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Mapping Changing Social Policy Ideas: A Global, Actor-Centred Approach

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Abstract

The objective of this short paper is to map different types of ideas and the actors carrying them in order to show how ideas might impact social policy change at both the global and the local level. The first part defines "ideas" and their various types, while the second part answers two related questions about the potential impact of ideas on social policy development: where do policy ideas come from; and how, and through which actors, are global ideas diffused and adapted to local context? As suggested, studying the role of ideas requires an analysis of the different forms they can take, the diversity of actors carrying them, and the diffusion and translation processes through which ideas move back and forth between the local and the global levels.

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Introduction

The literature on the role of ideas in public and social policy has expanded dramatically over the last two decades (Béland and Cox, 2011; Blyth, 2002; Campbell, 2004; Hall, 1993; Jenson, 2010; Mehta, 2011; Merrien, 1997; Orenstein, 2008; Padamsee, 2009; Parsons, 2007; Schmidt, 2011; Stone 2001). The objective of this short paper is to map different types of ideas and the actors carrying them in order to show how ideas may play a direct role in social policy change at both the global and the local levels.

The first part of the paper defines "ideas" and their various types, while the second part answers two related questions about the potential impact of ideas on social policy development: where do policy ideas come from; and how, and through which actors, are global ideas diffused and adapted to local context? As suggested, studying the role of ideas requires an analysis of the different forms they can take, the diversity of actors carrying them, and the diffusion and translation processes through which ideas move back and forth between the local and the global levels.

Defining and Classifying Ideas

Ideas as Causal Beliefs

The study of ideas in social science and policy research is contested in part because defining and, therefore, analysing "ideas" is a tricky endeavour. One of the main challenges here is that "ideas" take different forms, and the concept of "ideas" can seem overly broad, at least if scholars fail to distinguish between types of ideas and levels of ideational analysis. Yet, it is important to note that the term "ideas" is not more inherently vague or problematic than other broad social science concepts. For instance, "institutions," which are often associated with "ideas," also take a variety of forms and encompass many levels of reality (Campbell, 2004). The truth is that, in social policy research as elsewhere, careful use of the term "ideas" is less problematic than using

other broad terms—such as "interests" or "institutions"—without properly defining them.[i]

Here, the term "ideas" is just another way to refer to what Craig Parsons (2007) calls "ideational processes," which are one of the four types of explanation in political and policy analysis, alongside institutional, psychological, and structural explanations. From this perspective, although both ideational and psychological mechanisms are about what Parsons (2007) calls the "logic of interpretation," according to which actors make sense of their environment, "ideas" are distinct from purely psychological processes, which are about how the brain works in general, regardless of the actor's historical and social "position." Importantly, the four types of processes (ideational, institutional, psychological, and structural) can interact to shape certain outcomes and behaviours, depending on the context (Parsons, 2007). In other words, "ideas" are often linked to other types of processes and they do interact with them, just as social policy actors interact with one another and with their environment (Padamsee, 2009).

In this paper, we define ideas as "causal beliefs." At the broadest level, such beliefs are assumptions about how the world works and how to change it. From this angle, ideas as causal beliefs can have both cognitive and normative components. This means that ideas can be as much about "knowledge" as about the "proper action" to take (Béland and Cox, 2011). Importantly, ideas are closely related to the actors formulating and carrying them, meaning that a sociology of social policy ideas is necessarily a sociology of actors, as actors are involved at different stages of the policy process. Such an actor-centred approach to ideas is emphasized throughout the paper.

Social Policy Concepts and Language

Before mapping different types of ideas and their role in specific moments of the policy process as they relate to concrete actors, we must stress that a focus on social policy

ideas necessitates a close attention to the historical development of social policy language and concepts, which are, in themselves, ideas that actors use to make sense of the world surrounding them, or to wage political battles against other actors promoting alternative policy prescriptions. In the history of social policy, the emergence of new terms and concepts, such as "social insurance," "welfare state," or, more recently, "social inclusion," has played a key role in shaping both policy decisions and the political battles over them. This is true because both newer and older social policy language and concepts are about the constant definition and redefinition of state action in society, as the state interacts with other actors, including businesses, labour unions, and NGOs (Béland and Petersen, 2013). Consequently, the terminology we use to talk about social programming is not innocent, and social policy concepts can become relatively stable "cultural categories" capable of shaping the perceptions of actors and, ultimately, policy decisions. The work of sociologist Brian Steensland (2008) on the negative meaning of the term "welfare" in the United States and its impact on social assistance reform during the Nixon presidency (1969–1974) illustrates this claim about the role of social policy language as a consequential ideational and political reality.

Policy Moments and Types of Ideas

Ideas can take different forms and their roles are likely to change from one moment of the policy process to the other. A good way to map the policy process and the role of ideas within it is John W. Kingdon's (1995) now-classic distinction between the problem, policy, and political streams, three aspects of policy development that interact with one another in complex, non-linear ways (Béland, 2005; Kingdon, 1995; Mehta, 2011).

Within the problem stream, where actors identify and give meaning to the policy challenges facing society and the state, ideas take the form of contested problem

definitions (Mehta, 2011; Stone, 2001). From this perspective, social policy problems are not purely objective realities but historically contingent definitions that change over time, as new problems are identified and older problems are redefined. A striking example of this type of problem definition and redefinition is the now-popular concept of "new social risks," which is about how recent demographic, economic, and social trends have transformed the uncertainty workers and families face in contemporary societies (Taylor-Gooby, 2004). The idea of "new social risks" encompasses a certain way to define today's socio-economic reality and the problems social policy actors should tackle in priority. This is why this idea is related to particular policy prescriptions (Hacker, 2006) and to the adoption of new social programs (Bonoli, 2005). The same remark about the historically-constructed nature of policy problems applies to the emergence of the idea of social exclusion (and social inclusion) on the world stage over the last two decades, and to the ongoing redefinition of the concept of poverty within global and national policy communities, which are each having a direct policy impact in both advanced industrial countries and the Global South (Béland, 2007; Council of Europe, 2012; Foli and Béland, 2014; United Nations, 2010).

In the context of the policy stream, experts formulate potential policy alternatives to address the problems that emerge within the problem stream (Kingdon, 1995; Mehta, 2011). One way actors design and select potential policy alternatives is by referring to a coherent economic policy paradigm, such as Keynesianism or monetarism (Hall, 1993; for critical perspectives on the concept of policy paradigm see Carstensen, 2011 and Daigneault, forthcoming). Yet, actors do not always draw on one coherent approach to develop policy alternatives, as "bricolage" is a common type of ideational process, where ideas borrowed from various sources are combined and recombined to create something new (Campbell, 2004; Carstensen, 2011). It is probably better to see paradigms and bricolage as two poles between which most policy alternatives

formulated within the policy stream are located, rather than as two radically distinct and incompatible types of behaviour.

Finally, within the policy stream, policy entrepreneurs are busy linking different policy problems and solutions to impose concrete legislative and reform proposals (Kingdon, 2005). In this context, strategic framing becomes especially central, as policy entrepreneurs and their allies do their best to convince other political actors as well as the general public that their policy proposal should be enacted (Béland, 2005; Campbell, 2004). Such discourses can take different forms and target different constituencies, depending on the institutional context at hand (Schmidt, 2011). For instance, from an ideological standpoint, policy proposals might be framed in ways that make them ambiguous, which could lead to people on both the left and the right to support them (Palier, 2005). For instance, a particular pension reform might please unions for a certain reason, and employers for a different reason (Bonoli, 2000). In this context, emphasizing some aspects of the proposed reform in front of one audience and other aspects of it in front of other constituencies may become an effective framing device used by policy entrepreneurs and their allies to help foster ambiguous yet resilient political coalitions (on ambiguity and coalition building, see Palier, 2005).

Beyond these three streams, students of ideas and social policy should take into consideration two other policy moments located beyond agenda-setting and the enactment process and, therefore, not central to Kingdon's (2005) model: policy