson 1995; Rose 2005). With its interdisciplinary nature, comparative public policy can enhance theory development through integrating the theoretical lens and strengths of knowledge of different discipline. Building on a problem-based or issue-based approach and uses “policy” as its major unit of analysis, it allows a high level of integration between theory and practice. Moreover, adopting a comparative perspective, it assimilates experiences and cases across countries and regions in making a significant contribution to construct a global social science (Gulrajani and Moloney 2012). However, at the current stage of its development, there is still a gap between what it can deliver and what it has accomplished.

The main objective of this chapter is to help bridge that gap by introducing comparative public policy and discussing critically the challenges and opportunities it is facing. This chapter is organized into the following sections. It first defines the field by focusing on its uniqueness as well as relationships with similar areas of studies. The second section examines its crisis of contested identities and reviews three key trends of its research. Two of them are carrying major hope of enhancing the studies by addressing its core problem of the lack of sophisticated and coherent theoretical framework dedicated to it. The third section discusses the major challenges and opportunities of its future development. It concludes by emphasizing the close and important linkage between comparative public policy and social science in their parallel and interactive development.

Defining the Field: Uniqueness and Similarities

Since comparative public policy is mainly about studying public policy under a comparative context, answering the question of “what is public policy” should be the first and important step in defining comparative public policy. According to Anderson (2011), public policy can be defined as “a relatively stable, purposive course of action or inaction followed by government in dealing with a

problem or matter of concern.” He further supplemented this definition by stating that “this definition focuses on what is actually done instead of what is being proposed and intended; differentiates a policy from a decision, which is essentially a specific choice among alternatives, and views policy as something that unfolds overtime” (pp. 6–7).

There are several important elements in the above definition. First, although there are many actors, including nongovernmental actors, in the making of public policy, because of its “public” nature which involves the use of public power and authority, government still plays a central and defining role in the making of public policy. It is the presence and involvement of government which makes the whole matter and process “public.” Because of the central and irreplaceable role of government in public policy, comparative public policy is a comparison of policies made by different governments or public institutions. Second, public policy is a purposive and goal-oriented course of action. Although the final outcome of public policymaking can be irrational and may not really solve a public problem, it is often a rational compromise among different actors involved based on their goals and incentives filtered or structured by institutions. That is why public policy is different from a specific decision as emphasized by Anderson. Policy is often the outcome of a course of action among multiple players whose role and influence are defined by institutional and structural factors. It also means comparing public policy is essentially a comparison of the impacts of institutions (Heidenheimer et al. 1990; Pontusson 1995; Scharpf 2000).

Building on the main elements of public policy, Heidenheimer et al. (1990) define comparative public policy as “the study of how, why, and to what effect different governments pursue particular courses of action or inaction.” Recognizing the influence of institutions on policymaking, they suggest the study of comparative public policy “requires learning aspects of the structures and processes through which governmental decisions are reached,” and scholars should keep in mind the importance of these ultimate determinants of policy choices made by nations. They also

Comparative Public Policy, Table 1 Major classification of comparative studies

Fields	Unit of analysis	Core discipline (s)	Main concerns in development
Comparative public policy	Public policy	Interdisciplinary	Contested identities: method or field Difficulty in theory development due to the complexity of the subject matter and its interdisciplinary nature of inquiry Applying and “borrowing” theories from other disciplines, lack of a coherent and comprehensive theoretical framework
Comparative politics	Political systems and institutions	Political science	Limitation in power of analysis and scope of inquiry by a single discipline
Comparative public administration	Bureaucracy, administrative, and governance systems	Interdisciplinary	A wider range of theories but mostly “borrowing” from other disciplines. lack of a coherent and comprehensive theoretical framework A wider scope of inquiry from its problem-based approach but focusing mainly on administrative apparatus and capacity and the policy implementation stage

emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of comparative public policy by arguing that it “can never become a self-contained specialized discipline” and it is always “located at busy crossroads in social sciences.”

The interdisciplinary nature of comparative public policy is both a curse and a gift. It can enrich the content and perspectives of comparative public policy on the one hand but also cause concerns of overlapping boundaries and confused identities with other studies and disciplines. Table 1 shows the differences in terms of unit of analysis, core discipline, and main concerns in the development for three distinctive but interrelated areas of study: comparative public policy, comparative politics, and comparative public administration. They are all distinctive because they all have their uniqueness in terms of concerns or theoretical lens. At the same time, they are also interrelated as they do share some overlapping elements. One obvious example is all of them adopt comparative approaches and methods in the general arena of research in social science.

Comparative public policy is different from comparative politics as the latter is a subfield of political science, while comparative public policy is interdisciplinary in nature of which political science is only one of the pillars of its theoretical

foundation (Heidenheimer 1985; Pontusson 1995; Scharpf 2000). The two are also different in terms of their unit of analysis as comparative public policy uses “policy,” not political systems and institutions as its unit of analysis. To comparative public policy, political systems and institutions are some of its important independent variables rather than its unit of analysis. Comparative public policy and comparative public administration share many similarities, for example, both of them are interdisciplinary in nature and adopt a problem-based approach (Fitzpatrick et al. 2011; Gulrajani and Moloney 2012; Jreisat 2005). In general, however, comparative public policy is a broader and more inclusive area of study. The concept of policy, a key focus of comparative public policy, is broader than the concept of bureaucracy, a main concern in comparative public administration. Comparative public policy goes beyond the study of administrative apparatus and capacities which is linked mostly to the stage of policy implementation and covers all major stages in the policy cycle in its analysis.

Contested Identities and Major Trends in Research

Being unique does not mean comparative public policy does not encounter any major problems

and crises in its identity and development. Owing to the lack of a coherent and comprehensive theoretical framework of its own, “borrowing” theories from other well-established disciplines is still a common practice in its research (Heidenheimer 1985; Heidenheimer et al. 1990; Pontusson 1995; Scharpf 2000). This should not be taken as the total fault of its scholars as theory development is particularly difficult in comparative public policy because of the complexity and multifaceted nature of its subject matter. Nevertheless, this still leads to a serious problem of contested identities of “method versus field” in comparative public policy (Feldman 1978). There is a debate on whether comparative public policy has reached the status of being qualified as a field or it should be taken as no more than a method of using comparative approaches in research. As summarized by Feldman (1978) very well, “without a guiding theory, explanations for policy become lists constantly awaiting addenda, and comparative cases hover close to a line of anecdote” (Feldman 1978, p. 300). Although these words were written more than three decades ago, to a considerable extent, the situation described still persists. In many textbooks of comparative public policy, they are still relatively thin and weak on theory but are rich and more detailed in the discussion of cases of different countries and policy areas.

While its undeniable comparative public policy is lagging behind in developing its own theories and frameworks, there are some encouraging new developments on this aspect. Gupta (2012) summarizes three major categories of current research in comparative public policy: using comparative method, comparing theories across institutional configurations, and comparing theories to one another. By emphasizing being “comparative” in research, the first category is basically a continuation of the tradition of comparative public policy. The second and third categories, however, are promising developments in transforming the study of comparative public policy from a method into a field, a status which it should be long deserved. The development of comparative public policy in the direction of being more theory oriented is not only benefiting itself but also social science disciplines related to public policy. It is

because comparative public policy research is an important testing ground of the robustness and generalizability of theories in social science. The recent development in comparative public policy research should be more appropriately considered from a wider scope as a positive step for enhancing of the development of theories in social science.

According to Gupta’s (2012) review, the first category of research in comparative public policy refers to the traditional use of comparative method to answer two primary questions: how do policies differ across countries and what explains these differences. This category still represents a majority of the studies and serves as the existing foundations of comparative public policy research. With the rising importance of multilevel governance, a new addition to this category of research is in addition to comparing nationally, many studies also compare subnationally. This category of research, however, still suffers from the weakness of confining themselves to identifying differences across systems and countries without intensively answering the question of “why” through coherent and rigorous theoretical frameworks. Even if a theoretical lens is applied, it is also often borrowed from other fields and disciplines.

The hope of transforming comparative public policy into a respected and well-established field of study is pinned on two emerging trends of research (Gupta 2012). These two categories are highly interrelated by their strong theoretical orientation. The main difference between them is the second category compares a theory (or theories) across institutional configurations, while the third category of studies focuses mainly on comparing theories in answering the same question in policy research. Both of them have the potential of pushing forward the knowledge frontier of comparative public policy by contributing to theory development in public policy. Together, they form a mutually benefiting process which generates positive inputs to both theories in public policy and social science disciplines related to public policy studies.

One example of the second category of comparative public policy research is the testing of the validity and applications of Advocacy Coalition

Framework (ACF), a major theoretical framework for analyzing policy equilibrium and change by key variables including policy learning, policy beliefs, policy coalitions, and policy subsystems, across different political settings, systems, and contexts. According to Sabatier and Weible (2014), ACF has been applied in 224 studies with applications in all continents and multiple policy areas including environment, health, finance/economics, social, education, technology, and recreation/tourism. A major contribution of this category of research is the development and applications of theories specifically for public policy process by testing their explanatory power across institutional configurations. By putting the theories of public policy process into empirical testing across institutional configurations, it allows researchers to revisit their theories and refine them to take into consideration of the influence of contextual factors, including culture, political structure, economic system which often differ across countries but do matter in affecting policy outcome, and behaviors of policy actors.

Similar to the category of research comparing the power and validity of public policy theories across institutional configurations, the third category of emerging research in comparative public policy puts a strong emphasis on the use of theoretical lens in analysis. However, instead of testing a single theory across institutional configurations and settings, it uses multiple theories to answer the same research question in public policy in order to develop the best theory. One good example of this category of research is a study by Ness (2010) which examines how state governments in the US determine merit aid eligibility criteria to assign college funding by using three competing theories of policymaking, ACF, multiple streams (MS) and the electoral connection (EC) framework. The study finds MS is the most useful theoretical framework for understanding and explaining merit aid policy in the US though this does not exclude the fact that the other two theories also have their explanatory value. As a result, in concluding his study, Ness designs a revised MS model which also integrates the useful elements from the two other theories. Although this third category of research mainly

focuses on a single policy question, by comparing and integrating theories, it has also helped to serve the same purpose of building better and more powerful theories of public policies which are adaptive and resistant to settings and contexts.

Challenges and Opportunities in Future Development

The two categories of emerging research are really two sides of the same coin. Regardless of comparing theories across institutional configurations or comparing theories to one another, they share the same aim of developing robust general theories which can travel across systems, countries, and contexts. They have been proved as productive and useful in addressing the two problems haunting comparative public policy for decades, the use of comparison methods without a theoretical framework and the proliferation of diverse and misplaced theories borrowed casually from other fields. To further move the studies of comparative public policy forward in terms of both academic and policy values, there are hurdles scholars must recognize and overcome. As a roadmap for its future, major challenges and opportunities of the future development of comparative public policy are identified in Table 2.

First of all, challenges of the complex and multifaceted nature of the field caused by its policy-based nature can be taken as an incentive for building knowledge which integrates theory and practice, particularly in constructing middle-range theories as an intermediate solution. Its problem of contested identities of field versus method has been addressed by the two emerging trends of research, which also provides a good opportunity to construct a theory in social science that is integrative, generalizable, universal, global, robust, and actionable in nature. It has been a common complaint in comparative research that there are great difficulties to compare across systems due to problems of identifying common variables and contextual factors such as culture and tradition (Haque 1996; Moon and Ingraham 1998; Welch and Wong 1998; Wong 2013). Fortunately, to a large extent, these difficulties have been relieved under globalization. Globalization provides a more interactive and

Comparative Public Policy, Table 2 Future development of comparative public policy: challenges and opportunities

Comparative public policy	Challenges	Opportunities
Subject of study	Using policy as the unit of analysis, a problem-based and policy-based approach, and a comparative perspective makes the subject of inquiry multifaceted and too complicated to be theorized Confusing identity of field versus method	Integrating theory and practice, policy, and research Two emerging trends of research Part of the problem can be resolved by constructing middle-range theories that compare similar countries and systems rather than all of them
Theory development	Most theories are “borrowed” from other social science disciplines and therefore are not compatible and coherent as a theoretical lens	Provides a valuable opportunity to construct a theory in social science that is integrative, generalizable, universal, global, robust, and actionable in nature
Common variables	Difficulties to compare across systems due to problems of identifying common variables and contextual factors (e.g., culture, tradition, and history) and defining them	Globalization provides a more interactive and interconnected environment for introducing more common variables Globalization itself and global institutions can serve as the common variables
Research collaboration	Require an extreme high level of requirements in terms of contextual knowledge, methods, and disciplinary training	Problems can be resolved by team-based collaboration, with institutional support and incentives
Impact and significance	Practical policy advice may come at the expense of level of theoretical content	Visible policy impact increase awareness of importance and contribution of social science knowledge

interconnected environment for introducing more common variables, such as economic and public management reforms and information and communication technology (Jordan et al. 2005; Welch and Wong 2001; Wong 2013). In fact, globalization itself and actors or pressures induced by it, including global institutions, global public-private partnerships, and transnational networks, can also serve as the common variables (Stone 2008; Welch and Wong 1998). Studying how these variables affect each country and system differently can generate many meaningful insights to contribute to the theory development of comparative public policy.

The rise of globalization does fit well in enhancing the two categories of emerging research. Globalization makes comparing theories across institutional configuration more easily and meaningful as all countries in the world are being impacted by globalization (Welch and Wong 1998, 2001). In essence, it gives scholars of comparative public policy something common to compare with in studying countries and their

institutional configurations to avoid the embarrassing situation of spending a large amount of fruitless effort on comparing apples to oranges. At the same time, with the development of a large group of theories to capture the effect of globalization on various aspects of states and governments, these theories present an ideal opportunity for the second category of emergence research in comparative public policy. Studies of globalization has provided its help to the second category of research by generating multiple theories to be tested for their explanatory power and contextual relevancy in its own research, which may include in-depth case study of an individual country or a group of countries, for identifying and developing the best theory to answer a policy research question..

Due to the complex, multifaceted and interdisciplinary nature of its subject matter, studies of comparative public policy demands scholars and researchers to have a very high level of knowledge and skills, which would include knowledge of different systems and institutions across countries

and contexts. Apparently, it is very difficult and can even be unrealistic to expect any individual researcher to meet all these high levels of requirements and expectations for conducting good-quality research in comparative public policy. This issue of “competence” has been a chronic problem long identified as an obstacle hindering the development of comparative public policy (Feldman 1978). Therefore, it will be more reasonable to seek for collaboration with research conducted on a team basis. Each member should possess knowledge in a particular country or a small group of countries among those being compared. They should also represent a wide and diverse background in disciplinary and methodological training.

Calling for more effort in collaborative and interdisciplinary research has been made in many literature reviews and summary works of comparative public policy for decades but has not been fully answered. It becomes increasingly clear that institutional restructuring and incentives would be necessary for the development and success of comparative public policy. For example, universities should create more collaborative projects and programs that promote joint cooperation of scholars from different disciplines. The setting up of those teams alone is not enough to ensure commitment and concentration from members if there is a lack of institutional incentive and recognition built into the personnel system of universities. Therefore, it is equally important that such collaborative teams are strongly supported by incentives on both team and individual levels. Moreover, interdisciplinary and policy-oriented research outputs should be assessed and valued in the decisions of tenure and promotion of individual scholars. Despite that, it must also be fully realized that while institutional support for comparative public policy research is critical and necessary, it is still the responsibility of scholars in comparative public policy to prove to universities, policymakers, and society the impact and significance of their research in order to convince them to make the above investment.

Conclusion

This chapter explains the importance of comparative public policy in terms of both policy and research. It also discusses how comparative public policy can move both theory and practice forward by integrating theories from different disciplines and creating knowledge that is not only actionable for designing effective policy tools but also generalizable across countries, institutions, and contexts. It represents an attempt to overcome a long-time problem of compartmentalization of knowledge in the traditional social science disciplines which limits the scope and comprehensiveness of analysis of public policies. The problem of compartmentalization has reduced the usefulness and weakened the relevancy of social science knowledge in a globalized and interactive world in which citizens and policymakers have legitimate expectations for universities and scholars to provide educated insights on solving major public problems.

At the moment, a gap still exists between the current state of comparative public policy research and its potential power. Before the studies of comparative public policy can make major progress, some major challenges and obstacles must be addressed. Among them, due to the complex and interdisciplinary nature of its subject matter, it is extremely difficult to develop a theory of its own which triggers an identity crisis. Without a coherent and comprehensive theoretical framework, it is often perceived as a method rather than a respected field of study. Reviewing the history and development of comparative public policy, a major lesson one should have learnt is it is not likely those problems and challenges could be overcome by efforts of scholars and researchers at an individual level. To ensure comparative public policy can fulfill its promise, it would need more than the diligence of individual scholars and must require institutional commitment in the social science enterprise on how comparative policy research is going to be recognized, conducted, and supported.

What is often needed is more cooperation and a better division of labor. Successfully overcoming problems of the development of comparative public policy would demand scholars and researchers

coming from different disciplines and backgrounds to work intensively together on a collaborative basis. Instead of requiring each member of a research team having the same set of skills and knowledge in comparative public policy, which is often too ambiguous and demanding, it is more realistic and convenient to assemble a team of researchers who could complement each other in terms of country information, disciplinary knowledge, and methodological training. This collaboration should be backed up by institutional restructuring, support, and incentives. Furthermore, the co-optation of policymakers into the collaborative research team could also be a good suggestion to ensure the close linkage between research and practice.

The investment needed for further developing and enhancing the study of comparative public policy is definitely not small. However, this investment should be worthwhile as the benefits and contributions are much bigger. The globalization environment also provides a valuable opportunity never available before for scholars of comparative public policy to make their studies meaningful and manageable. By using globalization and similar variables as common variables in comparative public policy research, they are no longer comparing countries without connection and similarities which is just like comparing apples and oranges. In short, globalization has reinforced the two emerging trends of research in comparative public policy, comparing theories across institutional configurations and comparing theories to one another, to create more powerful, robust, and generalizable theories in public policy.

Development of comparative public policy also enhances knowledge creation in social science and raises the visibility and impact of social science knowledge. It is the mission of modern social science to create a body of integrated knowledge which has the ability to incorporate experiences across countries and disciplines for understanding issues of public concern as well as creating high impacts (Bastow et al. 2014). This mission points to the creation of a global science, a more inclusive and reliable scholarship, which “ultimately would become a cumulative and collaborative social science enterprise, one that links

theory, methods, and data in robust and defensible ways” (Gulrajani and Moloney 2012, p. 85). By enhancing the analytical and explanatory power of its theories, the development of comparative public policy is part of the critical effort of increasing the visibility and validity of social science knowledge. Consequently, from a broader perspective, the state of comparative public policy is always a major indicator of the degree of success of social science scholars in pulling their knowledge together for making an impactful and discernable contribution to society.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Advocacy Coalition Framework](#)
- ▶ [Evolution of Public Policy](#)
- ▶ [Limits of Public Policy](#)
- ▶ [Policy Change](#)
- ▶ [Policy Functions](#)
- ▶ [Public Policy Analysis](#)

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