



## Space for action: How practitioners influence environmental assessment



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### ABSTRACT

This article contributes to understanding of how change occurs in the field of environmental assessment (EA). It argues that the integration of new issues in EA, such as human health, is significantly influenced by how practitioners' understandings shape their actions, and by what happens when those, possibly different, interpretations of appropriate action are acted out. The concept of space for action is developed as a means of investigating this relation between understanding and action. Frame theory is also used, to develop a sharper focus on how 'potential spaces for action' are created, what these imply for (individuals') preferred choices and actions in certain situations, and what happens in practice when these are acted out and 'actual spaces for action' are created. This novel approach is then applied in a Swedish case study of transport planning. The analysis reveals the important work done by practitioners, revealing just how EA practice is decisively shaped by practitioners. Analysis of practice using the lens of spaces for action offers an important new perspective in understanding how the field adapts to new challenges.

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### 1. Introduction

Environmental assessment (EA) is a field of constant innovation, evolving as the conception of environmental impact is broadened to integrate social, sustainability, biodiversity, climate and health considerations. However a major concern is that when EA integrates a new issue, it is often not clearly specified how this should be put into practice. The work of creating new legislation, changing policy, and developing new guidelines and assessment tools is often exhaustive, but may still not manage to provide a workable framework for integrating each new issue. This leads to the problem of a gap between the idea for change, its institutionalisation, and the resulting practice. Necessarily attempting to bridge this gap, practitioners have opportunities to interpret and act upon new issues as they introduce them into their routine practices. But this situation can also leave them rather empty handed and alone, faced with expectations to adapt and deliver but coping with a lack of clarity about what exactly they should do. This is a challenge for EA practice since it opens up for different paths of actions and non-action. When faced with the tension between new demands

and challenges to their ways of working, but without clear guidelines, EA practitioners may interpret the issues and act it out in ways that are unexpected by those pressing for change. This can mean that certain ways of seeing issues, problems and appropriate responses may get filtered out, or explicitly de-selected. This may result in either weak or distorted implementation. The questions of how practitioners decide what are appropriate ways to act when handling new issues, and whether and how their interpretations are enacted and agreed upon in EA processes, thus influence whether this intervention will have any effect on current practice, and what those effects will be. This may be a critical factor in determining whether practice responds decisively, reforming to meet the new challenge, or instead the response is muted, or temporary.

This article contributes to understanding the possibilities of change in the EA field by offering a new conceptual framework to guide investigation of these dynamics, which focuses on the important but under-researched role of practitioners. At the heart of this framework is the concept of spaces for action, which highlights the processes affecting individual practitioners' interpretations of appropriate action in EA practice, and their possibilities of getting these interpretations accepted by other practitioners. It is argued that the implementation of new issues in EA is significantly influenced by practitioners' spaces for action. The aim, then, is to introduce and demonstrate the usefulness of a conceptual framework to analyse how spaces for action influence implementation. The framework builds on the work of planning theorists, and draws in elements from frame theory.

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The issue of integration of human health in EA is selected. In this paper, we use the term EA to refer to both environmental impact assessment (EIA) and strategic environmental assessment (SEA), therefore covering the health assessment of projects, programmes and plans. In broad terms, the need to include assessment of effects on health, understood as ‘effects on human beings’, has been recognised since the 1985 EIA directive (1985/337/EEC). Subsequently, in 2001, the SEA directive (2001/42/EC) called for inclusion of assessment of human health. However, it is as recently as 2014 that the updated EIA directive has referred explicitly to ‘population and human health’ (directive 2014/52/EU). Health, then, has gradually emerged as a significant issue for EA, characterised by strengthening institutionalisation, accompanied by strong calls for practitioners to change their understanding of the issue of human health, in order to improve health inclusive EA (Hilding-Rydevik et al., 2005, Noble and Bronson, 2006, Nowacki et al., 2010, Socialstyrelsen, 2001, Steinemann, 2000, WHO, 1987). It is further argued by these authors that there is a need for cooperation between EA practitioners and health professionals, with the underlying assumption that the latter have a more appropriate understanding of health. As will be seen, these two calls are highly related to practitioners’ interpretations of appropriate action for health, and their possibilities of getting these interpretations accepted in practice.

The article proceeds by outlining previous relevant research, and then introducing the conceptual framework. The framework is next applied in a Swedish case study of environmental assessment in road planning. Finally the usefulness of the framework is discussed, and the implications for future research are considered. The key concepts are illustrated by different scenes in a short practice story, based on anonymised practice experiences of one of the authors.

## 2. Research needs: a knowledge gap and a need for new conceptualisation

EA has long been recognised as having weak theoretical foundations (Lawrence, 1997, Wallington et al., 2007) and a lack of empirical evidence (Fischer and Onyango, 2012). One explanation is that EA is a rather young field of research, where practice has predated research and theory development (Cashmore et al., 2004, Retief, 2010). In recent years there have, however, been some theoretical developments (Morgan, 2012, Pope et al., 2013, Retief, 2010). EA now stands as a diverse field with influences from, among others, planning theory, political science theory, policy theory, decision theory, theories of ecology and economics, evaluation theories and organisational theory (Lawrence, 1997, Pope et al., 2013).

In the face of a rational planning tradition assuming that EA actors are neutral preparers of information, producing objective evaluations, independent from political processes (Morgan, 2012, Lawrence, 2000), an important contribution has been the effort to recognise the political and value-laden nature of EA (Kørnøv and Thissen, 2000, Lawrence, 2000, Owens et al., 2004, Richardson, 2005, Wilkins, 2003). These researchers highlight the need to engage more fully with EA actors’ interests, experiences, stories, interrelations and intuitions of the situations they are involved in, and of other participants.

In this paper we embrace this view of the subjective, value-laden nature of EA, and recognise that EA processes are marked by struggles over meaning. We argue that practitioner’s understandings of an issue, their consequent responsibilities and their possibilities of getting these accepted in EA processes are all crucial for their capacity to influence the implementation of new issues in EA, and thus the development of the field of practice.

It is well recognised in literature about health integration in EA that actors’ understandings of health are important for how they act. Research has found weaknesses in the integration of health in EA and

planning, including a narrow health scope and insufficient description of actual health consequences (Bhatia and Wernham, 2008, Burns and Bond, 2008, Carmichael et al., 2012, Fischer et al., 2010, Harris et al., 2009, Hilding-Rydevik et al., 2005, Kågström et al., 2013, Kørnøv, 2009, Noble and Bronson, 2006, Noble and Bronson, 2005, Steinemann, 2000, WHO, 1987). Furthermore, legislation is identified as being vague about what dimensions of health should be included and how. Health competence and relevant methods are weak. These researchers have made broad recommendations to improve practice covering institutional, methodological, procedural, knowledge and partnership factors. Shared concerns are the limited or absent understanding among EA practitioners of the concept of health per se, and/or that EA could or should include a more comprehensive health focus (Hilding-Rydevik et al., 2005, Noble and Bronson, 2006, Nowacki et al., 2010, Socialstyrelsen, 2001, Steinemann, 2000, WHO, 1987). A common argument is that practice would improve by closely involving health professionals (with the presumption that they have a more adequate understanding of health). Such concerns have been stressed at a WHO meeting as early as 1986 (WHO, 1987), concerning health and safety components of EIA, as well as more recently in relation to SEA (Nowacki et al., 2010).

These suggestions for improving practice are, however, rather abstract, and the research underpinning them did not examine societal conditions for improved practice, or the micro-climate of EA practice. In particular, there is a need for closer investigation of institutional aspects that affect “the role of different actors and how those roles are currently being fulfilled” (Harris and Haigh, 2015, p. 139).

There is some recognition that change in understandings is hindered by obstacles such as cultural and institutional barriers between professionals in health, environmental assessment and planning, where different perspectives and technical languages lead to communication problems (Carmichael et al., 2012, Fischer et al., 2010, Nowacki et al., 2010, WHO, 1987). There is thus also identified a need for raising awareness and building capacity among these professionals. It is however recognised that improved practice also requires better understanding of these kinds of barriers (cf. Noble and Bronson, 2006).

The wider EA literature confirms that practitioners hold different understandings of central aspects of practice. These differences are found at an individual level, and between different groups of practitioners and other stakeholders (Morrison-Saunders and Bailey, 2003, Robinson and Bond, 2003, Wegner et al., 2005), and between professional cultures shaping professionals’ perceptions of EA (Morgan et al., 2012). In this literature it is presupposed that these understandings are important for action, but there exists a gap in knowledge about just how these different understandings are acted out in practice. Wärnbäck and Hilding-Rydevik (2009) have, however, connected practitioners’ knowledge and attitudes concerning the handling of cumulative effects in EA, to their will to act, claiming that the attitudes must be strengthened in order to change practice. They also identified external hindrances for improved practice, including time and financial constraints, and support and demands from other practitioners to address cumulative effects. Hilding-Rydevik et al. (2005) also found that the relations between consultants and developers are important in influencing the scope of EA.

There are, nevertheless, indications that certain practitioners have the possibility to be more influential, especially those working as reviewers and regulators (Hilding-Rydevik et al., 2005, Landim and Sánchez, 2012, Wärnbäck and Hilding-Rydevik, 2009). Apart from Landim and Sánchez (2012), the literature does not theorise how practitioners’ understandings of EA, of the issues at stake, and of their and others’ responsibilities, or their actions, shape their possibilities of influencing environmental assessment processes.

Our review leads to several main insights. The first is that practitioners’ understandings of EA and the issues it handles, are important for the development of practice, because these understandings influence

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