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Teaching policy analysis in China and the United States: Implications for curriculum design of public policy programs

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Abstract

Rapid worldwide growth in public policy education now offers excellent opportunities to assess the development of the field from a comparative perspective. Our analysis, which examines recent trends in public policy education by comparing public policy analysis courses taught in professional degree programs in China and in the United States, reveals considerable disparities in these curricula as taught in the two countries. Surprisingly, these differences have emerged primarily through disciplinary foci, expertise in policy analysis, and practical experience among instructors, rather than through the distinctive social, political, institutional, and historical characteristics of the two countries. Our findings also suggest that a positivist approach to policy analysis continues to dominate classroom discussions in US programs, despite intense debates in the literature regarding the utility of that approach in guiding actual practice.

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Keywords: Policy analysis; Curriculum design; China; Comparative analysis; Positivism; Policy Education

1. Introduction

Policy analysis as a field of study and a profession has been growing globally. Global policy challenges such as climate change, economic crises, and terrorism call for innovative solutions beyond institutional and disciplinary boundaries. Policy analysis, interdisciplinary in nature, thus appeals to a wide variety of practitioners. As a result, professional careers in policy analysis have emerged in a growing number of countries (Dobuzinskis, Howlett, & Laycock, 2007; Vaitsman, Ribeiro, & Lobato, 2013; Yu & Kuo, 2015), and organizations and entities specializing in policy advisory services have been established both within and outside government (Craft & Howlett, 2012; Vaitsman, Lobato, & Andrade, 2013; Wu, 2015).

New schools and programs of public policy have been set up to embrace the demand for expertise in policy analysis (Besharov & Oser, 2013; Durning, 2005). In recent years, professional training degrees such as the Masters of Public

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Policy (MPP) have been launched in Asia and Europe (Geva-May & Maslove, 2006; Yan & Brans, 2005; Yang, 2005). Policy analysis has also recently become an integral part of other professional training programs such as the Masters of Public Administration (MPA). In China, for example, where only a handful of universities offered any courses in public policy in 1990s, public policy analysis had become one of the nine compulsory courses for MPA programs taught in more than 200 academic institutions by 2014.

The upsurge in public policy education globally not only provides tremendous impetus to the development of the field but also presents serious challenges in countries where public policy education is a recent phenomenon (Wu, Lai, & Choi, 2012). Some scholars observe a clear pattern of convergence in the curriculum design of public policy programs among different countries, despite the considerable differences in political systems, administrative cultures, and historical contexts (Durning, 2005; Fritzen, 2008; Mead, 2013), and others find that there is a strong tendency moving toward the “norm” of such programs found in the United States when new public policy programs are being launched in different parts of the world (Geva-May & Maslove, 2006; Ngok, 2005).

There are, however, considerable gaps in understanding the emerging patterns of curriculum development for public policy education across different countries. For example, what are key areas of convergence and divergence across different contexts and what might account for the levels of convergence and divergence observed? What differences and similarities are transitional in nature and what might be expected to be long lasting? Does there exist a “norm” of public policy education within the United States? And if so, what are defining characteristics of such a norm? The answers to these questions will have significant impact on the curriculum development of public policy programs, and in turn, on the development of the field globally.

This study aims at shedding light on these issues by comparing policy analysis courses as presently taught in China and in the United States. The study focuses primarily on coded course syllabi in policy analysis courses chosen from top programs in both countries to assess the profiles of course instructors, coverage of main topics, value paradigms, pedagogical tools, and overall approaches, in a comparative perspective. In particular, we focus our attention on three different aspects of curriculum design in which patterns of divergence or convergence might emerge. *First, how would policy environment shape public policy programs across the two countries?* While it is widely believed that the strengths of policy analysis stem from systematic applications of scientifically rigorous methods for data collection and analysis for problem solving in public sector (Weimer & Vining, 2005), policy analysis is conducted by and for players who interact with each other in policy environment shaped by political systems, cultural norms and historical contexts that may differ considerably from one system to another. Therefore, public policy programs emerging from different parts of the world may share some common characteristics, but are also expected to have their distinctive features in response to differences in policy environment.

Second, what roles does the positivist approach play in guiding curriculum design for public policy programs in a global context? While the positivist approach, heavily relying on welfare economics, rational modeling, the quantification of economic costs and benefits, and viewing policy analysis as part of the quest to reveal objective knowledge (Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009), has been adopted widely as the leading approach for policy programs or courses in the United States (Geva-May, Nasi, Turrini, & Scott, 2008), its use as the primary guiding principle for present-day practices of policy analysis has increasingly been questioned (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003; Morçöl, 2001). Some more accusatory critics have even condemned positivist policy analysis for serving only power elites, via a “policy science of tyranny” that potentially could undermine the democratic process (Danziger, 1995).

The growing discontent with technocratic positivist policy analysis in recent decades has given rise to growing interest in post-positivist approaches, which hold that policy is inherently a normative process, and hence policy analysis carries explicit ethical, moral and value dimensions (de Leon & Steelman, 2001; Foster, McBeth, & Clemons, 2010; Meltzer, 2013). Associated with postmodern interpretivist epistemology, post-positivism tends to question the existence of objective facts independent of the observer, but believes in the social construction of facts, subjective reflection and contextual factors (Fischer, 2003; Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003). Despite their growing importance in academic research, however, post-positivist ideas are yet to be integrated effectively in professional training curricula, at least in the United States. It is thus critical to examine the sources of the persistent biases toward positivist approaches from a comparative perspective.

Third, how should policy analysis be taught in professional training programs such as the MPA or MPP? Durning (2005) argues that there are three ways to teach policy analysis: “policy studies”, “traditional policy analysis”, and “policy sciences”. Policy studies treat policy analysis as an input into the policy process and a subfield within political science. Traditional policy analysis draws heavily on applied microeconomics, political science, and statistics. The

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