HKU-USC-IPPA Conference on Public Policy

Panel

T03P05 - Complexity and the Politics of Knowledge Policies: Multi-issue, Multi-level and Multi-actor

Chairs

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Description

Theme and scope

The complexity of policy processes and the relationship between instrument choice and impact have always intrigued scholars of politics, public policy, and public administration. Indeed, complexity constitutes a key element in established public policy theoretical frameworks such as punctuated equilibrium, multiple streams (see chapters in Sabatier, 2007), and is at the core of Lindblom's (1959) science of 'muddling through'. In recent years, policy scholars such as Cairney (2012) and Geyer (Geyer and Pickering, 2011; Geyer and Cairney, 2015) have pushed for embracing complexity as a foundation and starting point for policy analysis (cf. Jervis, 1997). These scholars advocate a 'complexity theory' approach, highlighting several characteristics of a policy system: (1) the elements are interdependent so a holistic perspective is necessary, (2) there are many feedback loops and interactions across governance levels which lead to non-linear dynamics which makes the prediction of outcomes difficult (if not impossible), (3) there is significant path-dependence which means that specific attention should be placed on initial conditions as well as (4) circumstances that may lead to a punctuated equilibrium. A 'complexity theory' perspective enables researchers to attend to both top-down as well as bottom-up dynamics, interests and behaviour of various actors, and how policy ideas, goals and instruments are interpreted and transformed during the policy process.

This panel engages with the complexity approach in public policy through the case of knowledge policy. By knowledge policy, we refer to basic and applied research, innovation, and higher education. The issues at the core of these policy areas are cross-cutting, which means that their governance does not neatly fall into one single policy domain (*multi-issue*). Indeed, they often require collaboration across multiple policy sectors as the different aspects of knowledge policies are under jurisdiction of different ministries such as higher education, research, as well as foreign policy or even home affairs and discussed in distinct policy arenas (inside and outside of formal government channels). These *multi-actor* scenarios often lead to several coordination challenges related to possible duplication, inconsistencies, clashing priorities and potential

bureaucratic and political conflict (Braun, 2008). Adding to this is the rise of the regions – both supranational and subnational – in regulating and coordinating knowledge policies (Chou & Ravinet, forthcoming; Jayasuriya & Robertson, 2010). Due to increasing processes of international policy coordination, developments in the knowledge policy domain are a *multi-level* endeavour. Moreover, knowledge policy dynamics concerns a multitude of stakeholders which are increasingly involved in the design, implementation and/or evaluation of policy spanning multiple governance levels (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000; Olsen, 1988). The case of knowledge policy thus offers a promising empirical avenue to explore the key concepts at the heart of 'complexity theory', as well as a bridge for interdisciplinary theoretical exchanges.

Format

The panel follows a classical format with paper presentations followed by comments from discussants as well as other authors and audience.

Call for Papers

We seek submissions that address cross-cutting issues in the knowledge policy domains and the multi-actor and multi-level policy processes involved. Submissions are invited from all theoretical schools using quantitative, qualitative or mixed-methods approaches, but should demonstrate a good conceptual understanding of the complexity of knowledge policies with a clear empirical, preferably comparative, focus.