CONCEPTUAL PAPER

The Multiple Streams Framework: Understanding and Applying the Problems, Policies, and Politics Approach

Richard Hoefer[1]

Imagine you are teaching a class in social policy and want to truly challenge your students with a sophisticated and elegant policy development theory, one that is well-regarded in the political science literature and has been used successfully by social work scholars as well. Or perhaps you're designing a new research effort to push forward understanding of policymaking in your area of interest, particularly regarding the change or evolution of policy in that arena. If so, you may want to take a deep look at the multiple streams framework (MSF) which overcomes many of the problems raised in earlier theories, such as the Rational Actor Model (Hoefer, 2021) that simply are not very realistic. As noted by Cairney and Jones (2016), this approach is particularly helpful in conducting case studies but has had a more extensive impact, helping usher in an era of policy process change conceptualizations along with a "universally applicable" approach (p. 38). Belend and Howlett (2016) edited a special issue of *The Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* that examines the unlikely extent of the MSF in comparative policy analysis. Some social work scholars (have applied the framework (for recent examples published in this journal, see Barrick and Worsham (2020), Gal and Weiss-Gal (2020)), though it is still under-utilized, particularly compared to its massive popularity in other disciplines.

What Is the Multiple Streams Framework?

The multiple streams framework (MSF), developed by John Kingdon in 1984 (with a major update in 2010), is a well-respected approach for analyzing policymaking across a variety of policies and countries. Hundreds of English-language journal articles using MSF have been published demonstrating its versatility and theoretical richness. Indeed, it may be that the policy environment is becoming more amenable

✉ Richard Hoefer
  rhoefer@uta.edu

1   School of Social Work, University of Texas at Arlington, 211 S. Cooper Street, Box 19129,
    Arlington, TX 76019, USA

to the use of the MSF over time, with complexity and "a post-policy" world becoming more ingrained in governmental decision-making.

Kingdon (2010) rejects the rational actor approach and argues that many different solutions exist to any policy issue. The key question then is why one is selected over the others. A key assumption made in the MSF is that *ambiguity* in problem definition prevents rationality from being useful. Different actors define the same situation differently so goal maximization is impossible. For example, is homelessness a problem of housing, morality, or poverty? Each approach has its adherents, but choosing one definition over the others prevents finding common ground. A second assumption (which is held in common with bounded rationality and satisficing approaches) is that time and other resources are limited. Individual decision-makers have only so much time and capacity to tackle problems whereas the world seems to be full of almost unlimited problems that might be addressed.

Unlike the assumption of the rational actor model, in the MSF decision-makers may have shifting preferences for policy. These can change based on current (limited) information that is superseded with new information or because the time frame for making a decision changes. Emergencies need to be dealt with immediately with whatever is currently available. In addition, decision-makers often have little or no information on whether a proposed solution actually will help. This is called having unclear technology. When an untried approach is suggested, evidence may not exist regarding how effective it will be. On top of this, fluid participation in the decision-making process means that new ideas or barriers can be introduced as different institutions and people are involved. Thus, a seeming consensus can fall apart or emerge at the last moment before a definitive vote is taken.

The final assumption in the MSF is that independent processes occur when policy decisions are made. Thus, policy problems, policy solutions, and political conditions shift constantly and without clear linkages to the others. These are the streams in the multiple streams framework. Let's look at each of the streams and add a few concepts that are also part of the MSF.

Policy Problems Stream

In the MSF, bad situations are not, in an objective sense, problems. Situations must be defined as problems before political action will be taken. In fact, the same objective situation can be defined as a problem in many different ways. A high number of people receiving unemployment benefits or welfare is not inherently a problem; it is a situation. Various actors may interpret this situation as a problem and try to convince other actors that something needs to be done. But one actor may see it as an economic problem, where the government doesn't have enough funds to support so many of the unemployed. Another actor looks at the situation and notes a moral problem, with so many lazy people preferring to get benefits instead of making their own living through work. A third actor says that the problem is that too many illegal immigrants are taking jobs from Americans. Many other potential ways of defining the situation as a problem also exist. The MSF highlights the ambiguous and political nature of defining problems.

Problem stream debates and definitions take place within policy communities, usually composed of interest groups, academics, and members of the bureaucracy working in the field. Generally, each particular view of what the problem is has champions who may be called "problem entrepreneurs." These people want for government to pay attention and do something about the problem as they define it, but they do not necessarily have a particular way to solve the problem in mind. Problem definitions can result from the slow development of information over time or sudden focusing events such as a stock market crash, a sudden worsening in the situation, a terrorist attack, or a natural disaster. At this point, the problem is put on the government agenda for action. It may be seen to be a problem in search of a solution.

Policy Solutions Stream

Just as problem entrepreneurs push for government to take action on particular definitions of situations as problems, policy entrepreneurs have a solution that they believe is useful in almost any situation. The ideas of free markets and deregulation are two solutions that have been advocated in many arenas from the airline industry to voucher schools. If you think of any situation you define as a problem, it is likely that someone is advocating for the use of the free market as a way to solve that problem. Often, policy entrepreneurs have an ideological focus. Thus, their decision-making process doesn't need to rely on research or pilot tests of the concepts. Policy ideas are developed in academia, in think tanks, and by other experts. Researchers note that not all policy ideas have equal chances of being accepted. Some are beyond the limits of acceptable policy in any given context, others lack feasibility, and some are just seen as too expensive. For policy proposals that pass the initial filters, though, the MSF characterizes them as solutions looking for a problem to solve.

Political Stream

The political stream is perhaps the most difficult to explain. It is a combination of the national mood, the elected officials active in the decision-making, and the interest groups active on all sides.

At some point, an opportunity for action emerges where a defined problem exists, along with a solution that is acceptable. Political will exists to do something. This short period of time is called a policy window. Policy entrepreneurs at this point couple, or join, a problem with a policy and push to get a majority of decision-makers to support this problem/policy package with their votes. If this occurs (and frequently policy windows close without action being taken), then new laws are enacted. Whether new law is created or not, the system moves on to the next decision.

The main point to remember from this approach to explaining policymaking is that policymaking is not a rational process where clear goals are achieved through customized solutions. Rather, the process is random and depends on skilled framing

and coupling of both identified and defined problems and general solutions to appeal to a majority of decision-makers during a brief time when action is possible.

The practical lesson for social welfare policy creators is to become skillful advocates of particular problem definitions and acceptable solutions. While political conditions may be beyond anyone's control, certain situations (such as after elections or other inflections) are more amenable to becoming windows for policy decisions. One must be prepared with considerable work already done. Once a particular window closes, it may be quite a long time before a similar opportunity presents itself.

Articles in This Issue

One of the most significant events in the past 100 years is the arrival of COVID-19, beginning in the first months of 2020. Scholarship on this topic has been extensive, and social policy has clearly been involved in discussions around the impact of the pandemic. This issue features several such manuscripts. The first article in this issue combines two of the most important policy "events" in recent memory: COVID-19 and the 2020 Presidential election. Seeking to understand voting barriers in St. Louis, authors Gary Parker and Ellen Hutti find two types: corporal ones, due to the risk of exposure to COVID-19, and cognizant ones, the need to decipher new and complex voting rules that were changing even as the election was happening. Knowing the state of play will help "get out the vote" organizers to counter both types of barriers as the COVID epidemic is finding ways to resist eradication efforts.

The second article, also relating to COVID is by Annie Lee, David Seith, Jessica Roman, Joanne Taylor, Annette Riordan, Amman Sehra, and Andrea Hetling. This team from New Jersey looked at the impact of COVID on single-parent TANF caseloads. The results show that low-income adults had a harder time finding work between April 2019 and April 2020. This caused caseloads to increase as new recipients came on to TANF and current recipients remained longer. Policies to relax or suspend work requirements thus seem important to reflect difficulties faced by clients. We also include a correction as a separate piece. The correction adds the funding source for the research study and is not substantive in nature.

Our third article is by a team of colleagues (Delavega et al. 2022), and takes a different look at the pandemic, focusing on the negative economic impact of the containment policy chosen before a vaccine was available. The authors indicate that the pandemic and policy responses increased existing disparities in service access and supports in the USA. The paper is titled "The Two Pandemics: The Disparate Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the K-shaped Recovery".

The final article in our line-up for the first issue of 2022 is by Jin Kim and Andrew Brake. Using event history analysis with three waves of the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study, they analyze the impact of early incarceration, marriage, and the risk of poverty across the life course for men. Incarceration occurring before age 25 is shown to have a negative impact on later income. Incarceration also increases the odds of divorcing for married men and, for unmarried men, of marrying. Not being married makes poverty more likely in later years. The authors thus see the need to

enhance social services and family case management in order to reduce the poverty rate of formerly incarcerated men and their families.

As we look forward to the upcoming issues of Volume 3 of the *Journal of Policy Practice and Research*, it becomes clearer that research in the area is increasing quickly and spreading across the globe. Many thanks are owed to the supporting staff of the Journal who are part of Springer Nature. It is a pleasure to helm this publication and see the increased use of theory-based research papers, along with the conceptual work that increases our understanding as well. Personally, I am excited by the hints of a return to more in-person conferences where I can meet the authors and reviewers who have helped make this journal possible. Look me up!

Dr. Rick Hoefer

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