Analyzing Public Health Policy: Three Approaches

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Policy is an important feature of public and private organizations. Within the field of health as a policy arena, public health has emerged in which policy is vital to decision making and the deployment of resources. Public health practitioners and students need to be able to analyze public health policy, yet many feel daunted by the subject's complexity. This article discusses three approaches that simplify policy analysis: Bacchi's “What's the problem?” approach examines the way that policy represents problems. Colebatch's governmentality approach provides a way of analyzing the implementation of policy. Bridgman and Davis's policy cycle allows for an appraisal of public policy development. Each approach provides an analytical framework from which to rigorously study policy. Practitioners and students of public health gain much in engaging with the politicized nature of policy, and a simple approach to policy analysis can greatly assist one's understanding and involvement in policy work.

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The role played by policy is now regarded to be crucial in the organization and management of contemporary Western society. In a range of public and private organizations and institutions, workers and managers increasingly refer to and rely on policy to guide and legitimize their actions (Shore & Wright, 1997). However, the nature of policy depends on the policy area. Palmer and Short (1998) point to three distinctive features that make health policy different from other policy arenas. First, the influence of the medical profession in health care in general and in policy in particular is unequalled by professions in other areas, such as education or welfare. Second, given the complex, sometimes monopolistic nature of health care systems, it is difficult for consumers to be offered choice of services. Thus, the free market approach, which is attractive to many Western economies, requires substantial modification and tempering, informed by policy. Last, decision making in health care frequently involves life-and-death decisions, which are unparalleled in other areas of public and social policy.

There has been, in many Western countries, a distinct shift in political thinking and governance since the Second World War. In place of welfare-oriented state services, a move has been made toward smaller government, public–private partnerships, and market-driven economies. In the area of health, changes in the nature and environment of health care and other service delivery have become second nature to many health professional and management groups, and policy has become foundational to these changes. The importance has been stressed of developing what has been called policy acumen to understand the politicized complexity of this changing environment (Jones & Salmon, 2001). For those in public health, where the role of government is fundamental to the fruition of initiatives that reduce harm and prevent disease, an understanding of policy as a process and a point of advocacy is critically important (Ryder, 1996). Thus, the analysis of policy becomes an important aspect of public health practice.

WHAT IS POLICY ANALYSIS?

Traditionally, policy analysis has been defined as determining what governments do, why they do it, and what difference it makes (Dye, 1976). More recently, such analysis has become concerned with examining the processes of governance and policy advocacy, rather than with purely focusing on government itself. This is especially true in an area such as health, where a variety of governing structures...
are at play; for example, professional, patient, and community groups and private interests all play an important role in determining health policy in a variety of health environments (Blank & Burau, 2004). The development of policy analysis has taken place in academic areas such as policy studies and political science, which have been concerned with the examination of public policy. These academic disciplines have developed approaches to the practice of policy analysis, and it is from these that applied disciplines such as health have taken their lead.

In health, much policy analysis has tended to be dominated by health service policy activity. Perhaps this is not surprising given that, according to Baume (1995), much of what passes as health policy in a country such as Australia has concerned hospital service agreements, health care service reform, and national government health service initiatives. In public health, policy analysis has been confined to traditional public health policies concerning air, sanitation, water, housing, and so on. However, there has been a developing interest in a broader analysis of not only policy that affects the public’s health but also adjacent policy advocacy in areas such as tobacco control, HIV/AIDS, and food and nutrition, to name but a few. Insights drawn from these areas have been important in providing an understanding of decision making and subsequent policy development. For example, a recent policy analysis by Bryan-Jones and Chapman (2006) confirms the existence of incrementalism—that is, small and insignificant policy changes instead of substantial reform—in the regulation of smoke-free environments in bars and clubs in New South Wales, Australia. In their examination of HIV/AIDS policies in Africa, Siedel and Vidal (1997) identify the different ways in which HIV/AIDS has been positioned in policy and the consequences for funding and services in a number of African countries. And Nestle (2003) analyzes U.S. food and nutrition policy for evidence and consequences of the influence of the food industry. The field of public health is therefore a fertile and necessary area of policy analysis.

Why Is Policy Analysis Important?

At a general level, the analysis of policy is important because, as I have noted, policy has become a central concept and instrument in the way that modern societies are organized and managed—and it is through policy that authority is exercised. Many policy outcomes include not merely the decisions about why and how to act but also the assignment of resources to support policy implementation and outcomes. Policy analysis illuminates these important aspects of public policy.

For public health, however, policy analysis is crucial. Because public health produces outcomes that individuals are unlikely to achieve by themselves (Oliver, 2006)—for example, health promotion and disease prevention—it commonly requires action at many levels of society, frequently concerning government and other institutions and organizations. Policies inevitably inform these activities. The analysis of policy becomes a legitimate and important public health practice for three reasons: First, in comparison to many other areas of health, public health is often underprioritized and poorly funded, and practitioners have to debate decisions of resource allocation. It is only at the level of policy that problem definition, policy implementation, and resource allocation can be examined. A rigorous and defensible approach to policy analysis is needed for credible critique. Second, much work in public health concerns advocacy (Chapman, 2001), which has required a full engagement with the political process that incubates policy. An understanding or analysis of policy is a prerequisite in advocacy work.

Last, in the contemporary context, where so-called evidence-based policy has ignited much interest, policy analysis is needed for credible critique. Second, much work in public health concerns advocacy (Chapman, 2001), which has required a full engagement with the political process that incubates policy. An understanding or analysis of policy is a prerequisite in advocacy work. Last, in the contemporary context, where so-called evidence-based policy has ignited much interest, policy analysis becomes crucial to understanding the extent to which the rhetoric is supported by practice (Marsden & Watt, 2003).

For many practitioners and students of public health, policy analysis appears arcane, complex, and impenetrable. Whereas Morris (2000) provides a useful, if humorous, overview of what is involved, a number of systematic approaches are available.

How Do You Do Policy Analysis?

Perspectives in policy analysis abound, and as Weimer and Vining (1989) point out, approaches to policy analysis depend largely on the disciplinary framework used and the purpose to which the analysis is put. An economic analysis of a policy arguably requires a different approach to one looking at potential impact on community capacity building. Collins (2005) has usefully summarized a number of policy analysis methodologies that can be applied to public health. Dunn (1981) suggests that there are six general procedures that should be incorporated into policy analysis: solving, defining, predicting, prescribing, describing, and evaluating. Portney (1986) suggests three approaches to policy analysis: policy making, cause and consequences, and policy prescription. And Collins...
herself recommends an eight-step framework for the analysis of health policy.

One of the difficulties that students and practitioners face when examining public health policy lies in the problem of applying one tool or one series of steps to the policy context, given that any number of areas may be of interest—for example, problem identification, consultation, implementation. Moreover, as Sabotier and Jenkins-Smith (1993) point out, a theoretical lens or an explanatory framework is required; otherwise, it becomes difficult to distinguish what is likely to be important and what can be ignored. In other words, the policy analysis approach depends largely on what aspect of policy is under review.

What follows is not a prescriptive stepwise process that can be recommended for all aspects of policy analysis. Instead, three approaches to policy analysis are offered. Each is explained with an example of the context in which it might best be used. Whereas these explanatory frameworks are not exhaustive, they are comprehensive in their utility; that is, they can be pressed into service in a number of policy analytic contexts. Moreover, each has been developed, and each is supported by practice and theory; thus, they are all robust and highly defensible.

THREE APPROACHES TO POLICY ANALYSIS

The “What’s the Problem?” Approach

The first analytical approaches is the “What’s the problem?” framework by Carol Bacchi (1999). “What’s the problem?” is actually shorthand for “What is the problem represented to be?” because it is the representation of issues or problems and the subsequent effects of that representation that interest Bacchi. She distinguishes this approach (which focuses on problems) from much of the work in policy studies (which is concerned with solutions). Indeed, Bacchi goes to some lengths to differentiate between what she calls problem solutions analysis and problem representations analysis. The former, she contends, focuses on (a) a belief that problems exist “out there” and are available for so-called objective analysis (what Bacchi calls comprehensive rationalists) or (b) a belief that problems result from political processes that seek to give voice to all stakeholders and constituents (what she terms political rationalists). Bacchi is not merely interested in problem identification but also in what is silenced in this process. She wants to lay open the assumptions and values that come into play in policy work. As such, she provides the following questions to frame this analytical approach:

- What is the problem represented to be, in either a specific policy debate or in a specific policy proposal?
- What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation?
- What effects are produced by this representation?
- How are subjects constituted within it? What is likely to change? What is likely to remain the same?
- Who is likely to benefit from this representation?
- What is left unproblematic in this representation?
- How would “responses” differ if the “problem” were thought about or represented differently? (p. 12)

The early questions in this list allow for an examination of the way in which the issue under consideration has been “problematized,” defined here as the extent to which weight has been given to a phenomenon to give it moral and political gravity: in other words, to give it importance. By asking questions about representation, Bacchi highlights the human and political role played in policy work: She emphasizes that policies and the problems they address do not fall fully formed from the heavens. They are constructed. She therefore wants to provoke consideration regarding the complexion of a problem, not only in terms of its facets and constituent parts but also in the way that it has engaged interest and justification, which is brought out more clearly when considering the assumptions and presuppositions on which the representation is based. This point goes to the heart of the value or moral base on which the representation is founded. In the question that asks how subjects are constituted in the representation, Bacchi refers to the way that various representations bring actors into play, what their roles are, and how they are likely to affect, or be affected by, the problem representation. But it is in the last few questions that Bacchi demonstrates how her analysis goes beyond mere description of the problem representation. By asking what is left unproblematic and how the response would be different under another way of representing the problem, Bacchi seeks comparisons with alternatives, which forces a consideration of other, perhaps more productive, equitable, and socially just ways of approaching the same area.

Application of “What’s the Problem?”

Bacchi’s approach (1999) can be used to analyze a number of contemporary policy contexts. The one chosen here draws on the current debates in Australia and in some other countries regarding childhood obesity.
This issue has recruited a number of important and powerful stakeholder groups that appear to line up on either side of a policy divide. According to an Australian federal government, the problem is represented to be one where children are not being provided with sufficient guidance and management by parents, who have the responsibility for feeding children with nutritious foods and encouraging them to be physically active. Indeed, the then federal minister of health Tony Abbott is on record as saying, "No one is in charge of what goes into kids’ mouths except their parents" (as quoted in Fullerton, 2005, n.p.). Within this representation, parents have total responsibility to feed children healthily, and attempts must be carried out at home to manage children's eating habits (believed to be the heart of the obesity epidemic). Thus, the problem of overweight children and their obesity is represented as a failure of parents in exercising their responsibilities. Many representatives of the food industry also assume this view.

Working thorough Bacchi’s questions, one might conclude that the presuppositions and assumptions underpinning this representation are as follows: that children’s food choices and eating habits are the product of parental influence, that parents have the sole capacity to determine what children eat, and that factors outside the home are insignificant in influencing what determines children’s food choices. The effects of this representation are that, among other things, the potential influences outside the direct family environment attract minimum scrutiny and little regulation and legislation—for example, the promotion and marketing of food to children, the provision of food to children outside the home (such as at child care and school), and the various roles played by fast-food outlets. Following Bacchi, the principal actors constituted within this representation are the parents, who as sovereigns of the household, exert their influence over their children’s food choices regardless of the influences external to the family environment.

One can speculate in terms of Bacchi’s questions regarding what is likely to change and remain the same in this representation: First, there is unlikely to be a full examination by the federal government of the role of the food industry, the broadcasting industry, and the advertising industry in the development of increased body weight of Australian children over the past 10 years (Magarey, Daniels, & Bolton, 2001); second, any examination of the issue by federal government will be limited to the home environment; last, strategies for addressing the problem are going to focus on matters of personal (parental) choice. The benefits of this representation are probably going to flow to those who support minimum legislative control of industry activity and instead endorse codes of industry conduct and other self-regulatory mechanisms.

Left unproblematic in this representation are the concerns by various groups about the effects of food advertising to children, the position of children’s rights in not being exploited by food marketing, and the public health consequences brought on by market forces that promote unhealthy food choices.

A representation of the problem in a different way—for example, that obesity in children largely results from the heavy marketing of unhealthy food products—is the stock in trade of those groups who oppose the Australian government’s sole emphasis on parental responsibility (Coalition on Food Advertising to Children, 2006). What one can see here is that Bacchi’s series of questions allows one to unpack the problem representation of a policy statement and position. As an approach to policy analysis, it allows for a close examination of the values and beliefs that underpin policy statement and positions and the ways in which these act as normative and taken-for-granted assumptions. The way that such assumptions constitute actors while closing down other positions is made clear. Bacchi’s approach differs from many in policy analysis in that it does not question the role of the policy as such but the positioning of the problem representation that the policy is then developed to address. As such, it takes issue with a number of other policy-analytical approaches that are concerned with problem identification and legitimation.

The “What’s the problem?” approach sits comfortably within what may be called the social constructionist paradigm, which takes issue with the notion of real problems that sit outside human and political engagement. Instead, it is informed by the emergence of problems as a consequence of positioning issues within a knowledge–power context—that is, the way that understandings are rendered as discourses that carry and amplify moral imperatives and, with them, an ability to engage public and political activity. Much of the thinking in this area is influenced by the work of social theorist Michel Foucault (1997), and indeed, Bacchi acknowledges an intellectual debt to him in her “What’s the problem?” approach. But Foucault’s work has been used in other aspects of policy analysis, and it is to these that the article now turns.

**Colebatch and Governmentality**

The work of Hal Colebatch (2003) is representative of the policy-analytic framework informed by governmentality. The term governmentality was first developed by Foucault (1991) to describe developments in the ways in which populations became manageable in Western cultures. Briefly, Foucault points to the way that techniques for knowing and regulating people through surveys, demography, medicine, and other forms of surveillance (now attributed to the state) emerged in 17th- and
18th-century Europe. At the same time, various forms of self-discipline and the regulation of individuals were being reified. The result was a regulation of the “conduct of conduct,” so to speak, whereby governance is ordered through a variety of legal, expert, and self-regulating strategies. Indeed, the conjunction of legal, professional and self-regulatory codes of conduct is entirely germane to the use of governmentality in Colebatch’s analytical framework. Thus, whereas Bacchi examines what the problem is represented to be, Colebatch examines the ways in which policies and policy strategies engage when they are implemented.

Colebatch conceptualizes governmentality in terms of a vertical and a horizontal axes of policy activity. Put simply, the vertical axis comprises the activities of authorized decision makers, such as government jurisdictions and their executives. An example might be a government strategy or a policy initiative. This engages with a horizontal level of activities populated by stakeholders, some of which are government bodies, but others may be professional organizations, community groups, commercial interests, and so on, all of whom have a stake in the policy process and the policy outcome. That stake could be in the form of advocacy for the cause, adoption of all or part of policy initiative for local implementation, and even the oversight of professional conduct of those involved. Instrumental to Colebatch’s analytical framework is the question, what is the involvement of authority, expertise, and order in this policy context? And it is the execution of authority and its legitimation through expertise and order that structures this governmentality approach.

Application of Governmentality

Colebatch (2003) chooses the following health case to demonstrate policy analysis using governmentality. Part of the Commonwealth of Australia’s “Better Health” initiative involved an attempt to decrease the incidence of sports-related injury; as such, the “national sports safety strategy” was launched to address this area. Key to the strategy was the involvement of a raft of stakeholders from areas such as injury prevention (physiotherapy and sports coaching), sport and recreational bodies (at a variety of levels, national state, local government), and various government agencies—all of which were to be involved in an accreditation scheme tied to funding. Thus, the vertical initiative (Better Health’s sports safety strategy) horizontally engages with a range of other organizations that legitimate, and are simultaneously legitimated by, their involvement in the policy process. Typical of this horizontal engagement is the involvement of consumer groups and interest groups, who become crucial to implementing the policy initiative as it stands but also shaping it to meet their own ends. Interest groups attain authority by claiming direct experience of the area and problem under consideration, thus justifying their involvement and expertise in the issue. As such, policy is enacted on behalf of, rather than by, the government. This “government at a distance” is entirely consistent with a governmentality approach, which analyzes the ways in which policy processes are amplified and executed outside the direct control of government legislation and regulation.

So far, I have addressed policy analysis that examines problem representation and policy execution. The third example of policy analysis directly concerns the ways in which policies develop as part of public sector politics and public administration.

The Policy Cycle Approach

A policy cycle describes the ways in which policy is developed and the various stages of maturity through which it travels to become an active public document. Such policy cycles are not new. However, one of the best-known cycles in Australia is the one developed by Bridgman and Davis (2002). Essentially, the cycle breaks down the process of policy development into discrete activities, one following the next in a sequential, cyclical fashion. Starting with the activity of identifying the issues, Bridgman and Davis move through a stepwise sequence of events describing a range of activities within each. The other stages include policy analysis, policy instrument, consultation, coordination, decision, implementation, and evaluation.

The authors use this process as an ideal way of developing sound policy but recognize that it is not always attainable. They also stress that what looks like a march in one direction is often a dance best described as the ebb and flow of sophisticated policy debate (Bridgman & Davis, 2002). All up there is a general recognition of the cycle representing rigorous policy processes; that is, it is a framework for developing and implementing policy. For our current purpose, the cycle becomes less a framework for developing policy and more a tool for examining policy processes; in other words, it allows one to undertake policy analysis. Within each stage of the policy cycle, a number of criteria are given for successful accomplishment of the task. For example, at the level of consultation, the authors describe how the process in which public consultation or stakeholder consultation relates to the more intense consultation demonstrated within the public service itself (Bridgman & Davis, 2002). These criteria easily lend themselves as external standards for assessment of policy competence.
Application of the Policy Cycle Approach

The policy cycle approach best lends itself to an analysis of the development of public policy—especially, government legislation. For example, the cycle would be useful in analyzing the way in which policy was developed in Australia regarding the regulation of genetically engineered crops. The documents related to this development are reasonable accessible, and the issue came under the scrutiny of many government and nongovernment organizations. Thus, mapping the process of developing the policy is entirely manageable. However, for a policy in a private domain, the nonaccessibility of the information may be a barrier to a full analysis using the policy cycle approach. Thus, the policy cycle requires that the availability of the journey through which the policy has traveled in its development and that it not hidden through, for example, commercial in-confidence limitations.

One of the best examples of applying the policy cycle approach comes from Edwards et al. (2001), who use the model to unpack four case studies of major social policy processes in Australian state politics. Each case study represents a significant social policy reform: the provision of a youth allowance, the introduction of a child support levy, a graduate tax for tertiary education, and an employment policy. The analysis undertaken by the researchers

FIGURE 1  The Policy Cycle
SOURCE: Bridgman and Davis (2002) permission granted to reproduce.
takes the form of a rigorous examination at each stage in the policy cycle. In doing so, they demonstrate how specific questions can highlight important parts of the policy development process. Although the analyses do not address public health, it would be easy to translate to a public health policy context.

CONCLUSION

As in other areas, policy analysis in health can appear daunting. Given the often-complex nature of policy development, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the task of making sense of and providing a critique of the process. I presented these three policy analysis approaches because of their simplicity, which is not to say that they oversimplify the issue. Experience has shown that the policy cycle (Bridgman & Davis, 2001) is best employed when a macro-analysis of the whole policy-making process is required, especially at the level of public or government policy. However, when a micro-examination of policy is needed, the approaches of Bacchi (1999) or Colebatch (2003) are recommended. Bacchi’s approach is useful when examining the development of policy as problem representation. In practice, students and practitioners find the stepwise questioning proposed by Bacchi easy to execute. Colebatch’s use of governmentality is recommended when the analysis includes the role of constituents and stakeholders in policy implementation. It is especially useful in understanding the relationships among government, nongovernment, and private investments in policy implementation.

These three approaches are useful in providing insight into various parts of the policy process. I should also emphasize that these tools are useful for not only policy analysis as such but also the analysis of those instruments that function as policy, such as guidelines, codes, and strategies. Practitioners and students of public health gain much in engaging with the politicized nature of policy, and a simple approach to policy analysis can greatly assist in understanding policy work and being involved in it.

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