

Policy Coordination and Integration: A Research Agenda

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Abstract

Coordinating and integrating different policies and public sector organizations is a major challenge for practitioners and a continuing topic of interest for researchers. We argue that existing research on this topic needs re-orientation to provide better insights for practice and theory of policymaking as well as policy implementation. We offer four suggestions on how future research could advance: (1) combining existing conceptual and epistemological approaches more systematically; (2) complementing case studies and surveys with large-N analyses and novel research tools and methods; (3) more systematic analysis of the causal mechanisms in policy coordination and integration; (4) more thorough study of the real-world impact of policy coordination and integration.

Introduction

One of the oldest and most long-standing debates in public policy, public administration, and political science is on linking existing policies, and coordinating public sector organizations (Peters 2015). In recent years, public policy and public administration scholars have devoted considerable attention to cross-sectoral responses to complex problems, for example, environmental protection (Jordan and Lenschow 2010), climate change (Biesbroek et al. 2010),

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financial crises (Provost and Gieve 2012), education (Woo 2018), public health (Trein 2017a), terrorism (May et al. 2011), agriculture (Chinseu et al. 2018), or unemployment (Champion and Bonoli 2011). Such policy problems often crosscut traditional boundaries of policy sectors, administrative organizations and countries, and require coherent and coordinated responses across scales; they might also be perceived as wicked problems (Head and Alford 2015; Peters 2017; Peters and Tarpey 2019). The increasing complexity of policy regimes (Bolognesi 2018; Bolognesi and Nahrath 2020) and policy accumulation over time (Adam et al. 2018) will likely create additional coordination and integration challenges. Against this background, researchers recognize that the cross-sectoral dimension of public administration and public policy is pivotal to meet these complex policy problems (Kuipers et al. 2015; Peters 2017).

Despite the agreement amongst scholars that coordination is an important problem, the current state of the literature requires reorientation. In this viewpoint article, we identify four challenges for researchers and practitioners that could contribute to advancing policy coordination and integration in theory and practice.

Bridging conceptual fragmentation

The first challenge concerns conceptual fragmentation. A recent literature review identifies ten concepts that aim to capture the cross-sectoral aspects of public policy and public administration (Tosun and Lang 2017). The authors distinguish between government-related concepts, such as “joined-up-government” (Bogdanor 2005) and “whole-of-government,” (Christensen and Laegreid 2007), as well as governance-centered concepts, such as “policy integration” (Briassoulis 2004) and “boundary-spanning policy regimes” (Jochim and May 2010). In addition, other studies identify related concepts and theoretical frameworks that address cross-sectoral policy and administrative change, including “policy coordination” (Peters 2015), “collaborative governance” (Ansell and Gash 2008), or “functional regulatory spaces” (Varone et al. 2013). Whereas all of this research shares a similar ambition, its conceptual fragmentation has produced few theoretical advancements over the last decades as certain concepts are closely linked to distinctive empirical problems (Trein et al. 2019). Using a variety of theories and conceptual approaches is of value, but practitioners and scholars should be aware of the similarities and differences between them.

We call for future research to link these concepts rather than inventing new ones. Some recent research in these fields already moves in this direction; for example, scholars have suggested a processual approach to policy integration that links strategic (political), substantive (contents) and procedural (organizational and implementation) aspects of policy integration (Candel and Biesbroek 2016; Cejudo and Michel 2017). Others have focused on different forms of coupling to compare policy integration (Trein 2017b; Benoît and Coron 2019). Future research should move from concepts to developing theories and models, i.e., hypotheses about the presence, absence and potential impact of coordinated and integrated policy responses. Such research could place greater emphasis on the political dimension of coordination and integration; for example, the work by Scharpf on negative coordination (Scharpf 1997), or the *Institutional Collective Action Framework*, which accounts for the risks of coordination (Feiock 2013). Such theoretical developments should consider and specify the context of coordination, especially unsettling situations and contexts (Olsen 2015) as well as turbulent times (Ansell et al. 2017). Special attention should also be paid to the organizational dynamics activated by coordination or integration initiatives that create new incentives and resistance strategies in implementing organizations (Molenveld et al. 2020).

Advancing empirical analyses

The second challenge relates to the empirical study of cross-sectoral coordination and integration. So far, empirical analyses of policy coordination and integration have heavily relied on case studies (Trein et al. 2019) and surveys (e.g., Bowman and Parsons 2013). These studies have taken diverse strategies to study policy coordination and integration empirically, mostly focusing on one specific sector and/or one or a few cases. Examples are numerous; Research on policy integration has focused on the coherence of goals and instruments between different policy fields (Lenschow et al. 2018) or at research programs assessing policy integration in environmental policy (Duffy and Cook 2018). Furthermore, scholars have researched how inter-departmental coordination affects policy solutions in climate change adaptation and demographic change (Hustedt and Danken 2017), have combined survey data and case studies to analyze cross-departmental coordination in policy implementation (Læg Reid et al. 2014; Hammerschmid et al. 2016), or have assessed policy forums that aim at facilitating coordination through network analysis (Fischer and Maag 2019).

Whilst case studies and surveys have provided critical insights on the nature of policy integration and coordination, we need to use different methods, to guarantee comparability and external validity, in order to answer the big picture questions about what works, where, and why, as well as to advance theories about the processes of coordination and integration. Therefore, we argue for research that moves towards a cumulative analysis of various existing case studies either through systematic reviews or meta-analyses (e.g., Ansell and Gash 2008; Faling et al. 2019). Furthermore, scholars should embark into more cross-sectional and longitudinal research to allow for comparisons of policy coordination and integration efforts across policy sectors (Duit 2016) and countries over time (Trein and Maggetti 2020). Large-N comparative studies, for example, allow for testing the key drivers and effects of reforms aimed at coordination and integration. Relatively new methods could enrich empirical evidence on policy integration even more and offer new possibilities to analyze policy integration using big data sets. For example, computational text analysis (Grimmer and Stewart 2013), machine learning and Artificial Intelligence tools (Anastasopoulos and Whitford 2019) could assess how societal challenges have been integrated and coordinated across departments and countries over time. In addition, scholars could use behavioral public administration approaches (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2016; Battaglio et al. 2018) and experimental methods to test the impact of integrated policy approaches on public sector officials, target populations and bureaucracies as a whole.

Clarifying and generalizing causal mechanisms

The third challenge for research on policy coordination and integration is to generalize observed patterns and to establish causality, for example regarding political and other contextual drivers for the adoption and the impact of policy integration reforms. Most of the existing literature does not seek to synthesize and combine the theoretical and conceptual lessons from existing work, such as the various causal explanations found by case studies (cf. Section 2). There is substantive knowledge of the factors that could explain the presence and absence, as well as the success and failure, of policy coordination and integration. Researchers have pointed to organizational, managerial and behavioral factors that impede coordination and integration, such as selective perception, turf protection, secrecy, risk avoidance, or partisan politics (Peters 2015, 26-44, cf. Bach and Wegrich 2019, Hustedt and Danken 2017). However, efforts to establish causality have traditionally been weak.

Thus, future research should aim at improving the analysis of causal relations. This could be done for example through process tracing methods (Kay and Baker 2015; Beach and Pedersen 2019; Capano and Howlett 2019), Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) (Thomann and Maggetti 2019), or Q-Method (Molenveld et al. 2020). Such efforts would identify causal patterns, causal sequences and contextual conditions under which cross-sectoral reforms take place (Trein 2018; Biesbroek and Candel 2019). This research would help with better theorizing the drivers of policy coordination and integration beyond the simple listing of explanatory factors. For example, such work could uncover necessary and sufficient conditions for effectively achieving integration or coordination, for instance administrative capacities (Howlett and Saguin 2018) or institutional conditions (Söderberg 2011). In addition, a focus on causal mechanisms could contribute to assessing the effectiveness of integrated and coordinated policy strategies and instruments (Givonni 2014, Howlett, Vince, and Rio 2017).

How do we know it works?

The fourth challenge is to understand the effect of coordination and integration in terms of actual and perceived success and failure (Hupe 2014). Policymakers and researchers frequently call for more coordination and integration, but very little research has focused on whether cross-sectoral governance does actually work, and existing research has produced little encouraging results (Candel 2017, 532). The reasons for this shortcoming are manifold. Notably, very few policy evaluation researchers have taken up this challenge and there are no clear frameworks to measure success and failure of such integrated strategies (Candel 2019). Measuring policy success is a challenge in general (McConnell 2010; Bolognesi et al. 2018) but it tends to be more complicated for the case of policy integration and coordination. In this instance, there are several interactions among policies and organizations that make it difficult to uncover the precise effects of policies.

We argue that future research should take seriously questions on policy attribution, i.e., whether a change in an outcome, such as better air quality or better coordination amongst intelligence agencies, can be credited to innovations in cross-sectoral policies. Policy attribution is a long-standing and important topic in policy studies, but is especially pertinent for cross-sectoral problems that require complex implementation regimes (May 2015) and are often about governing the future (Boston and Berman 2017). Notably, we should assess if there is a way we can say with some level of confidence that cross-sectoral policy reforms, such as

implementing integrated policy strategies, succeed or fail in taming the policy problems they seek to address, or if they have unintended consequences. Such research should ideally be answering the longstanding question of whether such instruments do actually make a difference or if – and under which conditions – we are actually better off with more sectoral and specific measures. These findings would also be critical for designing future policies.

What is next?

Despite repeated calls from both academics and practitioners for better coordination and more adequate ways to deal with the challenges of cross-sectoral coordination and integration, many governments are still puzzling. To move forward the discussion, we should focus on research questions such as the following: (1) how to compare the substance and the politics of policy coordination and integration? (2) How to assess whether expressed intentions to coordinate and integrate policies do actually result in integrated policy outputs and implementation practices? (3) How to theorize the conditions explaining why governments coordinate and integrate policies – formally and in practice? (4) Under which conditions do coordinated and integrated policy strategies really contribute to tame important policy problems? To answer such questions, international and collaborative efforts are needed to include a maximum number of policy sectors and countries. For example, scholars and practitioners could meet in panels and workshops at the American Society for Public Administration, the American Political Science Association, the European Group for Public Administration, the European Consortium for Political Research, or the International Research Society for Public Management. Such collaborative efforts could result in books, special issues, and research projects responding to the discussed challenges. We explicitly encourage practitioners to participate in these events in order to engage in a dialogue about policy integration and coordination that addresses practical challenges and contributes to theoretical advancement and cross-sectoral and national learning.

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