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Serial and comparative analysis of innovation policy change

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ABSTRACT

Much of the existing literature on innovation policy analyzes policy change as an outcome of rational, cognitive processes, where the availability of new information prompts policy-makers to rethink and revise their policies. This paper aims to broaden this perspective by building a new methodological approach, Serial Comparative Analysis (SCA), to the analysis of policy change. SCA is proposed as an analytical perspective that sheds light on the social and political complexities of policy-making, and thus allows for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of policy change. SCA builds on the archaeological approach to discourse, and basic methodological principles of ethnographic inquiry. By conceptualizing a policy domain as a discursive formation, SCA provides insights into the socio-historical conditions under which a specific policy emerges, forms and transforms. While other methodological approaches may adopt the presumption that policy change is a causal outcome of new information used in policy-making, SCA views policy change as something that is discursively constructed and negotiated in specific institutional and historical settings. In doing so, SCA brings to light the rules that organize the truth-values of policy discourses in particular contexts, and elucidates how changes in these rules bring about changes in policy.

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1. Introduction

All over the world, state governments are currently engaged in actively promoting the creation, production and diffusion of various types of knowledge and innovations to pursue particular national social, political, and economic objectives. While the specific objectives of this innovation policy-related activity vary, typically covering a wide range of initiatives [1,2], innovation policies are usually geared towards improving the growth and competitiveness of national economies [1,3]. Quite recently, moreover, there have been attempts to broaden and deepen the domain, so as to respond to the so-called grand challenges or wicked problems [3,4], such as climate change, water shortage, aging population, and pandemics [3]. The concepts of horizontal innovation policy [5], broad-based innovation policy [6], and transformative innovation policy [7] have been introduced to

allow governments and institutions to stay better attuned with the changing nature of innovation policy.

In the literature on science, technology, and innovation (STI) studies, however, much of the existing research on innovation policy analysis still emphasizes the rational learning aspects of policy change [8, see also 9,10]. Drawing on the rational learning approach, this research recognizes the important roles that researchers, experts, and analysts play in change processes. Nevertheless, this paper contends that this approach largely fails to account for the ways in which the broader socio-political contexts and political will formation, for example, come to shape policy transformations [11]. As Morlacchi and Martin [12] have argued, STI policy studies are typically overly pragmatic and based on excessively instrumental concerns. Apparently, the core goal of STI studies is to help practitioners build more effective policies—effective in the sense of boosting innovation as well as economic, technological, and social development, for example through better co-ordination and strategic policy intelligence [13]. STI policy studies thus typically posit instrumental rationality [14], sometimes to the extent that policy

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change is attributed to a mere injection of new information into the processes and practices of decision-making through which policies are planned and executed.

In recent times, however, this overly instrumental, rational, and pragmatic approach to innovation policy change has come under critical scrutiny [14–17]. A number of critical STI scholars have argued that in focusing their energies on what policy-makers *ought to do*, STI scholars pay alarmingly little attention to what policy-makers *actually do* [14]. Moreover, in treating the political process as ‘given’ [18], many scholars also overlook the highly complex nature of public policy-making. As Uyarra [15] has argued, policies emerge and are adopted in complex contexts of pre-existing policy mixes and institutional frameworks, which have been shaped through successive policy changes. In practice, therefore, policy-making is typically characterized by high uncertainty, irreversibility, path-dependency, and continuous struggle [16]. Hence, to gain deeper insights into this complexity, a more critical, reflexive approach to policy analysis would seem to be needed.

In this paper, we continue this critical scholarship. Drawing on the notions of discourse and qualitative inquiry, we propose a new methodological approach to the analysis of policy change, Serial Comparative Analysis (SCA), which seeks to overcome some of the limitations of the existing approaches. We offer SCA as an analytical tool that shifts attention to actual policy-making processes, as opposed to ideal ones, shedding light on the complexities that arise from the multitude—and the conflicts—of interests that underlie the processes and the everyday practices of policy-making. In doing so, we argue, SCA helps innovation policy analysts broaden their perspectives and provides them with a concrete tool for gaining insight into the possible social, economic, and political ramifications that a policy change might entail, be they intended or unintended.

SCA builds on the concepts of discourse and discursive formation [19]. Accordingly, innovation policy is conceptualized and analyzed as a discursive formation, constructed out of policy-related knowledge and practices of policy-making [3], which influence the mobilization and allocation of public resources as well as the organization of the institutional settings where this takes place. The focus of analysis lies in the regimes of truth and practices that structure, shape, and legitimize the processes through which policies are constructed, changed, and implemented. The aim is to render more transparent the implicit assumptions that inform these processes, as well as to shed light on the unintended socio-political effects that different policy-options possibly involve.

As a methodological approach, SCA highlights the effects and interplay of dominant policy-related knowledge and practices in policy-making. It makes the multiple different interests that underlie policy-making processes more transparent highlighting the role of dominant rules that organize truth regimes in policy. Moreover, SCA sheds light on certain conditions under which policy can change or endure, bringing to the fore possible rigidities in policy transformation over time. In doing so, it opens the ‘black box’ of policy-making, and offers policy-makers concrete tools for scrutinizing and re-thinking the prevalent, taken-for-granted ways of reasoning that guide policy-making.

To illustrate how SCA can be used in practice, we draw on examples from a recent empirical study on the formation of Finnish innovation policy over three decades, from the late 1980s until 2010 [3]. The study elaborated on the ways in

which innovation, as a policy object, was defined and redefined over time. The aim was to elaborate on the ways in which particular truth-values empowered and disempowered different actors and how the observed changes in the innovation policy unfolded through a series of re-objectifications.

2. Serial Comparative Analysis: a discursive approach to policy change analysis

SCA may be described as a discursive approach to policy analysis. By *discursive approach*, we refer here to an array of methodological perspectives that are based on explaining social action in terms of discourse¹ including social practices.

Traditionally, discourse analysis has been used to study ‘language in use’, with an analytical focus on ‘talk and text in context’ [20]. In this paper, however, we draw on a broader perspective on discourse that transcends the domain of language and shifts attention to social practices and institutional regulation as constituent elements of discourse [21–24]. In proposing SCA as a new methodological approach, we draw on the archeological approach to discourse [19] and conceptualize discourse as practice. From this perspective, discourse is not only textual or something that is said, it is a socially instituted practice of producing and regulating statements, which directs the articulation of new statements and defines what can be said and how within a certain discursive formation and context. In line with the foundations of archeological analysis, moreover, SCA focuses not only on the formation but also on the transformation of discourses. More specifically, the objective is to render change observable and analyzable by identifying and establishing the ‘system of formation’ that brings about change.

We offer SCA as a conceptual and methodological tool for analyzing both the formation and change of policy knowledge and policy-making practices over a period of time. It is based on the assumption that through the reformulation of rules, which organize policy knowledge and policy-making practices, a discourse can change allowing for the emergence of a new type of policy.

Compared with the existing approaches to policy change analysis, such as Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) [25] and the Institutional Analysis and Development framework (IAD) [26] in particular, SCA has some similarities and differences. Much like SCA, ACF is also primarily concerned with the analysis of policy change, with a specific policy subsystem as the primary unit of analysis. However, SCA conceptualizes this subsystem as a discursive formation, as we shall discuss below. As regards the IAD, its analytical scope has recently shifted and broadened towards the social construction of policy-makers’ subject positions. Like SCA, it has rejected, to some extent, the overly individual-centered explanation model of ACF.² Compared with SCA, however, it is still rather inadequate, we argue, for studying change and transformation over time [26].

¹ Institutionalized ways of thinking, talking, and representing knowledge about phenomena.

² ACF interprets policy changes through individual choices which attach subjective and instrumental meaning to any behavior in the framework of bounded rationality and embeddedness in communities (Ostrom [26], 12–15).

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