

PUBLIC NOTE

The concept of governance Neutral reality or normative ideal?

One of the main issues many social scientists contend with is how to develop a unique voice and how to make meaningful contributions to the existing body of academic research. In the hyper-competitive environment of contemporary academia –in which the marketability of results often seems to be of more importance than true understanding– truly innovative thinkers have started to become an endangered species. Professor Mark Bevir (1963) seems to be an exception to this and has enlightened debates about the concept of governance, the power of ideas and the history of political thought with his interpretive yet theoretically grounded research approach. As a post-foundationalist, heavily influenced by humanist and historicist thought, he has tried to formulate a new explanatory framework for administrative behavior that runs against the more established one's of (new) institutionalism and rational-choice theory. He states that we should not try to explain the behavior of policy actors by referring to 'objective' social facts such as an increased inflation or civil servants' position within the bureaucracy. Rather, we should emphasize more empathically with individual agency. According to him, we can understand the decisions of policy actors when we acknowledge that they are derived from their personal beliefs, which are in turn determined by existing stories, narratives and traditions. This entails that their specific set of behaviors are contingent on time and context.

Key words:

Governance, government, post-foundationalism, interpretive social science.

Bevir holds a BA from the University of Exeter and a PhD from the University of Oxford. He held several posts in Europe and elsewhere, before moving to the United States. Currently, he is a Professor of Political Science and the Director of the Center of British studies, at the University of California Berkeley. He also is an honorary professor at the Graduate school of Governance, United Nations University and Distinguished Research Professor in the College of Arts and Humanities, Swansea University. His main research interests are— as already partly introduced —the concept of governance, political theory and interpretative social science. Public Note went to Berkeley and spoke to him about his career, his work, as well as the academic world.

What kind of experiences –personal or academic– have made you the scholar you are right now and how would you ‘trace back’ your enthusiasm for the interpretative approach in public policy research?

I suspect the personal is more important than the academic. I think quite a lot is just what you are predisposed to. Because I am quite an introverted person –which I suspect a lot of academics are– a career in academia suited me well. Moreover, I would characterize myself as a deductive thinker, which probably helps to explain why I orientate towards theory, philosophy, and interpretation of texts a little bit more than ‘pure’ empirical work. But if I would ‘trace back’ my enthusiasm for the interpretative approach to social science my answer is a little bit longer...

I started my career as a graduate student working on political theory, or more in particular the history of political thought. This interest eventually led to my first big publication *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (1999). In this book, I analyzed how historians recover meaning when they are reading past texts. I explained that the meaning of historical documents is not objectively ‘given’ in the texts, but determined by the personal beliefs of the individual historian. I would say my first interest in the craft of interpretation was born here.

A couple of years later, Roderick Rhodes (professor at the University of Southampton, UK) came to the University of Newcastle, where I was working back then, to give his inaugural lecture about on post-foundationalism and public administration. In his talk, he was dismissive of the idea that post-foundational thought had much to teach public administration. Since my work on the *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (1999) was premised on this philosophical school, I challenged him about this and said that public administration research had much to gain from post-foundational thinking. Rhodes was quite interested in what I had to say, so he said: ‘let’s go down to the pub to talk about it’. About a year later, we started to publish collaborative work in which we applied my theoretical ideas about interpreting past text to governance and public policy analysis. So the most important answer to your question is that we simply applied the

theories about how to interpret past texts, actions and other meaning, to the context of public administration.

Am I right in thinking that your approach to interpretive policy analysis is different from the ‘classical’ one, developed by pioneers like Bruce Jennings (1983) and Dvora Yanow (1993), in which an inductive and ethnographic method are used and ‘meaning making’ is the central aim.

Yes, indeed. When David Marsh (professor at the Australian National University) and Gerry Stoker (professor at the University of Southampton, UK) were editing a new edition of their textbook, *Theory and Methods in Political Science* (2002), they asked us to write something about post-structuralism or discourse analysis. We agreed on writing this chapter, however we could not use this title since our approach did not entail the typical characteristics of a discourse analysis in which scholars investigate the formal relationship between units within a language. Since our theory had to do with the interpretation of past texts, we decided to call ourselves interpretivists. Because of my background in political theory, I

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did not realize that at that time several scholars already called themselves the same way and performed so-called interpretive policy analysis. The difference between my approach to interpretative public administration research and this ‘classical’ school is that my version focuses on philosophical disputes on how to explain the meanings we postulate, by referring to historically grown traditions. The ‘classical’ school focuses on methodological disputes about the best way of recovering the meanings that are found in policy making.

From the outset, the subfield of public administration research had wanted to be an action-oriented discipline in which contributing to the quality of public governance or public service provision was considered just as important as the ‘growth’ of knowledge. Public Note attaches great importance to the social relevance and valorization of scientific knowledge. What are your views on this ambition?

I believe that there are two ways of thinking about this issue. Obviously, there is this influential idea that scholars in public administration are able to develop neutral scientific knowledge that helps to design effective policies and eventually leads to a better social world. I do not deny that there

is some truth in this, however, I think it is also important to acknowledge that ‘neutral’ scientific knowledge is more or less a myth.

We need to understand that social science does not straightforwardly describe and explain the world –as if this world is a fixed entity that is objectively observable– but also crafts it. I believe that the world social scientists encounter is one that is already constructed and made, by social science or at least social theory itself. With regard to public administration research, this refers to the process in which influential ideas, such as the Principal-Agent (PA) explanatory schemes or Wicked-problem theory, not only describe how the world works, but also changes the way public policy actors perceive this world. In other words, because these ideas create mental maps in the minds of these individuals, policy actors will behave –consciously or unconsciously– in accordance with the explanatory scheme of these ideas.

But a lot of empirical literature suggest that many research results do not reach policy makers and if they do, rarely shape policy making directly (e.g. Stone, 2012; Kørnøv, Thissen, 2000). This literature reveals that policy makers often ignore scientific insights or only use knowledge that complies with their own experience or value system. Are you not overestimating the actual impact scientific ideas have in shaping the policy world?

That depends on how we define social science. If social science refers to the specific findings that were promoted by particular scholars within a distinct administrative setting, then I agree with you and accept that those ideas do not have much impact. However, if we define social science as a set of shared understandings or stories about the world that are often rooted or crafted by social thinkers and eventually circulate throughout policy venues such as networks, think-tanks or media, then I do think that social science has a major impact on the world.

To refer back to the example of PA theory, not the individual application of this theory has had a major impact on the world but its general assumptions have. This theory spread the idea that individuals are primarily rational actors who will, within the context of a principal-agent relationship, always abuse their informational advantages. Because many policy actors were influenced by this theoretical explanatory model, they started to worry about this problem of moral hazard. To prevent this from happening, these policy actors often advised to implement policies that aligned agents’ incentives with those of their principles (e.g. performance-related pay) and thus actively shaped the world. I believe that interpretive research should challenge this practice by unraveling the scientific narratives and stories that are embedded in the policy world. Eventually this could liberate us and lead to more open-ended forms of knowledge and practices.

You have also applied this line of reasoning to the theories that explain the well-known shift from government to governance. This transformation that evolved at the end of the 70’s was, according to the textbook explanation, shaped by a process of policy feedback. The bureaucracies of the western welfare states had grown too big and where therefore unable to respond to the increased complexity of society. This process led to less effective public service and thus towards more frequent use of networks and markets. According to you, what is wrong with this explanation?

Again, this depends on how we conceptualize the process of policy feedback. I think that we can distinguish between the formal and humanist version of the notion of policy feedback. In the formal version, you do not need to understand why the relevant policy actors respond to the changing world in the way they did, you do not ask the question about why these people thought that the problems at hand required the solutions they came up with and you do not take into account the influence of tradition and history. Instead, you just assume that we can understand the world by appealing to ‘objective’ social facts, such as inflation or the hierarchical position of a policy actor within the bureaucracy. I think that is wrong.

In my account of this policy feedback mechanism there is more room for agency. I believe that policy actors did not come to see the problem of- and the solution for the overburdened nature of the state in a neutral setting, as if those ideas just naturally occurred to them and where determined by the particular policy environment. Instead, we need to acknowledge that the policies of marketization and the use of networks these actors adopted were embedded in existing traditions, stories and narratives that were influenced by ideas crafted in social science, to be more specific neoliberal economics and rational choice theory. These ideas made people believe that the state was overburdened and unresponsive and in turn determined their proposed solutions (e.g. New Public Management).

This takes us back to the second question of this interview. I really sign up to the idea that we need to understand people as agents, who are capable of reflecting on their beliefs –either consciously or unconsciously– and willing to modify them if this makes sense to them. We need to explain action by referring to the beliefs of actors and we need to explain the beliefs of actors by referencing to existing traditions and narratives. These historical modes of explanation are incompatible with the formal modes of explanations, found in the formal feedback theory, but compatible with my humanist version.

Let's stick to the concept of governance for a while. During my time as a bachelor student at the Utrecht School of Governance, we spent the vast majority of time talking about 'modern' topics such as public-private partnerships, network governance or co-production between citizen and municipalities. As you can imagine, this socialized my way of thinking and made me expect to encounter these forms of coordination in the 'real world'. However, when I worked as an intern at a Dutch Ministry and experienced the way public administrators work for a longer period of time, I observed the complete opposite. Hierarchical and bureaucratic way of thinking appeared to be the most dominant one and 'modern' forms of organization were of secondary importance. In your work, you note the continuing dominance of bureaucratic thinking and practices in day-to-day policy making as well. How could we explain this academic bias towards governance and its accompanying concepts?

Good question! I think the first part of an answer is that the bias towards these 'modern' topics reflects an academic advocacy for them. For a lot of scholars in public administration, networks, partnerships and other collaborative ways of organizing are solutions to the problems they associate with bureaucracy and the rise of markets under neo-liberalism. Let's say that they lean more heavily on networks than our empirical evidence permits.

A second explanation for this bias is the fact that a lot of scholars often use official policy documents or public statements of key policy actors as a direct data source. These researchers do not 'go out' and check whether those documents and statements coincide with the everyday practice of civil servants and street-level-bureaucrats. If you do not engage in a more ethnographic type of research, then your scholarly work is likely to capture the self-understanding of key policy actors instead of the actual practice they are engaged in. I will not be surprised if this self-understanding gives a greater role to networks and partnerships than everyday practice allows for.

Some scholars do not realize that this network approach to coordination is really a policy agenda that is driven by ideas of new-institutionalism and often meets strong resistance from various actors within the bureaucracy. Part of the reason it meets this resistance is that there are actually a lot of good features to bureaucracy. For example, bureaucracies are able to provide public services to a wide range of citizens in a uniform manner and have clear-cut accountability lines. Another explanation for this resistance is simply that a lot of civil servants fall back on this hierarchical way

of thinking because that is what they are socialized into and thus makes sense in their world.

Recently, the scholars Capano, Howlett and Ramesh (2015) have advocated for 'bringing governments back in'. By this they mean that more empirical research should use 'government' and its accompanying concepts as their main topic of analysis. This to close the gap between this academic bias and the empirical reality. Do you agree with them and should we replace the concept of government as the header for our research agendas?

The most common way of distinguishing the two is that government refers to a style of coordination that is hierarchical and in which the state is a self-contained actor who acts relatively autonomously. Governance, on the contrary, refers to a style of coordination in which the state is not the central actor but just one player within a field of other private and voluntary sector actors. Policy making and service provision takes place within the context of networks and markets. One way you might want to defend to bring the concept of government back in here is to say that hierarchies are more common than the governance literature suggests and therefore thus a legitimized research topic. On the one hand, I have some sympathy for this view, but on the other hand, I would want to describe things a little bit differently.

The idea that government is a self-contained entity that is exercising total control over the developing of policies and provision of public services always has been a bit of a

myth. State actors have always disagreed amongst themselves. The government never represented a single voice nor a single practice, and the policy world has always been characterized by continuous disagreement among different levels of the bureaucracy. So, the idea that we have moved from government to governance is overstated. Thus, bringing the concept of government 'back in' would

be a mistake, because this would mean that we bring back in a rigid concept of the state, in which it is misrepresented as a unified and uniform actor.

I think, the real challenge for the concept of government is to acknowledge its contested and contingent nature and to recognize the internal resistance against policies and hierarchy. Instead we need to adopt what Rhodes and I call 'the stateless state'. This refers to the idea that the state does not have an essence within itself but is constantly made and remade as a cultural practice.

Do you find it problematic that universities socialize their students into this governance paradigm taking into account that the ‘government’ way of thinking is still relatively dominant in practice?

This raises the question whether the university, which is constantly going on about networks, is a good preparation for the more hierarchical policy world students will encounter during their future jobs? Clearly the students will be better prepared to perform at their future jobs if they had a more accurate picture of the world they entering. However, we should not forget that social science is also making the world. One of the reasons social scientists overemphasize networks is that they think that networks are making the world a better place by encountering the problems associated with bureaucracy and markets.

You could also pose your question in a slightly different way and you could ask: ‘Do I think that universities should be creating a generation of students who believe in the virtues of networks rather than the verities of bureaucracy?’. Then my answer would be more ambivalent. As I told you before, we should not lose sight – in so far as this is what happening – of the merits of bureaucracy. However, I also think that, broadly speaking, networks are quite a good innovation. For example, they create more space for collaboration, which in turn leads to more opportunity for public participation of everyday citizen.

What I find even more important is that students leave the university, not only with knowledge about virtues of both networks and bureaucracies, but also about the contested and historically contingent nature of these concepts. Both forms of organization do not possess a set of fixed and neutral properties but instead are contingent to historical practices that are constantly made and being remade by the actors within them.

Floris de Krijger

fmdekrijger@gmail.com

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Floris de Krijger



Floris is bezig met zijn masterstudie *Research in Public Administration and Organisational Science*. Afgelopen semester heeft hij masterkeuzevakken gevolgd aan de University of California, Berkeley. Naast zijn studie werkt hij als student-assistent bij de Universiteit Utrecht en is hij redacteur van Public Note.