The lessons of learning: Reconciling theories of policy learning and policy change

COLIN J. BENNETT[1] & MICHAEL HOWLETT[2]
[1]*Department of Political Science, University of Victoria, Victoria, B.C. V8W 3P5, Canada*
[2]*Department of Political Science, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C. V5A 1S6, Canada*

Abstract. Several different explanations of policy change based on notions of learning have emerged in the policy literature to challenge conventional conflict-oriented theories. These include notions of 'political-learning' developed by Heclo, 'policy-oriented learning' developed by Sabatier, 'lesson-drawing' analyzed by Rose, 'social learning' discussed by Hall and 'government learning' identified by Etheredge. These different concepts identify different actors and different effects with each different type of learning. Some elements of these theories are compatible, while others are not. This article examines each approach in terms of who learns, what they learn, and the effects of learning on subsequent policies. The conclusion is that three distinct types of learning have often been incorrectly juxtaposed. Certain conceptual, theoretical and methodological difficulties attend any attempt to attribute policy change to policy learning, but this does not detract from the important reorientation of policy analysis that this approach represents.

1. Introduction: Policy change and the ambiguities of policy learning

Policies change in a variety of different ways. As has long been recognized, some policies are new and innovative, while others are merely incremental refinements of earlier policies (Hogwood and Peters, 1983; Polsby, 1984). Why policies change, however, is not a well-understood phenomena. Until recently, the largely untested orthodoxy was that public policies, like other state actions, were driven by social pressures. Whether found in its pluralist, neo-pluralist, corporatist or Marxist guise, this view presupposed a relatively passive government whose actions were driven by social forces and conflicts (Nordlinger, 1981). As Jack Walker pointed out as early as 1974, however:

> It is doubtful that the development and behaviour of great public bureaucracies can be understood if they are conceived of as exclusively passive or defensive agencies reacting to influences flowing into them from outside their boundaries and gaining power only as a reflection of the size or influence of their immediate constituencies. An extremely important source of influence of civil servants, consultants and other policy specialists is their ability to shape the intellectual premises and performance measures employed by policy-makers (Walker, 1974: 3).

Such an insight into the role of ideas in the policy process led Hugh Heclo to suggest that a new approach to public policy-making which focused on knowledge acquisition and utilization could yield better explanations and understanding about policies than existing conflict-based theories. As he argued in his 1974 study of British and Swedish social policy:

> Tradition teaches that politics is about conflict and power.... This is a blinkered view of politics and particularly blinding when applied to social policy. Politics finds its sources not only in power but also in uncertainty – men collectively wondering what to do.... Policy-making is a form of collective puzzlement on society's behalf (Heclo, 1974: 305).

The view that states are more than arenas for social conflict is now widely held, but not so is a focus on learning as the source of policy change. Within conflict-oriented policy theory, the nature of the mechanism or agent of policy change and the role of knowledge in that process remains unclear (Castles, 1990). While learning approaches overcome some such difficulties, they raise another set of questions. These approaches generally hold that states can learn from their experiences and that they can modify their present actions on the basis of their interpretation of how previous actions have fared in the past. However, many of the fundamental elements of such learning remain conceptually unclear and, as a result, the entire phenomenon of experience-induced policy change remains difficult to operationalize (Bennett and Howlett, 1991; Bennett, 1991; Hernes, 1976).

Part of the problem can be traced to different conceptions of 'learning' utilized by different authors active in the field. Hall, for example, utilizes an instrumental definition of learning, arguing that learning serves the object of better goal attainment by governments. As he puts it, learning is a 'deliberate attempt to adjust the goals or techniques of policy in the light of the consequences of past policy and new information so as to better attain the ultimate objects of governance.' (Hall, 1988: 6) This is quite different from Heclo's original formulation which suggested that learning is a less conscious activity, often occurring as a governmental response to some kind of societal or environmental stimulus. In Heclo's view 'learning can be taken to mean a relatively enduring alteration in behavior that results from experience; usually this alteration is conceptualized as a change in response made in reaction to some perceived stimulus.' (Heclo, 1974: 306)

This definitional ambiguity is significant because it suggests that different authors working in the area have different notions of learning in mind even though they may utilize the same term to describe them. In the case of the two definitions provided above, for example, both authors are talking about the nature of the relationship existing between policy learning and policy change, but differ substantially in how they approach the issue. For Hall, what he terms 'social learning' is part of the normal public policy-making process in which decision-makers attempt to understand why certain initiatives may

have succeeded while others failed. If policies change as a result of learning, the impetus for this change originates within the formal policy process of governments. For Heclo, on the other hand, what he terms 'political learning' is seen as an activity undertaken by policy-makers as a reaction to changes in external policy 'environments'. As the environment changes, policy makers must adapt if their policies are not to fail.

These definitional ambiguities with learning theory do not end here, however, for these two rival conceptions of policy related learning do not exhaust the field. Lloyd Etheredge, for example, has utilized another construct, 'government learning', to describe the process by which governments increase their intelligence and sophistication and in this manner enhance the effectiveness of their actions (Etheredge, 1981: 77–78). Drawing on the works of Lindblom and others into the connections between knowledge and policy, Etheredge has adapted elements of the analysis of 'organizational learning' to policy studies (Lindblom and Cohen, 1979; Lynn, 1978). Although themselves divided in terms of a precise definition of learning, organization theorists share notions of organizational adaptation and behavior change due to knowledge accumulation and value-change within institutions and their members. Etheredge suggests these concepts apply equally to public organizations as to private firms (Argyris and Schon, 1978; Shrivastava, 1983) while a similar understanding of learning has been applied to international governments by Ernst Haas (1990: 17–49).

Yet another approach has been developed by Paul Sabatier in his work on policy networks and policy communities (1987; 1988). Stemming from an earlier concern with the effects of the collection and dissemination of the results of policy analysis and its effects on subsequent policies, Sabatier has argued that 'policy-oriented learning' is a major determinant of policy innovation and change (Sabatier, 1978; Weiss, 1977a; Weiss, 1977b). As he has put it, policy-oriented learning involves 'relatively enduring alterations of thought or behavioral intentions that result from experience and that are concerned with the attainment or revisions of the precepts of one's belief system' (1987: 672).

Finally, in his recent work, Richard Rose has utilized yet another conception of learning – 'lesson-drawing' – to help describe the process by which programs and policies developed in one country are emulated by others and diffused throughout the world (Rose, 1988; Rose, 1991). As Rose has put it, lesson-drawing is a particular type of learning in which policy-makers learn from both the positive and negative experiences of others; 'confronted with common problems, policy-makers in cities, regional governments, and nations can learn from how their counterparts elsewhere respond. More than that, it raises the possibility that policy-makers can draw lessons that will help them deal better with their own problems' (Rose, 1991: 4).

These five conceptions of learning and its role in public policy formation – political learning, government learning, policy-oriented learning, lesson drawing and social learning – now compete in the literature and are used by

many analysts to describe a commonly described tendency for some policy decisions to be made on the basis of knowledge of past experiences and knowledge-based judgments as to future expectations. However, these concepts are not, in fact, interchangeable. They have different origins and describe different aspects of the learning process and it is important to note the areas to which they apply and those to which they do not if a usable set of concepts for theory construction and evaluation is to be maintained (Sartori, 1968).

This article sets out to evaluate these competing concepts and to aid in the clarification of the role of knowledge in the policy process. It does so by discussing each of the five afore-mentioned concepts in terms of what each has to say about three critical components of the learning process: who learns, what is learned, and what effects on resulting policies emerge as a result of learning.[1] In so doing, it suggests that three distinct types of policy learning exist and are incorrectly juxtaposed in the existing literature. It is argued that disaggregating these concepts is the first step towards successful operationalization of learning approaches to public policy analysis, but that significant conceptual, methodological, and theoretical aspects of the subject remain to be resolved before this approach can be integrated into the mainstream of policy studies.

2. The subject of learning: Who learns?

Clarifying the range of social or state actors that are the subjects of the learning process is an important step towards eliminating much of the imprecision of the focal concept. As Hall has noted, the answer usually provided to this question is intimately related to larger theoretical debates surrounding the role of the state in the public policy process (Hall, 1988). It is possible to argue that learning takes place solely during the intra-governmental stages of the policy cycle; a position which is quite compatible with approaches to policy theory which emphasize the actions and activities of (relatively) autonomous state officials (Nordlinger, 1981) or the manner in which the overall structural configuration of state institutions influences those actors (Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol, 1988). It is also possible to argue that learning within governments is simply a response to imperatives which emerge in the societies they govern, meaning the significant actors are not state officials but rather the societal actors who create the conditions to which state actors must respond. A third possibility, that state officials and societal actors are locked in a life-long and somewhat complex embrace in which they both determine each others' activities, including learning, also exists (Mitchell, 1991).

Of the five contending conceptions of learning and policy change put forward above, one (Heclo) argues the preeminence of societal forces; another (Etheredge) is located firmly within the formal institutions of the state, while the other three opt for more complex views of the relationships existing between these two sets of actors.

In his early work on the subject, Heclo most clearly opts for the view that learning is driven by social forces. Heclo argues that policy change is the 'natural byproduct of economic development, the outcome of popular electoral control of leaders and party competition, the result of interest group pressures, or the emergence and growth of administrative expertise' (1974: 284–285). While Heclo speaks of general processes of 'social learning' and 'group learning' and of more specific types of 'organizational' learning with regard to policies, his focus is on sets of political actors who are capable of influencing policy change. These are the 'middlemen at the interfaces of various groups' who have 'access to information, ideas, and positions outside the normal run of organizational actors (p. 308) and have been able to package and promote policy innovations. These 'policy middlemen' are key players and central actors in the process of political learning and resulting policy changes. They are the transmission belt by which changes in the socioeconomic environment are transmitted to governments. As Heclo put it, 'the importance of policy middlemen has sprung not from any unique powers of abstract thought, but from sensitivity to the changes going on around them and access to powerful institutions' (p. 311).

This view is quite supple, but is unclear on a number of significant questions. Probably the most obvious lacuna concerns what exactly qualifies one for membership in the guild of political brokers. On occasion Heclo seems to argue that membership in an interest group is a prerequisite, but on other occasions argues that the entrepreneurial function of the middleman does not necessarily operate exclusively within the interest represented. Most of the examples he provides identify prominent members of government or state officials with few links to any specific interest group as key actors. As was the case with his later work on issue networks, however, without a clear definition of the criteria for brokerage membership, this analysis falls under the general rubric of 'elite studies' and shares all of the well-known problems of that genre of political theory (Heclo, 1978).

Unlike Heclo's early work, Etheredge's model is quite precise in identifying the agent of learning. The model he develops is quite explicit in its focus upon governments and largely ignores the role of societal actors in the learning process. Nevertheless, it is not clear exactly who the agent of learning is within a government. Etheredge asserts that learning is an activity that can take place at both the individual and organizational levels, but does not address this question in any detail as it pertains to specific government members or institutions. From the types of cases presented in his works, however, it appears that he is thinking for the most part about administrative officials at both the senior and junior levels of public service employment. Government learning, in this sense, is bureaucratic learning and the agent of learning is the bureaucrat.

This latter conception is quite different from those put forward by Sabatier, Hall and Rose. In his analysis of 'policy-oriented learning,' Sabatier refines many of the notions utilized by Heclo and attempts a marriage of interest-

based and knowledge-based public policy theory (Heintz and Jenkins-Smith, 1988). Sabatier adopts Heclo's definition of learning as involving alterations in policy relevant behavior caused by experience. While Heclo relies on a loosely-defined set of policy middlemen to accomplish this learning, however, Sabatier argues that a particular kind of policy subsystem, the 'advocacy coalition' is the agent of learning.

The 'advocacy coalition' combines elements of what are more commonly referred to as 'policy networks' or 'policy communities' (Wilks and Wright, 1987; Wright, 1988). Harkening back to Heclo's notion of loosely defined 'issue networks,' Sabatier argues that advocacy coalitions include a variety of both state and non-state actors. These 'include actors at various levels of government active in policy formulation and implementation, as well as journalists, researchers, and policy analysts who play important roles in the generation, dissemination, and evaluation of policy ideas' (Sabatier, 1988: 131).

Sabatier explicitly rejects institutional definitions of subsystem membership, noting that advocacy coalitions usually arise out of dissatisfaction with existing institutional arrangements (p. 138). Similarly he rejects organizational networking analyses because these rely on pictures of existing relationships between actors which *a priori* rule out potential or latent actors and combinations of actors (p. 138). In his work coalition membership is defined by two criteria, knowledge and interaction.

> After considering several alternatives, I have concluded that the most useful means of aggregating actors in order to understand policy change over fairly long periods of time is by 'advocacy coalitions.' These are people from a variety of positions (elected and agency officials, interest group leaders, researchers) who share a particular belief system – i.e. a set of basic values, causal assumptions, and problem perceptions – and who show a non-trivial degree of co-ordinated activity over time (p. 139).

In most policy fields, he expects the number of these coalitions or networks to be quite small; possibly one, or as many as four, existing in any given area. Coalitions perform most of the functions usually associated with interest groups in pluralist analyses, and are linked together by 'policy brokers' whose 'dominant concern is with keeping the level of political conflict within acceptable limits and with reaching some 'reasonable' solution to the problem' (p. 141). These brokers are usually elected officials or high civil servants who might, in other circumstances, themselves be advocates rather than brokers. Thus for Sabatier, the agent of learning is the policy network, a conception which extends the agent of learning from the relatively narrow 'policy middlemen' proposed by Heclo and the state officials of Etheredge.

In his version of learning theory, Peter Hall also adopts an approach which includes both state and societal actors as the predominant agents of learning. Concerned with the statist critique of society-centered policy models, Hall saw the need to develop the outlines of a new statist interpretation of public

policy-making to replace the much criticized earlier models. Although heavily influenced by Heclo, Hall has argued that state autonomy from societal forces is the condition which allows policy formation to be characterized by learning rather than by conflict. The principal agents of learning, in his view are, 'the officially-sanctioned experts operating in a given field of policy. The most important of them work for the state itself or advise it from privileged positions at the interface between the bureaucracy and the intellectual enclaves of society' (Hall, 1988: 5).

A major question which Hall does not address, however, is the relationship which exists between these officials and the public; or between the state and society. In his case studies of economic policy formation in Western Europe he variously argues that politicians or officials were the most significant actors, depending upon the particulars of each case examined.

> We need to recognize that parties and interest groups are not the only channels that bind state to society ... the direction of policy is also influenced by a network of ideas to which actors in the state and society both contribute.... Many have argued that the influence of bureacrats is inexorably increasing while that of politicians declines. This was a useful corrective to the traditional notion that politicians formulate policy while loyal officials merely implement it. However ... bureaucrats and politicians both play distinctive and influential roles in the formulation of policy (pp. 24–25).

Not satisfied with this characterization of the agent of learning, Hall concludes that the issue is a complex one requiring further study. As he states in his conclusion to his 1989 symposium on the spread of Keynesian ideas across nations:

> Every state is tied to society by a network of institutionalized relations that structure the flow of information, resources and pressure between public and private sectors. They include: established networks for interest intermediation, institutional arrangements for the provision of public finance, and organizational ties to private centers of knowledge. These relations can have an equally significant impact on the state's capacity to implement certain policies and they deserve further scrutiny (p. 380).

Hall thus seems to share several elements of Sabatier's focus upon the pivotal role played by policy subsystems in the learning process, but without an explicit recognition or description of the actual subsystem responsible. This focus is also shared by Rose in his analysis of learning or 'lesson-drawing.' Concerned with explaining under what circumstances and to what extent a program that is effective in one place can be transferred to another, Rose suggests that members of transnational epistemic communities are responsible for any learning which takes place in this process (Rose, 1991: 3).

Rose argues that the search for new knowledge is not a typical pursuit of governments and represents a reaction to discontent with the established *status quo*. Lesson drawing is done by policymakers who, Rose argues, usually rely upon members of expert professional communities for their advice (pp. 15–17). Following Haas (1990) he defines such communities as knowledge-based networks of individuals with a claim to policy-relevant knowledge based upon common professional beliefs and standards of judgment, and common policy concerns (p. 15–16).

While theorists of international relations who developed the concept usually use it only to describe actors in the international sphere (Bennett, 1992a; Haas, 1992; Ruggie, 1975), for Rose, such communities exist at the sub-national, national and international levels. Members of these communities are defined by their sharing some common expertise, although Rose points out that disagreements over the wisdom of particular policy measures is commonplace within such communities. They provide policy advice to decision-makers and are the agents by which lessons from domestic and foreign experiences are transmitted to policymakers, but they are not the decision-makers themselves. Those decision-makers are, in Rose's view, for the most part elected officials.

> Elected officials searching for lessons prefer to turn to those whose overall political values are consistent with their own. Although epistemic communities can be a source of new ideas necessary for lesson-drawing, they lack the political authority to impose binding decisions (p. 17).

As these different views suggest, within learning theory the location of the agency of policy learning is as complex a matter as is the location of the agency of power within conflict-based theory. At minimum it extends to the high level politicians and civil servants identified by Heclo. For Etheredge it extends to most civil servants, while for Hall, Sabatier and Rose complex arrangements of state and societal actors in various types of domestic and transnational policy networks and policy communities are key actors.

This wide-ranging set of alternative agents is a major source of conceptual ambiguity for policy analysts attempting to utilize learning-based approaches to policy studies. It makes it very difficult if not impossible to operationalize a learning approach since agreement on the subject of such a study logically precedes any further investigations. Despite these differences, however, it is possible to clarify the question of the agent of learning by examining what these authors have to say about the object of learning and the effects of learning. As the discussion below reveals, the authors have very different conceptions about what is learned and its effects, differences which underlie their different concepts of the subject of learning.

3. The object of learning: Learns what?

In Heclo's early work, not only is the subject of learning ambiguous, but so is the object of learning. Generally, as is well known, Heclo argued most strongly that the policy process should be viewed more as a process of learning than as a process of conflict resolution, so that to a certain extent what is learned is policy itself. Given this analysis, the effect of this learning is new or altered policy, at minimum, 'a relatively enduring alteration in behavior that results from experience' (p. 306). But what exactly is gleaned by policy middlemen from experience? On this point, Heclo is unclear.

Partially, what is learned is the experiences of other jurisdictions (p. 310), although Heclo is quick to assert that learning is not simply about information and analysis. Rather, he assures us that power does matter, and that policy middlemen learn not only about what has been done by past government efforts but also about how it was done. That is, about the nature of political processes and institutions which actually adopt policy. So for Heclo learning involves learning about both the substance and process of policy, a conception which is too general to be of much use in empirical studies.

Once again, at the opposite extreme is Etheredge's work in which the object of learning is defined in organizational terms. In Etheredge's view, learning is determined by the growth of intelligence (Etheredge, 1981: 76–77). More specifically, drawing from cognitive development psychology, Etheredge and Short argue that there are three objective indicators of learning: '(a) increased capacity for differentiation, (b) increased capacity for organization and hierarchical integration, (c) increased capacity for reflective thought, perspective on the form and nature of the contents of thought, and on the choice of structuring principles' (p. 42).

Each of these is related to government bureaucracies which are said to learn as they develop and change. While this might lead some to conclude that government learning is solipsistic and self-referential, Etheredge argues that it is not a self-driven, neutral process of information accumulation. Rather he argues that it is a process influenced by a number of political and sociological variables. As he puts it:

> One hypothesis I want to emphasize again is that government learning is often the dependent variable. It is dependent on what universities teach, on what the voters want or can be sold, on what lobbying groups say, on the agendas the news media set, on the standards and quality of critics, on the action mood of the times, on conceptual and methodological innovations from university research, on whether people have enough genuine trust to tell the truth, and on much else. It is probably also true that learning by government is often a function of current active political conflict and the public adversary processes by which opponents of established policy do the research that ultimately makes government more intelligent (1981: 135).

Nevertheless, while the initiative and content of learning may be engendered by the interplay of state and societal actors, in Etheredge's work it remains state organizations which learn and state organizations which change when learning takes place.

In Sabatier's view, learning is not so much about organizations as it is about ideas. In his work, the glue that holds advocacy coalitions together is the 'Deep Core' beliefs held by their members. These extend to the fundamental normative and ontological axioms which define each individual's underlying personal philosophy (Sabatier, 1988: 144). However, Sabatier also argues that these deep core beliefs are relatively impermeable to change, meaning that coalitions are not usually involved in their alteration (p. 146). Instead, what these policy networks are engaged in is the alteration of two other aspects of coalition belief systems, those related to the 'Near Core' and other 'Secondary' aspects. The near core positions are those related to the types of strategies required to achieve the deep core beliefs, while the 'secondary' aspects relate to decisions on instruments and research required to implement the near core strategies (p. 145).

In Sabatier's view, policy-oriented learning therefore generally involves:

1. Improving one's understanding of the state of variables defined as important by one's belief system (or, secondarily, by competing belief systems).
2. Refining one's understanding of logical and causal relationships internal to a belief system.
3. Identifying and responding to challenges to one's belief system (pp. 150–151).

Thus, as Sabatier puts it, 'policy-oriented learning ... is an ongoing process of search and adaptation motivated by the desire to realize core policy beliefs' (p. 151). Ultimately, then, what is learned is how to better achieve one's ends, or how to better implement public policies.

This is quite similiar to the view developed by Rose in his study of lesson-drawing. In his work Rose points out that in any effort to reduce dissatisfaction with existing policies, policymakers have three alternatives: to turn to their national past; to speculate about the future; or to seek lessons from current experience in other places. He argues that evaluation and lesson-drawing are inextricably linked since a lesson includes a judgment about a program in effect elsewhere and the position of a potential user (p. 19). Learning involves scanning programs existing elsewhere, producing a conceptual model of a program of interest, and comparing the exemplar with the problems of the existing program which have occasioned dissatisfaction. Once this has been done, various kinds of lessons can be drawn.[2]

Hall has an elaborate conception of what is learned in the process of social learning, a conception which is quite similar to Sabatier's in many respects. However, Hall's conception of the object of learning is much broader than

Sabatier's; extending to the goals of policy or fundamental ideas and beliefs held by policy-makers.

Like Sabatier, Hall distinguishes between the means or instruments of policy and the goals or ends of policy. Unlike Sabatier, however, who argues that learning is restricted to the means of policy, Hall argues that learning affects both means and ends. In his scheme, learning involves three different types or 'orders.' In 'first-order learning,' lessons regarding the 'setting' of existing instruments are derived from past experiences. In 'second-order learning,' the use of various instruments themselves is considered. In the rarest form of learning or 'third-order learning,' changes involve the hierarchy of goals behind the policy itself (Hall, 1988: 7–8).

As this review has noted, on the question of the object of learning there is some disagreement among the five authors surveyed. While the generality of Heclo's formulation resists operationalization, Etheredge moved in the opposite direction and restricted learning to organizational features of state institutions. Sabatier, Rose and Hall all argued that it is programs and program information required to implement policy which is learned. Only one, Hall, argued that learning can be extended to policy goals as well as the means of implementing policy.

Like the discussion of the subject or agency of learning, this discussion suggests that the authors are in fact discussing several different types of learning. The type of learning outlined by Etheredge is specific to state officials and concerns itself with organizational features of state bureaucracies. Sabatier and Rose are both concerned with learning which affects instruments and programs adopted by governments to implement policies. Both focus on the activities of members of domestic and transnational policy subsystems in this learning process. A third type of learning is suggested by Hall; that is, learning which affects fundamental beliefs and values which underlie public policies. Although the actors responsible for this learning are not clearly specified by Hall, it would not be unreasonable to suggest from his comments that very broadly based knowledge-oriented policy communities are key players in this process.

4. The results of learning: To what effect?

The point that there are at least three distinct learning processes which these authors have uncovered is borne out by their evaluation of the third element of learning: its effects. Most of the authors argue that learning does not actually occur unless there is some kind of policy change which results from that learning process. What are the effects that each sees occuring as a result of learning?

In Heclo's view, there are two common types of policy change which occur as a result of learning. These are a type of unreflective, reflex, incrementalism, and, secondly, a more trial and error process of policy innovation and change.

The first type of learning, which Heclo refers to as 'classic conditioning' is the type that he argues is most typical of 'normal' everyday policy-making. As he argues, 'policy-makers may not exactly salivate at the sound of the usual bell, but there is something of a conditioned reflex in a great deal of their behaviour' (Heclo, 1974: 315). In this form of learning, fundamental policies are not questioned but merely altered in the face of new social concerns; or, in the event of a new problem appearing, a solution is reached by reasoning through analogy to established policies and programs.

In the second type of learning, or 'instrumental conditioning' to continue Heclo's psychological metaphor, the actions of policy makers are more uncertain and 'what one learns depends on what one does' (p. 316). That is, past initiatives are studied and criticized and lessons learned from past experiences which inform contemporary choices. Unfortunately, Heclo does not specify the conditions under which either of the two types of learning could be expected to occur.

Etheredge clearly couples the subject and object of learning together, arguing that learning involves both a growth in intelligence and an increase in effectiveness (Etheredge and Short, 1983: 43). In identifying 14 common types of problems that governments face, he notes that some demand a great deal of inquiry and research, while others do not; and that some hold out the promise that policy changes will be likely to come about as a result of an increase in knowledge while others do not. Thus, for example, if no problem is perceived little research will be done; new technologies can cause a 'stampede' of studies; while poorly defined problems may or may not be studied, but will have little possibility that any study undertaken will be policy relevant (pp. 135–140).[3]

In their own case studies, however, the authors argue that governments have difficulty bridging the gap or making the link between intelligence and effectiveness not so much due to the type of problems they encountered but due to limitations caused by bureaucratic forms of organization. That is, governments can accumulate information but government organizations and decision-making processes are often designed in such a fashion that increases in intelligence are not effectively translated into increases in effectiveness.

In his work, Sabatier focuses primarily on learning as a process by which networks learn from past experiences how better to achieve and implement their core beliefs. Thus learning is for the most part learning about techniques and processes by which to 'improve' policy; that is, to have that policy encompass and effectively implement core values.

But what of the core values themselves? Does learning have anything to do with changes in core values? For the most part Sabatier's answer is no. As he argued in his influential 1988 article:

> while policy-oriented learning is an important aspect of policy change and can often alter secondary aspects of a coalition's belief system, changes in the core aspects of a policy are usually the results of perturbations in non-

cognitive factors external to the subsystem such as macro-economic conditions or the rise of a new systemic governing coalition (p. 134).

In an earlier work, Sabatier argued that these beliefs were influenced by a set of 'external factors' which defined the environment in which they existed. These included relatively stable parameters such as the basic attributes of the problem area, the basic distribution of natural resources, the fundamental cultural values and social structure of the society in question, and the basic legal structure of the jurisdiction involved. These relatively stable parameters acted to establish and constrain basic beliefs which would be placed under tension by a set of dynamic variables including changes in socioeconomic conditions and technology, changes in governing coalitions, and the impact of policy decisions in other political systems and sub-systems (1987: 655–658).

Since Sabatier's discussion specifies the mechanism through which policy changes occurs – the changing values of members of advocacy coalitions – it is an improvement upon most earlier accounts. Despite Heintz and Jenkins-Smith's arguments to the contrary, however, it does not shed much light on the circumstances under which the crucial deep core beliefs which ultimately bind advocacy coalition together and channel their activities emerge (Heintz and Jenkins-Smith, 1988; Lindquist, 1990).

Rose also does not deal with the larger question of value change, and also focuses on instrument and program changes as the principal effects of learning. Refining Sabatier's notions, he argues that there are five common effects of lesson-drawing. First, a program from one jurisdiction may simply be copied by another. This only occurs when various cultural, political and social conditions in the two jurisdictions are virtually identical. More common is emulation, in which a program in effect in another jurisdiction is used as a model but is tailored to meet the requirements of the enacting jurisdiction. A third form of lesson-drawing is hybridization, where elements of two exemplar programs are combined into a new program. A fourth type of lesson-drawing is synthesis in which elements from a variety of programs are combined together into a new one. The final type of lesson which is drawn is inspiration in which programs in other jurisdictions are used to stimulate greater efforts to develop domestic ones. In all cases, the effect of learning extends only to programs and, presumably, to instruments. Program goals remain pre-established and the search for lessons does not extent to the adoption of new policy goals (Rose, 1991).

Hall, of course, does deal with value change. Harkening back to Heclo, he argues that there are two definite effects of learning. For Hall, 'normal politics' or policy-making is associated with learning about instruments while learning about policy goals occurs only in special circumstances associated with shifts in 'policy paradigms' or changes in the dominant set of policy ideas which shape discourse in the policy making process (Hall, 1989). There is on the surface a neat affinity between this second type of policy learning and

change and Kuhn's theory of scientific development according to shifting paradigms. The Kuhnian account sees a paradigm as a set of puzzles or questions which dominate a scientific community's activity and frame its normative assumptions, its discourse and its research agendas (Kuhn, 1962). The translation of this picture to the puzzles of policymaking within policy communities has a certain elegance, and probably much to recommend it, if politics is conceived not as a struggle for power but as a process of problem-solving. For public policies, as for scientific paradigms, periods of relative stability give way to experimentation, contestation and ultimately a new paradigm, if the accumulation of anomalies undermines the original normative and empirical assumptions.[4]

These different discussions of the effects of policy learning display considerable differences between the five authors cited and reinforce the notion that they are dealing with quite distinct learning processes. With his focus on organizations Etheredge, not surprisingly, sees learning as resulting in organizational change. Sabatier and Rose discuss the effects of learning in instrumental and program terms, while Hall endorses this view but adds to it the notion of fundamental change in policy paradigms emerging from learning.

5. Conclusion: Lessons about learning

The notion of learning as a useful corrective to the conflict resolution approach of many existing models of policy making has been around for some twenty years now. There is no shortage of theorization. Our review would suggest that, if anything, the concept has been overtheorized and underapplied. There are some reasons for this relative lack of empirical work which we will explore in conclusion with a view to suggesting how these ideas may be better applied in the future. Those reasons are conceptual, theoretical and methodological.

This discussion has reinforced the need to refine those concepts which currently dominate discussions of policy learning and suggest several avenues for change and improvement. As Sartori's famous and much-cited article on concept misformation reminded us, proper conceptualization must precede theorization (Sartori, 1968). Concepts must be framed in such a way that their connotations and denotations are clear; they must have a relatively precise meaning, and it must be apparent which universe of phenomena fall within their scope and which fall outside.

It is clear that learning encompass several distinct processes. First, someone must learn, and the various theories examined above differ substantially on this question. Some restrict learning to high level politicians and officials, other extend it to a more general social process involving most members of society. Second, there must be some object of learning, that is, something which learning is about. Once again, the existing theories vary on what this object is. While all see learning as the general increase in knowledge about

policies, some see this in terms of instruments, some in terms of programs, and some in terms of policy goals; or some combinations of these three elements. Finally, there is the question about the effect of learning, about what impact learning has on subsequent policy change. Again, the authors are divided. Some see learning as culminating in organization change, some in program or instrument change, some in major paradigm shifts in how policy problems are viewed, and thus in what sorts of policies are preferred or supported – and which are not.

How can these different views be reconciled? Rather than reject one or the other of these attempts to deal with the subject, it is possible to generate a synthesis of their views. This is accomplished by accepting (a) that learning is in fact a complex, multi-tiered phenomenon which can affect either decision-making organizations and processes; specific programs and instruments used to implement policy; and/or the ends to which policy is developed, and (b) that the agent of each type of learning will be different. Such a view draws on the strengths of each of the theories examined above, while minimizing their weaknesses.

Figure 1 presents the three types of learning identified in this review of the literature and their relationship to policy change.

LEARNING TYPE	WHO LEARNS	LEARNS WHAT	TO WHAT EFFECT
Government Learning	State Officials	Process-Related	Organizational Change
Lesson-Drawing	Policy Networks	Instruments	Program Change
Social Learning	Policy Communities	Ideas	Paradigm Shift

Fig. 1. Three types of learning and policy change.

In this view, the all-encompassing term 'policy learning' as it is often used at present can be seen to actually embrace three highly complex processes: learning about organizations, learning about programs, and learning about policies. This is one of the major reasons why this concept has resisted operationalization. For these reasons, we urge the reconception of the three concepts of government learning, lesson-drawing and social learning to more accurately describe this complex process of collective puzzlement which is public policy-making.

There remain, however, some significant obstacles of a theoretical nature. Conceptual refinement can only partially alleviate the obfuscation of the causal logic within the learning approach. There are also several significant theoretical and methodological questions which must be addressed before this approach can join the analytical mainstream.

Methodologically, one of the major problems involves finding solid empirical work that unequivocally demonstrates that X would not have happened had 'learning' not taken place. The conceptualization of learning as a kind of intervening variable between the agency (independent variable) and the change (dependent variable), however, may never be successfully operationalized. It may be impossible to observe the learning activity in isolation from the change requiring explanation. We may only know that learning is taking place because policy change is taking place.

Moreover, in some of the formulations learning is similarly indistinct from the agency of learning. If the glue that holds together learning agents is now no longer defined by institutional or structural boundaries but by 'core beliefs' or 'discourses' or 'shared values,' then the agency is defined in terms of the learning activity. Learning is an inherent and ongoing process that gives the agency its coherence. When does learning not occur? The counterfactuals may never be specified given the initial conceptualizations.

Finally, there are also a set of methodological difficulties associated with the complexity of the subjects, objects and effects of learning. Investigating these requires a methodology similar to that adopted in Heclo's comparative analysis of social policy in Britain and Sweden; namely the intensive, examination of a few comparable cases. It requires painstaking archival work, supplemented by elite interviews with key informants. The task is to discover the 'core beliefs' of the key agents (in whichever societal or state institutions they reside), as well as the more specific evidence that was marshaled to explore and justify policy decisions.

In most jurisdictions, the sorts of archival evidence required is only revealed after several years, after which the memories of the key informants may be less accessible or reliable. Policy studies that wish to explore the extent and effect of learning have a dilemma; to analyze historical cases and rely on a written, and inevitably, selective record; or to study contemporary cases and rely more on elite interviewing, with all its attendant problems (Dexter, 1973). Yet without a complete understanding of the complexity of understanding and information that forms the bases of policy decisions, there is no way that policy change can be attributed to learning rather than to other social or political forces.

Theoretically, this suggests that learning is only a partial corrective to theories of policy change based on notions of power and conflict. It is not an alternative hypothesis, because it must always take place within structures that have won, or maintained, the authority to allocate values within the community. The theorists discussed above recognize this point in differing degrees. The various writings have been directed towards a reorientation of

theories of power to embrace the equally powerful role of knowledge and information. Knowledge and information should be seen as one more 're-source' that identifies the powerful from the non-powerful. Information about public policy is not utilized in a neutral or depoliticized fashion. What is 'learned' and what is 'remembered' must always be seen in the context of political interests and political power (Holzner and Marx, 1979).

Nevertheless, the relationship between policy learning and policy change is an interesting one whose contours and components have only begun to be investigated and understood. Although states do change when they learn, they learn in a variety of different ways, and the types of changes which result vary accordingly. One way that they learn is through government learning; another is through lesson-drawing; and still another is through social learning. Disaggregating learning and clarifying conceptual, methodological and theoretical concerns are a beginning to fruitful research, however many significant questions remain to be resolved.[5]

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. It is analytically useful to disaggregate policy learning into its component elements in order to comprehend the nature of the phenomenon and its relationship to policy change. Learning, of course, has at least two elements: a subject who does the learning and an object about which something is learned. However, as Etheredge has argued, there is also a third component of learning which must be considered: the effect of the learning on the subject's subsequent behavior. This is the idea that 'learning [can] be defined by two criteria: the growth of intelligence and she "related" growth of effectiveness' (Etheredge and Short, 1983; Etheredge, 1981).

2. Learning in this sense can be both positive and negative. That is, learning is both about what to do, and about what not to do, so the same program can act as a model or exemplar for one country, and exactly the reverse for another (Bennett, 1992b). Yet, obviously, drawing negative lessons, is very different from 'nonlearning' (Heclo, 1974): the former denotes that policy makers in one country examined the policy lessons of another, and decided to avoid that program of action; the latter denotes that they never knew about it.

3. In their collaboration, Etheredge and Short continued to insist on the link between effectiveness and an increase in intelligence, arguing that: an observed increase in effectiveness in doing x does not, by itself, show increased learning. Effectiveness may increase from perseverance, money, power, changed public receptivities, or other causes; it is evidence of learning *per se* only where there is a causal link to intelligence (Etheredge and Short, 1983: 44).

4. In the realm of science, we have a published record of scientific achievement through which to observe these processes. In policy making, however, the shifts are likely to be far more subtle and less amenable to observation. Analysts who have recommended or utilized the concept normally make their empirical judgments on the basis of discourse analysis (e.g., Jenson, 1989), searching for the prevailing 'grammar' or 'vocabulary' of policy networks. Much of this analysis rests on approaches inherent in post-structuralist reasoning. But it is worth remembering that policy analysts, such as Anderson (1979) have advanced similar arguments about the importance of analyzing the assumptions which underpin every field of policy making and that generate a specific discourse. Others, like Moore (1988) have also investigated the role of ideas in the policy process while Imershein (1977) and others have examined changes in organizational structures as being representative of paradigm shifts.

5. What conditions facilitate one type of learning or another? What is the relationship between learning and power? These are but two key issues which need investigation.

References

Anderson, Charles W. (1979). 'The place of principles in policy analysis,' *American Political Science Review* 73: 711–723.

Argyris, C. and D. Schon (1978). *Organizational Learning: A Theory of Action Perspective.* Reading: Addison-Wesley.

Bennett, Colin and Michael Howlett (1991). 'When states learn do they change? American lessons, Canadian learning and the conceptualization of policy change.' A paper presented to the Annual Meeting of American Political Science Association.

Bennett, Colin J. (1991). 'What is policy convergence and what causes it?' *British Journal of Political Science* 21: 215–234.

Bennett, Colin J. (1992a). 'The international regulation of personal data: From epistemic community to policy sector.' A paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association.

Bennett, Colin J. (1992b). *Regulating Privacy: Data Protection and Public Policy in Europe and the United States.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Castles, Francis G. (1990). 'The dynamics of policy change: What happened to the English-speaking nations in the 1980s,' *European Journal of Political Research* 18: 491–513.

Dexter, Lewis (1973). *Elite and Specialized Interviewing.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Etheredge, Lloyd M. and James Short (1983). 'Thinking about government learning,' *Journal of Management Studies* 20: 41–58.

Etheredge, Lloyd S. (1981). 'Government learning: An overview,' in S. L. Long, ed., *The Handbook of Political Behavior,* Vol 2. New York: Pergamon.

Evans, P. B., D. Rueschemeyer, and T. Skocpol, eds. (1988). *Bringing the State Back in.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Haas, Ernst B. (1990). *When Knowledge is Power: Three Models of Change in International Organizations.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Haas, Peter M. (1992). 'Introduction: Epistemic communities and international policy coordination,' *International Organization* 46: 1-36.

Hall, Peter A. (1988). 'Policy paradigms, social learning and the state,' a paper presented to the International Political Science Association, Washington, D.C.

Hall, Peter A. (1989). 'Conclusion: The political power of economic ideas,' in P. A. Hall, ed., *The Political Power of Economic Ideas: Keynesianism Across Nations.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 361–392.

Heclo, Hugh (1974). *Modern Social Politics in Britain and Sweden: From Relief to Income Maintenance.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Heclo, Hugh (1978). 'Issue networks and the executive establishment,' in A. King, ed., *The New American Political System*. Washington D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, pp. 87–124.

Heintz, H. Theodore and Hank C. Jenkins-Smith (1988). 'Advocacy coalitions and the practice of policy analysis,' *Policy Sciences* 21: 263–277.

Hernes, Gudmund (1976). 'Structural change in social processes,' *American Journal of Sociology* 82: 513–547.

Hogwood, Brian W. and B. Guy Peters (1983). *Policy Dynamics*. Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books.

Holzner, Burkhart and John H. Marx (1979). *Knowledge Application: The Knowledge System in Society*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Imershein, Allen W. (1977). 'Organizational change as a paradigm shift,' *The Sociological Quarterly* 18: 33–43.

Jenson, Jane (1989). 'Paradigms and political discourse: Protective legislation in France and the United States before 1914,' *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 22: 235–258.

Kuhn, Thomas (1962). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lindblom, Charles E. and D. K. Cohen (1979). *Usable Knowledge: Social Science and Social Problem Solving*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Lindquist, Evert A. (1990). 'Learning and change in policy communities: A research agenda for the literature.' A paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association.

Lynn, L., ed. (1978). *Knowledge and Policy: The Uncertain Connection*. Washington D.C.: National Academy of Sciences.

Mitchell, Timothy (1991). 'The limits of the state: Beyond statist approaches and their critics,' *American Political Science Review* 85: 79–96.

Moore, Mark H. (1988). 'What sorts of ideas become public ideas?' in R. B. Reich, ed., *The Power of Public Ideas*, Cambridge: Ballinger, pp. 55–83.

Nordlinger, Eric (1981). *On the Autonomy of the Democratic State*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Polsby, Nelson W. (1984). *Political Innovation in America: The Politics of Policy Initiation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Rose, Richard (1988). 'Comparative policy analysis: The program approach,' in M. Dogan, ed., *Comparing Pluralist Democracies*, Boulder: Westview Press.

Rose, Richard (1991). 'What is lesson-drawing.' *Journal of Public Policy* 11: 3–30.

Ruggie, John Gerard (1975). 'International responses to technology: Concepts and trends,' *International Organization* 29: 557–584.

Sabatier, Paul (1978). 'The acquisition and utilization of technical information by administrative agencies,' *Administrative Sciences Quarterly* 6: 386–411.

Sabatier, Paul (1987). 'Knowledge, policy-oriented learning, and policy change,' *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization* 8: 649–692.

Sabatier, Paul A. (1988). 'An advocacy coalition framework of policy change and the role of policy-oriented learning therein,' *Policy Sciences* 21: 129–168.

Sartori, Giovanni (1968). 'Concept misformation in comparative politics,' *American Political Science Review* 64: 1033–1053.

Shrivastava, Paul (1983). 'A typology of organizational learning systems.' *Journal of Management Studies* 20: 7–28.

Walker, Jack L. (1974). 'The diffusion of knowledge and policy change: Toward a theory of agenda-setting.' A paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association.

Weiss, Carol (1977a). 'Research for policy's sake: The enlightenment function of social research.' *Policy Analysis* 3: 531–545.

Weiss, Carol (1977b). *Using Social Research in Public Policy-Making*. Lexington: D. C. Heath.

Wilks, Stephen and Maurice Wright (1987). 'Conclusion: Comparing government-industry relations: States, sectors, and networks,' in S. Wilks and M. Wright, eds. *Comparative Govern-*

ment-Industry Relations: Western Europe, the United States, and Japan. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 274–313.

Wright, Maurice (1988). 'Policy community, policy network and comparative industrial policies,' *Political Studies* 36: 593–612.