

Forum Section: Theoretically Refining the Multiple Streams Framework

Streams and stages: Reconciling Kingdon and policy process theory

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Abstract. Use of metaphors is a staple feature of how we understand policy processes – none more so than the use of ‘policy stages’/‘cycles’ and ‘multiple streams’. Yet even allowing for the necessary parsimony of metaphors, the former is often criticised for its lack of ‘real world’ engagement with agency, power, ideology, turbulence and complexity, while the latter focuses only on agenda-setting but at times has been utilised, with limited results, to understand later stages of the policy process. This article seeks to explore and advance the opportunities for combining both and applying them to the policy-formation and decision-making stages of policy making. In doing so it examines possible three, four and five stream models. It argues that a five stream confluence model provides the highest analytical value because it retains the simplicity of metaphors (combining elements of two of the most prominent models in policy studies) while also helping capture some of the more complex and subtle aspects of policy processes, including policy styles and nested systems of governance.

Keywords: Kingdon, John W.; policy cycle; multiple streams; policy formation; decision making

Introduction

The study of public policy has relied substantially on the use of metaphors to help simplify the complexities and dynamics of policy processes (Pump 2011). Several authors have raised the importance of metaphors and stories to capture how policy is formed, studied and presented (Bardach 2011; Black 1962; Edelman 1988; Klein 1999; Schlesinger & Lau 2000; Stone 1989, 2012). Public policy as a discipline has gained much momentum from two eminent metaphors with strong analytical appeal – ‘stages/cycles’ and ‘multiple’ streams – yet both have been criticised for lacking political realism and one in particular (multiple streams) has been applied only to the agenda phase of the policy process. Certainly, the parsimony of metaphors (Rayner 1984) brings with it a lack of specificity and so our intention here is not to criticise either of these prominent metaphors. Rather, it is to suggest that there is value in the policy sciences prising open a window (to use John W. Kingdon’s terminology) and combining aspects of both. The confines of one short article limit our capacity to explore all stages of the policy process, but we do examine in depth the policy-formation and decision-making stages. The policy sciences often develop incrementally and pragmatically (DeLeon 1989) and so our approach here is an incremental step in

a new direction, and consistent with recent key policy texts flagging the need to consider issues of conceptual convergence in the policy sciences (Cairney 2013; John 2012).

In this context, our goal in this article is to explore and advance the opportunities for combining stages/cycles and streams metaphors, applying them to the policy-formation and decision-making stages of policy making. The article begins by examining briefly the values and limits of both metaphors. It then explores, with illustrative examples throughout, a number of potential alternative models: three-into-one tributary model; three streams – two phases model; four stream model; and our preference, a five stream confluence model. This latter option is examined in some detail with an explanation of how it can help capture some of the more nuanced features of public policy, including policy strategies and styles as well as multilayered policy-formation processes leading to varieties of different policy outcomes. In the conclusion we return to the limits of the traditional stages/cycles and streams metaphors, indicating how a five-stream metaphor goes a considerable way to safeguarding itself from similar criticism.

The values and limits of stages/cycles and streams metaphors

The origins, nature, development and use of the stages/cycles and streams metaphors are covered extensively elsewhere (e.g., Brewer 1974; Burton 2006; DeLeon 1999; Lyden et al. 1968; Simmons et al. 1974; Weible et al. 2012). We provide here only an elementary summary as a primer for subsequent analysis.

Since the early days of policy studies and in particular the work of Lasswell (1956, 1971), ‘cycles’ and ‘stages’ have become embedded in the language and studies of policy analysis. Different authors have adapted these metaphors in a multitude of ways, and the number of stages and the terminology attached to each has varied considerably. For example, Lasswell’s (1956) seven-stage model (intelligence-gathering, promotion, prescription, invocation, application, termination, appraisal) contrasts with that of Brewer’s (1974) five/six stage model (invention/initiation, estimation, selection, implementation, evaluation, termination). Later variants introduced a further metaphor of cycles to indicate that rather than policy processes moving from ‘start’ to ‘finish’, they were ongoing and recurring, in the sense of policy being its own cause (Wildavsky 1987). The organic cycle metaphor not only became a standard feature of many textbooks and practitioner classes (for an exemplar, see Althaus et al. 2012), but it helped create synergies with conceptual advances in fields such as paleobiology and system theory, facilitating the developments of policy concepts such as ‘punctuated equilibrium’, ‘path dependency’ and ‘negative/positive feedback’ (Baumgartner & Jones 2009; Pierson 1992, 1993, 2000). Yet the stages and cycles metaphors have many detractors (e.g., Colebatch 2006; Jann & Wegrich 2007; Sabatier 1991), who have argued that it presents an idealised image of policy making rarely encountered in the real world of powerful political agents, ideology, turbulence and complexity.

A latter-day metaphor that has gained substantial momentum since the mid-1980s is the work of John W. Kingdon (1984, 2011). With a focus on how issues become prominent on policy agendas, he uses several metaphors (‘open windows’, ‘primeval soup’), but it is the aquatic metaphor of ‘policy streams’ that has captured the attention of policy scholars.¹ Streams are set out as threefold in nature: (1) the *problem stream* refers essentially to policy problems in society that potentially require attention; (2) the *policy stream* pertains to the

many potential policy solutions that originate with communities of policy makers, experts and lobby groups; and (2) the *politics stream* refers to factors such as changes in government, legislative turnover and fluctuations in public opinion. In Kingdon's view, these streams flow largely independent of each other until circumstances lead to a confluence of the three streams. The phenomenon of 'crisis' is a classic example, where the problem is acutely manifest (possibly in a dramatic 'focusing event'), there is political will to address the issue and solutions that were previously not high on the political agenda become blended with the 'problem' and the 'politics', producing 'open windows' of opportunity for policy entrepreneurs to seek policy change.

Kingdon's 'streams' metaphor has been applied to multiple cases (see, e.g., Sharp 1994, Woods & Peake 1988), particularly because it helps capture the phenomenon of an 'idea whose time has come'. Yet Kingdon's focus is principally on agenda-setting (not subsequent stages of the policy process) and has been subject to criticism for its emphasis on contingency and 'chance', and for over-emphasising the importance of problem construction at the agenda stage, despite the fact that the 'problem' may be reframed or even abandoned in the long term (see, e.g., Colebatch 2006; Jann & Wegrich 2007).

Paradoxically, therefore, the enduring appeal of both metaphors is combined with extensive criticisms that they are in many respects detached from the *Realpolitik* of public policy. Yet can the two metaphors combined be greater than the sum of their parts? The way forward is far from simple. Some attempts have been made to combine streams and cycles, but mixing metaphors can be a difficult task, often leading to confusion rather than enlightenment. Barzelay (2006), for example, advocates a relatively simple merger of the two metaphors, arguing that agenda-setting events set up chains of causality. He states:

In the overall process, agenda-setting events influence alternative-specification events through two causal channels. First, problem definition trajectories influence the construction and winnowing of alternatives, through the influence of issue framing and the assignment of issues to distinct venues for alternative specification. Second, the prospect of policy change, inferred from an agenda-setting event's past and anticipated trajectory, spurs the efforts of participants in alternative-specification events, whether they are policy entrepreneurs, protectors of the status quo, or just doing their job. The trajectories of decision-making events are, in turn, influenced by agenda-setting and alternative-specification events. This aspect of the overall policymaking process arises because the rendering of alternatives, in combination with pressures responsible for an elevated issue status, may open the gates to decisional venues and their corresponding decisional agendas. (Barzelay 2006: 253–254)

In essence, for Barzelay, initial agenda-setting effectively determines the subsequent stages of the policy process. Yet such a view ignores the turbulence and complexities that might take place in the ensuing stages, altering or even terminating proposed policy trajectories (Howlett et al. 2009).

In reality, Kingdon did not attempt to provide a framework that explained the dynamics of subsequent stages in the policy process (Zahariadis 1995, 2007; Zahariadis & Allen 1995). Nevertheless, some scholars have persisted with the idea that three streams – problems, policies and politics – simply cross over into policy formation, implementation and evaluation (see, e.g., Exworthy & Powell (2004) on policy implementation). While it is indeed

useful to see a degree of intellectual cross-fertilisation across stages of the policy processes, a three stream model cannot simply be applied wholesale to other stages of the policy process. Doing so requires consideration of additional streams. We explore a number of possibilities below and latterly advance our own five stream model before concluding by suggesting that it goes a considerable way to safeguarding itself from the type of criticism leveled at the traditional stages/cycles and streams metaphors.

Extending the streams metaphor to stages: Alternative policy-making models

We suggest that despite the necessary parsimony that comes with metaphors, any integration of streams/stages/cycles metaphors should be able to incorporate, as a basic minimum, several key elements, which are: (a) an appropriate number of streams that help epitomise the sets of phenomena that are manifest in policy processes; (b) the relationship between these streams at important points in the policy process; (c) some sense of attempts to ‘steer’ these processes, rather than their being determined either by an inevitable or random flow of circumstances; and (d) some capacity to cope with different types of policy processes, from ‘garbage can’ policy making where pre-conceived ‘solutions’ are pivotal in the construction of problems, to processes where policy formation comes to a halt because of the absence of viable alternatives. What follows in the various models addresses principally (a) and (b). It is only in our five stream model that we address more fully elements (c) and (d).

Three-into-one tributary model

A close approximation to Barzelay’s original idea is to suggest that once Kingdon’s three streams converge at the agenda-setting stage, they transform into a single new larger stream – a policy process stream that then begins to work in its own way towards an outcome (Teisman 2000). This new ‘river’ is made up of the ‘waters’ of the old streams but in a new mix (the varying ways of looking at the problem, the various possible alternatives and the political drivers) that informs and constrains authoritative decision-making processes and the use of governing resources to implement policies (see Figure 1).

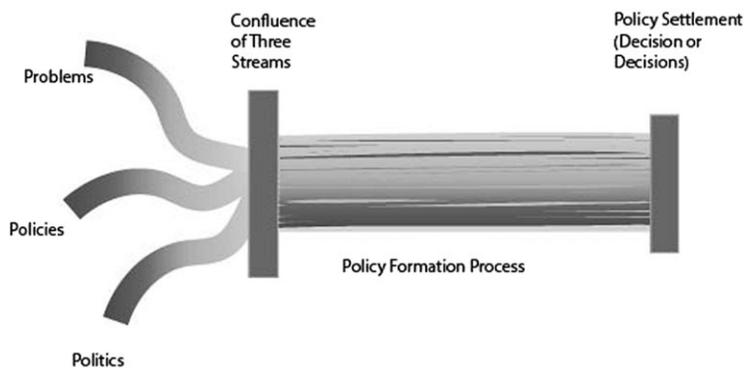


Figure 1. Three-into-one tributary model.

One advantage of this model is that it overcomes any assumptions that the ‘problem’ is always predetermined in the agenda-setting stage. When the three streams converge into a single process stream, the waters of the ‘problem’ ‘policies’ and ‘politics’ streams are blended into a new, larger stream that doesn’t necessarily retain the ‘problem’ as it was. In corruption cases, for example, the problem begins invariably as one of corrupt behaviour, but further examination and consideration of lessons for the future often highlights weak regulatory oversight or policy vacuums, facilitating and/or failing to prevent corrupt behaviour.

There are, however, some difficulties with this model. The elimination or apparent elimination of ‘politics’ as a separate stream remains an issue (Hood 2010; Howlett 2012). This is because, to varying degrees, public policy is driven not just by the need to solve problems, but also by the political need to be *seen* to address problems – even at the expense of failing to solve the problem itself (Hood 2010; Howlett 2012; McConnell 2010a, b). Often a ‘policy problem’ starts as a gulf between core goals/values and specific circumstances that are widely accepted as having breached these goals, but then somewhere in the cycle the problem for policy makers becomes endogenised or politicised and blame-avoidance or credit-claiming behaviour ensues (Hood 2010). Policy making can then become less about problem solving and just as much, if not more, a political issue of management and control, diffusing the original problem or marginalising or even eliminating it from discussion (Hood 2010). ‘Politics’ can set the agenda for ‘policy’ in a way that cannot be captured by a ‘single’ post-agenda-setting stream model.

This important issue also resonates with literature on policy success and political risk (see, e.g., Althaus 2008; McConnell 2010a, b). The political imperatives of dramatic focusing events, morals panics and scandals, for example, can place immense pressures on policy makers to demonstrate swift and decisive action – for example, sudden surges in knife crime or dog attacks (Lodge & Hood 2002). Policy makers have multiple goals – often traded off against each other in calculated or even instinctive risk assessment of the political repercussions of pursuing policy-oriented goals (Althaus 2008; McConnell 2010a, b). Attempting to definitively solve the policy problem may only be one among many policy-making goals, and may be further down the pecking order than political imperatives.

Issue attention cycle-type dynamics (where issues rise suddenly onto policy agendas before disappearing almost as rapidly) are also good examples where there is a surge in attention and interest to deal with a problem, but then efforts fade away, often with only a token initiative in response (Downs 1972; Hogwood 1992; Howlett 1997). Many public sector employers, for example, attempt initially to address major gender equity issues such as a lack of women in senior management positions and women being disadvantaged in the workforce because they are not part of male social networks, only to produce initiatives (such as gender-affirmative job advertisements) that are much smaller in scope than many advocates wanted to see. Often the problem is reframed as the symptoms of undesirable circumstances rather than the causes. This is especially apparent, for example, when crises/disasters/fiascoes/scandals are the catalyst for the convergence of agenda-setting streams (Bovens & ‘t Hart 1995). For example, the ‘problem’ of the 2011 London riots has been bitterly fought over as post-riot policy initiatives emerged, with claims that they were caused by everything from a rogue class of lawless individuals with no community values, to post-financial crisis cutbacks that have squeezed vulnerable communities and given

young people even fewer life chances (Bauman 2011). As can be seen from these examples, channeling post-agenda developments into a single stream that is wide enough to accommodate their divergent dynamics obfuscates more than it clarifies the subsequent unfolding of many policies. A streams metaphor that does not maintain the distinctiveness of politics is, in our view, one that is lacking in acuity.

Three streams – two stages model

A further possibility in uniting cycles/stages and streams can be derived from the work of Zahariadis (2007). The first stage is the streams approach of Kingdon, culminating in agenda entrance. In the second stage, there are also three streams: policies, politics and process. The key difference, therefore, is that the ‘problem’ defined in stage one remains essentially unchanged and becomes absorbed into a new process stream (see Figure 2).

A hypothetical example is the case of road transportation in an urban area where traffic congestion has made it onto the agenda. The streams would be:

- A politics stream (e.g., a set of evolving neoliberal market-based transportation governance norms);
- A policy stream (e.g., a set of instruments or possible solutions to road congestion issues such as toll roads or congestion charges); and
- A *new* process stream (e.g., practical attempts to resolve road congestion by advancing the problem through discussion and implementation of a solution).

This model may appear at first glance to be a useful way of combining cycles/stages and streams metaphors because it retains the analytical appeal of Kingdon in explaining agenda-setting while recognising also that a new process stream comes into being after an item is on the agenda. In the process stream, refinements in problems, options appraisal and deliberative practices – all conducted in institutional forums with their own procedures and norms – can have a ‘life of their own’ that, at the very least, moderates some of the ‘garbage can’ assumptions of the streams approach (Araral et al. 2012). The model also raises some interesting possibilities for understanding policy dynamics because different types of

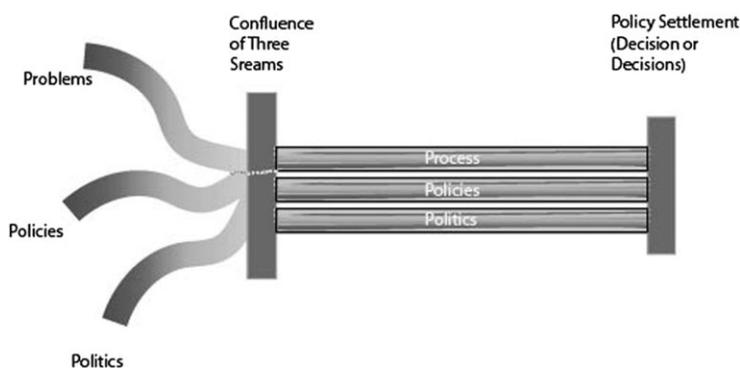


Figure 2. Three stream – two stages model.

nesting may be possible. For example, variations of an issue are possible, depending on the degree of politicisation and the source of the problem with the 'size' of each stream being a key factor in understanding how a process subsequently unfolds. Some processes could be more politicised than others (e.g., industrial relations, foreign policy). And some may be relatively policy-oriented (e.g., waste management, animal disease control) and thus more influenced by technical considerations.

Yet the virtues in conceiving of a new process stream within which the problem remains quite stable are also problematic. Competing definitions of 'the problem' persist throughout policy processes, certainly when we move beyond the realms of the policy-making environment but even within it. Competing constructions of policy problems are a routine feature of policy processes, and can lead to policies – often suites of policies – with different and non-mutually exclusive definitions of the problem (Daugbjerg 2009, 2012; Hajer 2005; Howlett 2009; Sabatier et al. 1987). As the London riots and other examples cited above have shown, policy processes often deviate from original problems, notwithstanding the fact that the nature of the problem may be highly contestable from the start (e.g., climate change, recreational drug use).

Four stream model

Kingdon's approach, as he acknowledged, was influenced by the work of Cohen, March and Olsen (Cohen et al. 1972; March & Olsen 1979) on decision-making processes in complex administrative environments. Importantly, these earlier works postulated the existence of *four* – not three – streams, comprising problems, solutions, participants and a fourth process or choice opportunities stream. 'Choice opportunities' here refer to 'occasions when an organization is expected to produce behavior that can be called a decision' (Cohen et al. 1972: 3).

Kingdon used the static metaphor of 'policy windows' to capture such future prospects at the agenda stage, but this is a rather awkward mix of stream and non-stream metaphors. More to the point, for someone looking at the entire cycle it can be argued that, as Cohen, March and Olson originally specified, choice opportunities constitute a separate stream akin to a policy development process, one in which collective energies are marshaled at specific points in time in the expectation that a decision will be taken and then appropriate action will be pursued. We depict this four stream model in Figure 3.

There is some initial attraction in moving to such a four stream model in reconciling stream and stages metaphors – principally because it helps take us beyond the agenda-setting phase while extending the window of opportunity dynamic into the realm of policy development and decision making. In doing so it can help explain how problems and processes may flow independently of each other if new evidence comes to light on the nature of the problem (as is sometimes the case when new governments interrogate the budget of the previous administration) or if the process involves bargaining and deal-making and moves away from the original definition of the problem (coalition or minority government policy making, for example).

Yet there are some quite fundamental limitations of this four stream model, even allowing for the necessary simplicity of metaphors. There is no clear logic in terms of how the four streams might interact with one another. For example, it is not clear how the three

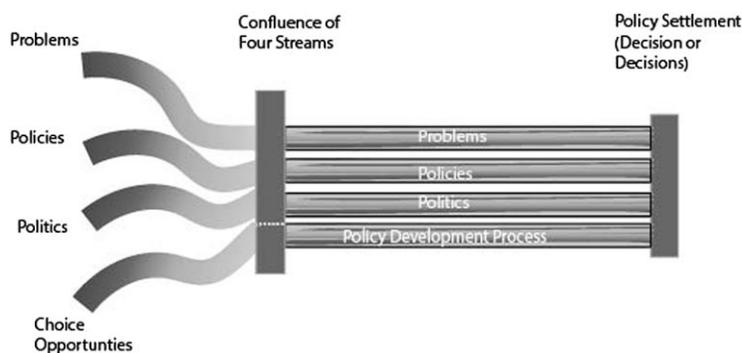


Figure 3. Four stream model.

streams would interact in response to a choice opportunity that occurs beyond the agenda-setting stage. If, for example, a public consultation process on introducing daylight saving time produces conflicting views, does the politics stream simply stop because of a deliberative deadlock? Does the problem get redefined, like that of children going to school in the dark? It is also unclear exactly where the choice stream originates and of what it is composed. Although it could be equated with an institutional timetable for action (see, e.g., Goetz & Mayer-Sahling 2009; Mayer-Sahling & Goetz 2009), stages-based analyses have pointed to events occurring outside formal institutional processes affecting policy timetables (Teisman 2000). And, to continue the analogy, such a four stream model would have difficulty explaining why the streams stopped flowing if an agenda item did not result in a policy outcome. Consultation on local tax changes in the United Kingdom in the early 1980s did not result in any policy outcome (other than doing nothing), essentially because the Thatcher government (a key actor in the political stream) decided that no feasible alternative existed to the existing system (McConnell 1995). A viable and extended streams model should be able to accommodate important aspects of the relationship between streams.

Five stream 'confluence' model

We consider this variant on the streams metaphor to be the most promising. It involves thinking about policy making as a sequence – much as in the stages/cycle metaphor – in which critical confluence and distribution points among policy streams are linked to specific 'stages' of the policy process in a cycle model, much as various tributaries flow into a river at different points as they make their way downstream to the ocean. Figure 4 illustrates a dominant political stream, although as argued below, other streams may also dominate.

The starting point for this model is Kingdon's three streams (problems, policies, politics). Confluence point I is precisely along the lines Kingdon suggested, when the three streams converge at the agenda-setting stage. This convergence is also the start of policy formation, where the streams converge into a 'whirlpool' – at times turbulent and hidden from public view – constituting a period of initial strategic appraisal by policy makers (political agents) when they consider the matter of if, and how to proceed, as well as issues such as whether

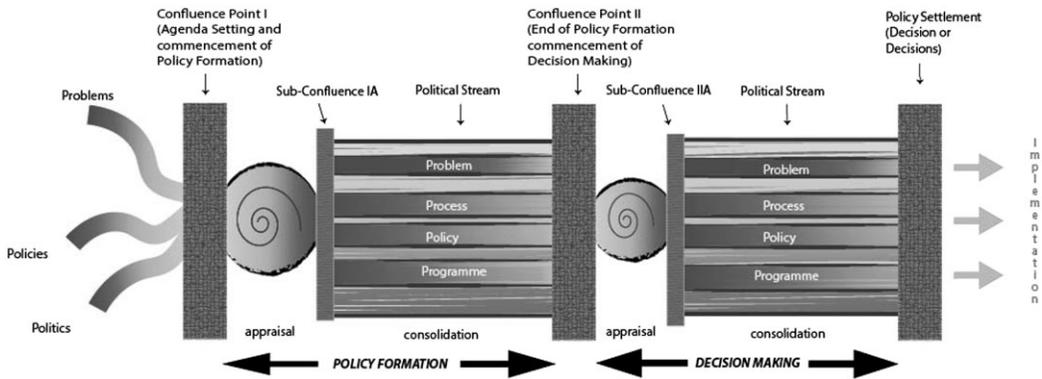


Figure 4. Five stream confluence model (example of dominant political stream).

Note: This example is illustrative of dominant political stream and aqueducts flowing within it which survive all potential confluence disruptions. In other instances, different streams may dominate (with the remaining streams flowing as aqueducts within its parameters). Confluence points have the potential to reconfigure which stream dominates at a particular stage.

their initial assumptions about the ‘problem’ remain valid. The end of this appraisal phase is marked by a sub-confluence point (IA), which also constitutes the beginning of the consolidation phase of policy formation and the configuration of the various streams. Here the three initial agenda-setting streams (problems, policies, politics) are joined by two further streams. The first is a process stream, designed to examine options, support authoritative decisions and so on, which sets up the future timetable for deliberations and establishes the general course through which the stream will flow. The second is a programme stream, designed to calibrate new programme instruments and integrate them with established ones. Further confluence and sub-confluence points are possible (as argued below) with each confluence point capable of bringing something different (such as new actors, new agenda-setting streams, new tactics) to the flow of events and each intersection point representing a ‘window’ in Kingdon’s sense, but with a different configuration of streams passing through each particular juncture (Klijn & Teisman 1991; Timmermans 2001). Following policy formation there is the decision-making phase, which commences with a further ‘whirlpool’ of appraisal (also potentially turbulent), when policy makers begin to focus their attention on how far they have come (e.g., in terms of available policy alternatives, feedback from stakeholders) and how to proceed towards a final decision. This appraisal phase ends with a sub-confluence point IIA, which leads into a final consolidation phase where the dominant stream and all the other streams are configured to flow towards a final policy settlement (decision or decisions).

Crucially, therefore, and unlike any of the other potential streams model, a degree of complexity is recognised because the five streams can be nested within each other to help explain different types of policy making and the way in which one particular stream can be in effect an agenda setter, setting the parameters for other streams within it.² This suggests qualitatively different kinds of policy making at each intersection point depending on exactly which stream guides the current at a particular point in the policy-making process – a key insight explaining the analytical power and persistence of the stages-cycle idea. Indeed, further confluence points are possible with a reconfiguration of the streams. Unlike

the stages metaphor, however, which lacks clarity on why each stage occurs or in what order different parts of the cycle come about, the five streams metaphor not only explains how and why this happens when new actors and powerful shifts in ideology and interests enter into an existing policy flow, but also suggests the possible content or style of policy making that can unfold. It also helps explain how problem definitions change or can be remade/reframed as the process unfolds, since current definitions of problems are altered in new contexts created by the addition of new 'waters'. For example, the initial stage of the United Kingdom's handling of foot and mouth disease in 2001 was dominated by a problem stream (containment of disease). It soon became apparent that no viable policy and programme destinations were in sight, and so a critical confluence point was reached and the response became centralised at the heart of the Primer Minister's office in 10 Downing Street. The political stream then became dominant over all the other streams, including the problem, which became redefined as 'under control' even when cases were rising (Taylor 2003). This example alerts us to the fact that complex policy processes may produce different dominant streams. The typology below is not exhaustive of all policy types that are possible but is intended to illustrate several common possibilities that could characterise policy formulation in a confluence-inspired metaphorical world.

Dominant political stream. One possibility here is an ideological, politically driven 'garbage can' where the entire policy formation process is driven by a political decision to pursue a particular policy 'solution'. A different form of political dominance is phenomena such as coalition government policy-making and peace processes, where there is a premium placed on reaching agreement among the various participants. In such circumstances, the political stream sets the flow of the policy process, with all the other streams carried along in it as players attempt to promote (or stall) a deal where the various definitions of the problem and the precise programme to be put in place are all flowing towards a 'political' solution. Indeed, in the example of peace deals, the process, problems, policies and politics streams would be nested within the problem stream, with the 'programme' stream being a very narrow trickle, on the assumption that it would expand during implementation.

Dominant policy stream. One possibility here is 'garbage can' policy making in public sector institutions, where policy making is driven by a preferred solution of policy makers/agents, but where this solution is *not* a product of a broader 'high politics' political stream (e.g., some waste collection planning reforms or marine litter strategies). In this style or type, the policy stream would dominate and set the boundaries within which all other streams would flow – for example, problems (definition and construction of), politics (de facto back seat), processes (consultation, deliberation) and programmes (the specific instruments that would be used to realise the policy aims).

Dominant process stream. Here both problem definitions and programme solutions are weak and the process stream is the key agenda-setter. 'Placebo' policies exemplify, such as in social welfare issues where there are multiple and complex causes of problems and no clear solutions to 'wicked' problems (Head 2008; McConnell 2010a, b). The very process of addressing an issue and achieving some form of outcome is the key goal. All the other streams are confined by this process.

Dominant problem stream. In its most 'ideal' form, this would equate with a comprehensively rational search for a solution to a problem, unencumbered by factors such as economic pressures and political ideology that might otherwise compromise such a process. Here, the problem stream would be equivalent to a very large and wide tributary with the other streams submerged by its power, flow and ability to carry the stream on its own. Technocratic problems (information technology systems breakdowns, animal disease) relying substantially on scientific evidence would typify.

Dominant programme stream. An example would be a particularly focused version of the 'garbage can' model, but in this instance the precise programme instrument would be the key stream as it is directed towards a specific solution (e.g., to raise income tax by x cents in the dollar). All other streams are subsumed and flow in this direction and towards this very specific destination.

Notwithstanding the different configurations of streams, at the end of each journey is what we term a 'policy settlement'. All journeys are different, with infinite possibilities in terms of a settlement that finds some kind of balance between policy/programme and political priorities/demands/pragmatics. Despite there being many possible policy settlements (destinations), let us assume that they have two main characteristics: a policy settlement is a bundle of policy instruments (programmes) and bundles of politics (electoral/reputational factors, agenda management imperatives, governance trajectories). Sometimes governments succeed in getting to the precise destination (policy settlement) they want and at other times they have to compromise and get near to what they want (e.g., concessions in legislative passage). Sometimes they take high political risks in order to get the bundle of policy instruments they want (e.g., austerity measures). At other times the settlement is driven largely (although not explicitly) by political considerations, with bundles of policy instruments being aligned accordingly (e.g., token/symbolic responses to complex wicked problems or pre-election spending booms).

The analytical appeal of the five stream confluence model can be enhanced further by factoring in the role of the policy maker, or political agent. For the sake of simplicity, let us refer here to 'government'. The government in this sense is what Jensen (2011) has termed a 'policy dictator' or, to continue, the streams metaphor, 'captain of the ship', attempting to steer a vessel downstream or acting as a hydraulic engineer, determining the channel in which the stream will flow towards its destination – the policy settlement. In the former role, government steers the ship of state through the existing institutional structures. As a hydraulic engineer, government exercises its prerogative to change institutions and rewrite certain rules of the game, designing a new channel for policy making to flow through. This process might result in multiple 'rounds' of route construction or correction (Teisman 2000; Howlett 2007) as the process stream unfolds and works its way downstream to a final destination, much as a ship might pass through a series of storms, or canals, or locks on its way to its destination.

To take the aquatic metaphor even further, we can usefully conceive of government carving out channels and attempting to influence: (a) the destination of the process flow (e.g., towards a very specific outcome or a general course of action); (b) who should be asked for advice (e.g., just trusted policy network participants or the public at large); (c) what they are being asked advice about (e.g., the final destination or the means of getting there); and (d) the speed at which policy should arrive (e.g., by superfast boat,

creating political waves but bouncing over them and getting to a destination ultra quickly, or by slow boat, barely making any ripples but taking a long time to advance objectives).

As indicated, we should not see streams flowing inevitably towards an outcome. Political agents can be enormously powerful in steering towards particular destinations, but in complex and sometimes turbulent policy environments, further confluences are possible and indeed the streams can converge prior to the destination or settlement sought by policy makers. At least five possible ways exist in which the flow of streams may be disrupted/ altered/halted/reconfigured:

- *Slow evaporation*: A stream dries up because no feasible options emerge in policy stream discussions and/or political will fade (e.g., a classic Downsian ‘issue attention’ type pattern).
- *Gradual erosion*: A stream erodes its boundaries and leaks into other streams (e.g., a localised corruption inquiry operating in the problem stream, slowly uncovers political wrong-doing and so spills over into the political stream, upsetting its flow towards a specific policy outcome).
- *Blockage*: The discovery that a stream cannot continue flowing in the same direction (e.g., a referendum process is ruled to be constitutionally illegal).
- *Unexpected flooding*: An unforeseen input of water occurs, leading to a breach of stream boundaries (e.g., a terrorist attack creates an unexpected confluence point and a reappraising of the streams, priorities and destinations – for example, a terrorist attack during a process of considering options to fund a major public infrastructure project, may lead to a reappraisal of the costs of security for that project).
- *Deliberate charting of a new course*: Key political actors exercise their power to set a new destination (e.g., a new government in the politics stream creates a confluence point and re-channels streams that had previously been moving toward privatising an electricity network).

Conclusion: Moving beyond critiques of the traditional metaphors

Our analysis here builds on John (2013) and Cairney (2013), who argue that a way forward for disparate elements of policy analysis is to combine them, where suitable and appropriate, rather than seeing them as mutually exclusive. We consider this article to be an important step in this direction, and indeed it is part of larger efforts on our behalf to think about the many ways in which policy studies can continue to use metaphors to nudge forward our understanding of public policy. We do not claim to have all the answers, but we have attempted to retain the recognition of the two most eminent metaphors in policy studies while facilitating the kind of nuanced analysis that is necessary to understand the actual policy dynamics of specific policy sectors in specific policy contexts.

In this context, it is clear and well understood that traditional cycle/stages approaches are not able to cope with the complexities and vagaries of policy processes. Even Kingdon’s three stream agenda-setting model could only do so to a limited extent, largely because streams were considered more or less independent of each other until they became coupled

at a particular point in time. In particular, our five stream metaphor is much better placed than the traditional cycle or the stages and streams metaphors to accommodate aspects of agency, power, ideology, turbulence and complexity. Political agents, from policy makers to others seeking to influence, can attempt to steer and push the flow of political and policy processes towards particular destinations. All seek to influence and secure the dominant agenda within which it is hoped that everything else can flow. Policy makers have formal decision-making powers and a formal 'steering' capacity, but they do not exercise absolute power over destinations. Policy processes are typically complex and characterised by multiple actors using various powers at their disposal in attempts to support, reconfigure or even block entire flows. Such powers may stem from all the classic ideological and extra-ideological factors we might expect to shape public policies. Routine policy processes may also produce small 'whirlpools' of turbulence once problems are on the agenda and subject to appraisal prior to the start of policy formation processes, and also when there is further appraisal prior to entering decision-making stages. Longer periods of turbulence may also occur due to unforeseen floods or key political agents being able to intervene to reconfigure the dominant stream and all the various nestings within it.

Importantly, our five stream metaphor is indeed a metaphor and not a formal 'model of everything', it retains a measure of simplicity while being able to cope with powerful agents of change, the importance of dominant ideas, as well as complexity and turbulence in the way governments go about finding solutions to public problems. It is also linear. We offer it as a conceptual tool because it retains a sense of the way in which events 'flow', but it can also cope with multiple phenomena such as policy problems being defined and redefined, agenda disruptions, lack of viable options and termination before a decision has even been made. Furthermore, policies are not produced on a *tabula rasa* and our metaphor can cope with the possibility of 'path dependent' five stream configurations being produced by policy makers continually seeking to channel problems, discussion and solutions along similar courses as before.

More generally, we suggest that all political systems contain the basic ingredients of the five stream model (five streams, 'captain of the ship', destinations/policy settlements) and there is sufficient flexibility to address dominant influences and alterations in course. We would argue that our model has widespread heuristic applicability and is sufficiently flexible to cope with variations in source of power, national policy styles and so on. Therefore, we can envisage further research projects focusing on various 'stream' configurations, styles and indeed policy sub-system stream 'types'.

Finally, while our discussion here concentrates on policy formation and decision making, the five stream confluence idea has implications for other 'stages' of the policy process as well. It allows us to conceive of different phases of the policy process being weighted in similar or different ways, with streams and their currents flowing in particular configurations that get rechanneled and reconfigured at different junctures. Future research could benefit from charting a course in this direction.

Notes

1. We cite the original 1984 edition in this article, unless there is reason to identify new material contained in the 2011 edition.

2. In recognition of the ‘art’ and interpretative aspects of policy analysis, we recognise that different analysts may envisage different ‘nestings’. For example, in ‘garbage can’ policy making, the dominant stream may be conceived as ‘politics’ (the decision to opt for a particular solution in advance of formal problem construction), ‘policy’, or even ‘programme’ (because all streams are marshaled towards a specific destination). We would prefer the first of these because it helps capture how political will can at times trump and shape all other forces, but our approach here is an heuristic (to help enlighten and aid analysis) rather than a scientific model of policy formation processes.

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