Can You Recognize a Paradigm When You See One? Defining and Measuring Paradigm Shift

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Introduction

Whether as a subfield of political science or as a discipline in its own right, policy studies have come a long way since Harold Lasswell’s seminal work on the policy cycle (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003, p. 702; Sabatier, 2007; Savard & Banville, 2012). Nowadays, policy scholars use various theoretical frameworks to understand policymaking, including advocacy coalitions (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993), multiple streams (Kingdon, 2003), and punctuated equilibrium (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). To a significant extent, these frameworks emphasize the influence of “ideas,” for instance, worldviews, ideologies, cognitive filters, and causal beliefs, on policy change (Real-Dato, 2009). This should not come as a surprise since ideas have recently gained ascendancy in social research alongside the “usual suspects” of interests, institutions, and socioeconomic conditions (Béland & Cox, 2011; Jacobs, 2015).

The concept of policy paradigm and associated typology of policy change proposed by Peter Hall (1993), in particular, is an ideational framework that has been extensively used by scholars (for a few examples of recent research, see Kay, 2007; Kern, Kuzemko, & Mitchell, 2014; Morel, Palier, & Palme, 2012; Orenstein, 2013; Skogstad, 2011). Beyond its metaphorical appeal, the value of the paradigm framework lies primarily in its ability to illuminate the connection between ideas and various degrees of policy change (see Baumgartner, 2013; Daigneault, 2014a). Applications of this framework have not gone without theoretical and operational problems, however.

The purpose of this chapter is threefold. First, the theoretical and operational problems associated with the concept of policy paradigm are reviewed in light of the original formulation by Hall (1993) and its
subsequent use by policy scholars. Second, an alternative conceptualization and a set of methodological guidelines to conduct sound research on policy paradigm are proposed to overcome these problems. Third, the value of these guidelines is discussed, taking as a case in point a recent empirical application in the field of social policy.

The roots of the paradigm concept

Paradigms in scientific inquiry

The concept of paradigm has a long history that can be traced back to antiquity, from the Greek *paradeigma* which means “pattern, model; precedent, example” (Harper, 2001, n.p.). However, it is the famous philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (2012 [1962]) who really mainstreamed the concept. While there is some controversy over the interpretation of Kuhn’s work, his use of the concept reflects two different meanings:

The key sense of “paradigm” is *exemplar*: an exemplary instance of puzzle-solving in that discipline that provides a context and a model for future puzzle-solving. Paradigm is also used to refer to a *disciplinary matrix*, a set of commitments shared by practitioners of a particular scientific field, including a special vocabulary and established experimental techniques, as well as accepted theoretical claims. (Bird, 2012, p. 3)

“Normal” science occurs when scientists solve research problems within a current paradigm. However, “anomalies”—puzzles that cannot be accounted for within the current paradigm—accumulate and eventually lead to a crisis. Eventually, a “scientific revolution” may occur as a new paradigm of inquiry replaces the old one. Kuhn argued that paradigms are often incommensurable, which implies that scientific research conducted under different research traditions is not cumulative (Bird, 2012). Incommensurability can also mean that people working within different paradigms cannot understand each other’s respective research. This stronger version of the “incommensurability thesis” is hard to defend because even people who hold competing worldviews (including clashing principles and values) can often recognize and discuss their differences. In any case, incommensurability is *not* a defining characteristic of a Kuhnian paradigm shift (Bird, 2012, p. 12).