1 Introduction: Relationality in the Policy Domain

The central theme of this Element is the relational dimension of policy life. How does the web of relationships among policy actors affect the construction and conduct of policy? How might we approach the task of conceptualizing, then discerning, the nature and action of the relational?

One can dismiss the task by simply saying that relationships are everything and everywhere. You might as well study how molecules influence policy, somebody might say. But other concepts used for analysis are similarly ubiquitous and unbounded, for example, beliefs, narrative, discourse, and rationality. The ubiquity and unboundedness of the relational should not dissuade us from building policy theories around it and crafting new ways of studying it. What is needed is to operationalize the concept of relationality for the purpose of deepening policy analysis. Scholars and practitioners both should begin the task of discovering aspects of relationality that can be analyzed and that are useful for their theory and practice. As importantly, we should be accumulating a store of case studies that illustrate relationality in policy life, building an array of examples of analysis.

One reason (but not the only one) for formally addressing the relational is to better understand policy anomalies. Anomalies abound in policy life, where things are not as they are intended to be (e.g., Carstensen, 2015; Wilder and Howlett, 2015). In one city, a formal schedule of property taxes is routinely deviated from, and payments are instead negotiated with assessors on a case-to-case basis. In another, a public-school charter that aims for a consistent level of quality everywhere gives way to a system where differing communities, with differing levels of income and influence, lobby to get better schools. In one state, a blanket public health measure requiring face masks is embraced in some districts and flouted in others.

The analyst can classify these as anomalies, call for better implementation, and leave it at that. But it is much more informative to take a more phenomenological view. This entails letting go of the urge to classify policy situations as normal or deviant and, instead, to describe and analyze them as they are. The early phenomenologist, Husserl, described a mode of description that brackets away strong assumptions about what a thing is or should be and, instead, returns "to the things themselves" (Husserl, 1900/1901, 168). This can require attending more faithfully to the complexity of a situation, what Geertz referred to as "thick description" (Geertz, 1973, 5).

One conventional way to view policy is as prescription – that is, as a plan for achieving good public ends.[1] This is corollary to a conventional view of policy

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[1] The authors wish to assure the reader that there is no intent to evoke an instrumental/purposive notion of policy. In fact, it is always tempting to use the straw figure of the rational model as an

as problem-solving (as noted by Turnbull, 2006). As Wildavsky wrote early on, "Policies are goals, objectives, and missions that guide the agency. Analysis evaluates and sifts alternative means and ends in the elusive pursuit of policy recommendations" (Wildavsky, 1964, 29). But, as Wildavsky and others later demonstrated, there may be gaps between the plan and its enactment because of the vagaries of implementation. Often, policy seems to invariably obey a different logic, repurposed if you will. Some suggest that policy actors behave according to a logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen, 1989), but the question is: Appropriateness to what? Some allude to a more informal, transactional policy of "nondesign" (Howlett and Mukherjee, 2014) but, again, we wonder: What is the logic of nondesign? We need to better describe these logics or mechanisms that seem to drive public policy in opaque, unintended, or informal ways. In this Element, we propose to trace these inner logics to relational phenomena. We will refer to this as a model of *relationality* in public policy (Lejano, 2021).

> Within the realm of public policy research, the term *relationality* pertains to the generative role that relationships have in shaping and enacting policy. *Relationality* is the condition in which policy, in its meanings and practice, emerges not just from formal, prescribed rulemaking and institution-building but also from the working and reworking of relationships among a network of policy actors.

In this Element, we will elaborate on the model of relationality and demonstrate how a relational framework can be used for policy analysis. A relational approach, as will be discussed, is useful not just for analyzing anomalies in public policy but in conventional policy situations as well. Later in this discussion, we sketch the outlines of how the relational approach might be useful in a prescriptive sense, in addition to its use for analysis.

In this provisional definition, we describe relationality not only as a condition but also as a set of processes. Relationships are mechanisms, operative among a web of policy actors, that generate policy. A relational analysis should aspire to a thick description of these mechanisms and their effect on policy.

1.1 Filling Gaps

A focus on the relational addresses gaps in several lines of research. We previously pointed to the literature on implementation as a body of knowledge built around policy anomalies – that is, when policy as realized departs from

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ideological construct from which the relational perspective contrasts (as a pedagogic strategy). For those scholars who are wont to delineate orthodoxies within the field, the relational perspective could readily be considered as part of an interpretive turn in policy studies.

policy as intended. This dovetails well with a parallel literature on how implementation revolves around decisions made by "street-level bureaucrats," referring to agents of the state in the field who directly implement policies and interact with policy recipients (Lipsky, 1980). This discussion does not rest on the rather artificial boundaries drawn, historically, between policy formulation and implementation, but the focus on implementation (as a mode of coproduction of policy) is a useful pedagogic tool for illustrating the value of a relational perspective. So being, we enter into the discussion of relationality initially from a previous literature's focus on the street-level agent. Otherwise, the notion of relationality is a more general concept that is not particularly tied to the idea of or literature on implementation.

An open question in the scholarship around street-level agents is how to understand (and characterize) the kinds of decisions made at this level and how to account for the variation in patterns and outcomes of policy implementation (e.g., Winter, 2001). A body of literature has emerged around trying to explain decisions by the street-level bureaucrat as rational, involving maximizing individual utility or program outcomes (see the discussion in Chang, 2021). A variation of this involves an embedded assumption of bounded rationality, where the street-level agent adopts coping strategies, where policy targets are aimed for while dealing with organizational and resource constraints found at the field level (e.g., Ellis, 2011). These perspectives often view the street-level bureaucrat as an autonomous agent, making decisions and taking actions based on an individualistic logic operating under local constraints. But variations in decisions and outcomes are wide, and the literature attempts to explain this by correlating with individual-level characteristics such as demographic variables, self-perception, values, and so on (e.g., Wilkins and Williams, 2009).

However, as we will discuss in Section 2, there is considerable evidence by now, from fields such as social psychology and experimental economics, that decision-making has a strong relational component – that is, people make judgments not just as the rational individual but also as the connected individual responding to connections to the other. In short, to fully explain how street-level bureaucrats (and other policy actors) implement policy, we have to add the motivating factors induced by their being embedded in a web of relationships that guide their actions. Often, these decisions and actions depart from any semblance of individual rationality. March and Olsen characterized modes of decision-making that operate outside the rational agent model as the "logic of appropriateness" and characterize the latter as a fitting of decisions to rules and roles (March and Olsen, 2010). But, again, missing in this promising line of inquiry is an appreciation of how "appropriateness" also includes a fidelity to

the relationships that one is a part of. Role and identity, as we will discuss in Section 2, are wrapped up in one's web of relationships.

Not that the importance of relationships has evaded scholars' attention. Every so often, the value of the relational will be mentioned. Lipsky's original treatise on street-level bureaucrats discusses the importance of the agent's relationship and interaction with the client. For example, Van Parys and Struyven recognize how relationships matter by trying to classify interaction styles in simplistic, categorical ways such as supportive, controlling, and so on (Van Parys and Struyven, 2018). As Hill and Hupe suggest: "it is relevant how street-level bureaucrats deal not only with rules (the substantive dimension) but also with other actors (the relational dimension)" (Hill and Hupe, 2021, 226) – and yet, there is so far no concerted attempt to analyze relationships between policy actors in detail.[2] At the same time as scholars acknowledge the importance of the relational, almost none attempt to analyze and describe relationship in enough richness and use such rich description to better understand policy processes and outcomes. One exception is Peake and Forsyth (2022), who call for a wider use of ethnographic interviews with street-level agents to understand how their interactions and programmatic contexts intertwine. As we will discuss in Section 4, this approach is one effective way of getting at the nature of relationships that influences the policy agent's thinking and action. It is likely to be an important route to adding to our knowledge of what constitutes logics of appropriateness.

One promising route runs through the literature on network governance (e.g., O'Toole et al., 1997). This scholarship promotes the important idea that policy emerges not simply from individuals enacting it but from social networks of interconnected individuals (and groups) whose interactions construct policy. In trying to connect the characteristics and dynamics of the network to policy outcomes and program effectiveness, the literature has largely focused on two aspects: first, the structural configuration of the social network and, second, how the heterogeneous, often nonformalized, network is managed. In doing so, the network literature primarily depicts network ties in terms of presence or absence of connection (i.e., classic social network analysis amounts to characterizing a network as a matrix of ones and zeroes). What is lacking is a deeper knowledge of what constitutes a tie – beyond presence or absence, how can we describe such ties (which, in this Element, we will refer to as relationship)? So, a more explicitly relational analysis will allow an understanding of network processes that go beyond the structure of switch-like ties and into the nature of these

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[2] Some notable examples (such as Nisar and Maroulis, 2017) often employ quantitative approaches to social network analysis.

connections, which may differ from node to node. This takes us beyond macro-level insights into the importance of actor centrality and into questions about what constitutes centrality and how it functions. Interestingly, when the network literature does look at how processes work up close, it mostly revolves around the same assumption of the individual actor engaging in strategic behavior (e.g., Klijn, 1997, 29). As we will discuss in Section 2, our knowledge of individual decision-making is deeper now, and we know that individuals also act in a more relational way. Moreover, focusing closely on the nature of relationships moves us from the what (which actors are central) to the how (why and how their centrality matters).

The scholarship on policy networks arose because of the complexity of processes by which many policies are enacted. As Klijn describes it: "Policy processes in networks are unpredictable and complex . . . Many authors have tried to define these processes in typologies of strategies" (Klijn, 1997, 32). But these meta-level approaches to characterizing relationships in networks (creating typologies, describing the structure of the network) do not allow us to explain what happens with each particular actor interacting with another. The idea presented herein is that describing exactly what these interpersonal (and interorganizational) relationships are, using richer modes of description, can help us explain what policy outcomes emerge and why.

Close examination of the relational allows us to go beyond typological descriptions of how policy is implemented in ways varying with context. For example, the literature on clientelism and policy networks usually concentrates on one mode of relationship where certain clients are favored (or capture the state) so that they receive disproportionately more benefits from a policy. But there is a much richer spectrum of possible relationships between client and state (including adverse relationships that detract from the client's welfare, cooperative relationships where clients participate in policy interpretation, etc.), and we need to better describe exactly what these relationships are, how they function, and how these affect policy outcomes.

Relational phenomena are often found in the inner workings of policy – that is, behind the scenes and in ways not acknowledged by formal or codified policy. Such phenomena are relevant to all aspects of policy formulation/enactment. They blur any notion of stages in the policy process and their recognition perhaps blends well with constructivist perspectives on policy-making that eschew the autonomous subject (see Barbehön, 2022, for a review). In this Element, we use the concept of relationality as a general framework for *policy analysis*, especially in evaluating how and why policies emerge and effect change (e.g., Lejano, 2021).

Across the broader landscape of policy studies, one can view relationality as part of the interpretive turn in policy scholarship. This can be understood in the same spirit as other studies' attempts to describe how policy is constructed through the interactions of multiple policy actors (e.g., Durose and Richardson, 2015). Focusing on relationality means understanding these interactions as, in part, expression of relationships among these actors. This draws inspiration from a related literature in the area of relational sociology, in which society is analyzed not as a static constellation of things or properties but dynamic, unfolding relations (e.g., Emirbayer, 1997; Powell and Dépelteau, 2013). As Donati writes, "society is conceptualized as a network, though not a network of objects or of individuals, but as a network of relations" (Donati, 2011, 226). Crossley (2011) suggests that, while conventional (sociological) analyses focus on individuals or societal "wholes," the most appropriate unit of analysis is instead social relations.

If we understand policy to emerge from interactions (i.e., relationships) among a network of policy actors, then policy analysis should be better able to account for the relational in explaining how and why policies work in the world. In Section 2, we conceptualize relationality and then discuss the implications of such conceptualizations for how we analyze policy.

As we will see in the empirical case study taken up later in this Element, a closer analysis of relationships gives us an understanding of how and why a new policy did not lead to expected outcomes in richer ways that, as seen in this case, can lead to fresh ideas for policy reform.

1.2 Goals of This Element

The goals of this Element are to

- provide a rudimentary definition of relationality in public policy,
- describe examples of how relationality is manifested in real policy situations,
- offer some initial ideas of how relational policy analysis can be done, and
- discuss how the relational lens can help us craft new ideas for policy reform.

We will use a case study to illustrate how a relational approach to analysis can be conducted, and how this leads to fresh insights into policy reform.

1.3 Relationality in Practice

Sometimes policy outcomes differ from that intended when the rationale for the policy, as designed, does not match those that motivate policy actors in the field. What is the logic of appropriateness that governs the decisions and actions of the actor in the field? Pierre Bourdieu (1977) probes into this complexity in his

work on logics of practice (i.e., how patterns of action and reasoning at the field level may differ from that conceptualized by an external observer or an authority). His account of practice highlights the governing influence of relationships (e.g., dyadic relationships) on institutions.

Bourdieu, writing about things remote from public policy, gives a vivid description of how relational mechanisms work, using the example of gift exchange among the Kabyle of Morocco (Bourdieu, 1977). Gift giving among the Kabyle is a refined institution. It can never be a simple tit-for-tat exchange because that would make the interaction seem perfunctory. Rather than an objectively fixed obedience to social rules, the gift exchange has to operate as if it were spontaneous and improvised.

> "If it is not to constitute an insult, the counter-gift must be deferred and different . . . opposed on the one hand to swapping, which . . . telescopes gift and counter-gift to the same instant, and on the other hand, to lending, in which the return of the loan is explicitly guaranteed by a juridical act and is thus already accomplished at the very moment of the drawing up of a contract" (Bourdieu, 1977, 5).

Gift giving is more art than science, something that expresses a finely working relationship between parties. The gifts cannot be identical or even equivalent, since that would suggest the two parties were identical. It may differ between two peers or an elder and junior, for example, between two longtime friends and two chance acquaintances, between persons who share an interest in food and those who cherish books. Actors exchanging gifts must show care for the relationship.

The analogy to policy is that, just as with gift exchange, sometimes a policy is enacted in a way that cannot be prespecified or codified into a set of rules. The actual outcome is something inherently dependent on context, who the parties are, and what their relationship was, is, and will be. It is a particularly apt analogy for policy situations where:

- notwithstanding a codified or formalized set of rules or procedures that constitute a policy, its actual implementation, or embodiment varies from context to context in a way not captured by the formal policy;
- the formalized policy acts as a guide to policy action, but does not well circumscribe the action, as the latter is of a complexity that cannot be even approximately codified in a policy text;
- sometimes the formal policy acts as a facade, disguising the actual policy process that actors cannot acknowledge in any formal way.

If the last point seems extreme, note that such situations are more commonplace than one might think. For example, in 1964, California formally ended its

bracero program, which had allowed the transient entry across the border of temporary farmworkers from Mexico. But the movement of migrant workers continued beyond 1964 despite never being sanctioned by official policy (González and Loza, 2016). In part, this was due to the continuing relationship between growers in Southern California and willing farmworkers in Mexico. In every context, we should be able to find examples of policies that work in ways not reflected in the official text.

Sometimes policy is crafted on a level that is (purposely or not) general, abstract, or ambiguous, and policy actors then have to translate this into working policies on the ground (Brugnach and Ingram, 2012). This situation, which might be likened to interpretation of a policy text, inherently brings into play relationships found in context. We may end up with a situation where policy is not isomorphic (i.e., not simply diffused) but polymorphic in that it varies from context to context (Lejano and Shankar, 2013). Current ideas about policy design are amenable to policy as something malleable, framed, and reframed by a network of policy actors continuously (e.g., Peters et al., 2018). The essential quality of a realistic, adaptable policy prescription process is that of openness (Dryzek and Ripley, 1988). Relationality is a lens for understanding how and why policy translation occurs (e.g., Alta and Mukhtarov, 2022). As Warne Peters and Mulligan suggest, problem-solving in the field is relational work (Warne Peters and Mulligan, 2019).

Admittedly, sometimes policy really does work in anomalous and divergent ways (e.g., Carter et al., 20154). But, we suggest, more often, the life of policy inherently proceeds nonanomalously in accordance with, and supported by, the relationships that are maintained among policy actors. A pattern of public action becomes an institution because it reflects and is supported by the everyday relationships found in that context. Take the simple example of an informal street vendor selling oranges on the corner. If this activity is maintained day in and day out, then we can say that it has become an institution. But to be an institution, it has to be supported by a web of relationships that actively maintain it – relationships between the vendor and orange-buying commuters and pedestrians, with officers who choose not to enforce vending permit ordinances, with building owners in that area, and so on. A relational approach seeks to make plain, and subject to analysis, the way relationships influence and even determine policy. One way to deal with this is to acknowledge that, yes, of course, relationships always matter, and leave it at that. The more interesting way is to explicitly analyze it and explain how.

In subsequent sections, we will be more explicit about what relationality is. This will require that we also attempt to be more analytical about just what a relationship is and how we might analyze it. We cannot hope to completely

formalize the idea of relationship, since this broad concept defies definition. Relationships need not be dyadic, since they can inhere between many people or groups of people. Interpersonal relationships are never just individual-to-individual ones, and their meaning often goes beyond the immediate interaction (Bourdieu, 1977, 81). These can be multi-scalar, as relationships can inhere between persons, organizations, and institutions. They most often go beyond the material, as one can have a relationship with a cause or a concept (consider the idea of love for one's country). But we need ways to operationalize the idea of relationship to a degree that promotes policy analysis.

2 Conceptualizing Relationality

Policymaking is often portrayed as a rational activity – that is, a deliberate fashioning of policy to best achieve predetermined ends. The exercise is all the more rational to the extent that such fashioning of policy is done in a way that reasonably optimizes the chance of a policy's success. Understood in this way, policy is seen as ostensibly purposive; a prescription for achieving public goals.

In the discussion that follows, we set aside the complexity of policy for a moment and (artificially) draw a distinction between a rational model of policy and a relational one. This artificial, and somewhat playful, juxtaposing is pedagogical as, at some point, we return to the real world of policy where there are no clear-cut models, only the things themselves. The rational ideal is not the alpha and omega of policy thought as early writers might have once proposed, nor need it be the anathema of collective engagement that critics might charge; it is but one of many modes of description, all of them partial and incomplete. What it is, is a way of describing what policymakers and practitioners often aspire for and direct their activities toward – but it is not the only way. In our use of the word, rationality, we do not refer to the narrow idea of reason as instrumental/purposive (or the narrower idea of it as utility maximization) but the broader idea of applying the best of our knowledge, abilities, and multiple disciplines toward prescribing solutions to the problems of society, which is what Lasswell meant by introducing the idea of a policy science (Lasswell, 1970).

The most dominant notion of what rationality is, is conjured by the Cartesian ego, the autonomous individual (or subject) pondering the external world (or object) and divining what is true and good. The rational model is closely related to the idea of analysis, which has its roots in the Greek word, ἀνάλυσις, for taking something apart and inspecting it. The radical movement, applied to the field of policy analysis, involves, first, the separation of the analyst from the

object of study and, secondly, the objective evaluation of the state of the object and the right course of action regarding it. In program evaluation, this takes the form of taking a policy or program in isolation, assessing its outcomes vis-à-vis intended objectives, and designing (or modifying) it to optimally meet those objectives. The subject, or analyst, is a person removed from the thing being studied, regarding it in objective fashion.

From this rational ideal comes the framing of policy as prescriptive. The rational decision-maker or decision-makers are those who, from their privileged perch, are able to apply criteria for what is true and good in judging something (say, a policy) as right or wrong and, if the latter, redesigning it for the better.

The idea of policy as *ratio* evokes the figure of the subject (or subjects) as that who is able to set explicit goals and prescriptions from a position external to a situation. These policies are then enacted, and their outcomes are assessed. The Cartesian subject sets policy from a position removed from the object of intervention (these objects invariably involve complex networks, including the public, field agents, organizations, and others). This is not an entirely radical model – in fact, rulemaking is idealized as done by external agents (e.g., legislators) viewing the situation from a more objective perspective. Policy analysis is often framed within a rationalist (even decision analytic) perspective – as one handbook suggests, policy analysis consists of specifying "explicit goals, concrete alternatives, systematic comparison, and clear recommendation" (Weimer and Vining, 2017, 372).

Embedded in much of the literature previously discussed is the implicit assumption of the policy actor as autonomous agent and, going further, rational decision-maker. It is in this light that we understand models of policy actors as employing individual rationality or, more pragmatically, bounded rationality involving coping strategies. But there is, by now, substantial literature on the psychology of identity and more complex models of decision-making, which speak to the person as a relational being, motivated to think and act in ways that cohere with one's relationships with others. We take a brief look at these bodies of thought, which support the relational perspective.

The early phenomenologists (Husserl, 1900/1901; Brentano, 1874) critiqued the Cartesian notion of *res cogitans*, the individual taking in the world and making judgments about it from an objective perch. Instead, they saw the person as defined by intentionality, or as a being always tending toward the other (e.g. Husserl, 1900/1901). Every mental activity, as Brentano would suggest, is something relational (1874). The person is never the external subject removed from the object being examined but, instead, someone embedded, from beginning to end, in the situation itself.