Discover Ambiguities, Invent New Possibilities, Express (New) Values: What Experience Based Pragmatism Contributes to the Policy Design Process in Pluralistic Settings

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Introduction

Pragmatist philosophy is receiving renewed attention both in design and in policy studies. This is not a coincidence. Policy-making and policy implementation constitute design activities (Junginger 2017) in 'systems with humans in them' (Churchman 1970). There is also a shared concern for issues of human rights, human dignity, social justice and social cohesion by those acting in democratic governments and those pursuing human-centered design. The description of democratic forms of ruling as "by the people, for the people," underline this focus on human needs, human aspirations and human opportunities. All of which require the consideration of human experience and human interactions, which are at the heart of human-centered design (Buchanan 2006).

Pragmatist philosophers, or more precisely classic pragmatist philosophy offers means to draw out the qualities of experience in problematic situations. Problematic situations are the space in which policy intent and policy actions take place. Shifting the view from 'a problem' to a problematic situation is one consequence of applying pragmatism to the policy process. A second consequence is to make human experience human interactions central to the policy cycle. A third consequence is a shift away from defending differences in views. Instead, differences in views are sought to get a deeper understanding of a problematic situation which allows for the recognition of real problems within that situation which then can be addressed.

> *"What is designated by the word 'situation' is not a single object or event or set of events for we never experience nor form judgments about objects and events in isolation, but only in connection with a contextual whole."*[1]

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[1] John Dewey, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry, Ch IV – Common Sense and Scientific Inquiry.

> *"We live and act in connection with the existing environment, not in connection with isolated objects, even though a singular thing may be crucially significant in deciding how to respond to the total environment."[2]*

A fourth consequence is that we emphasize inquiry over problem-solving and decision-making. For John Dewey, inquiry is

> *'the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole.'[3]*

He explains that an inquiry is

> *"the original indeterminate situation is not only 'open' to inquiry, but is open in the sense that its constituents to not hang together."*

A fifth consequence is the explicit avoidance of reductionism and dualisms (Rylander 2012; Pappas 2014). Above all, though, the experience-based pragmatist approach means to position "the immediate existence of quality, and of dominant and pervasive quality" as "the background, the point of departure, and the regulative principle of all thinking" (LW 5:261).[4]

Functions of Quality in Experience-Based Inquiry

Gregory Pappas (2014) provides a most useful "unpacking" of the functions of "quality" and the "qualitative" in Dewey's works which can be applied to the policy process. Pappas starts with Dewey's statement that "[T]he immediate existence of quality, and of dominant and pervasive quality, is the background, the point of departure, and the regulative principle of all thinking".[5] Weeding through key works by Dewey, he clarifies how quality functions as background of thinking; how quality functions as the point of departure; and finally speaks to Dewey's third function of quality as the regulative principle of all thinking. In doing so, Pappas helps us understand how a Deweyan inquiry takes form and why experience-based inquiries are relevant to human-centered design and systemic change or transformation.

· **Quality as the background of thinking**

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[2] John Dewey, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry, Ch IV – Common Sense and Scientific Inquiry.
[3] John Dewey, Logic: The Theory of Inquiry, Ch IV – Common Sense and Scientific Inquiry, p.104.
[4] As quoted by Pappas.
[5] As quoted by Pappas.

Where "the immediate existence of quality, and of dominant and pervasive quality is the background" of all thinking, Pappas sees two subfunctions at work: In the first, quality functions "as the background that unifies and demarcates the situation in which thinking occurs." In the second, quality functions "as the background that gives continuity to thinking." Quality as the background of thinking concerns experiences policy-makers and those involved in the policy process bring to their work as well as the experiences of those who will benefit from or comply with a policy product.

· Quality as the point of departure of thinking

Where "the immediate existence of quality, and of dominant and pervasive quality is the point of departure" of all thinking, Pappas finds that "the qualitative motivates, gives the initial sense of direction to and material for inquiry, and is a condition for the emergence of genuine thinking." Perhaps this function is best illustrated through an experience we have 'had', which Dewey describes as one "when the material experienced has run its course to fulfillment" (Dewey 1938, p. 35) and which 'has a pattern and structure, because it is not just doing and undergoing in alternation, but consists of them in relationship" (Dewey 1938, p. 45). His examples of such an experience include a piece of work that is finished in a way that is satisfactory, a problem that receives its solution, a game that is played through, a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign that "is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is *an* experience" (Dewey 1938, p. 35). It is this kind of experience that cannot be taken back from people. And because of this, such an experience in the past provides a point of departure for thinking about the present and the future.

· Quality as the regulative principle of all thinking

Pappas finds most unpacking to do where "the immediate existence of quality, and of dominant and pervasive quality is the regulative principle of all thinking." He shows that the regulative function of quality already begins with "the qualitative as 'intuition' that precedes reflection and functions as funded experience." We may think of it today as gut-feelings that are increasingly recognized by psychologists as an influence on how we reason (Stolper et al 2010; Mayer 2011). Another regulative principle of thinking takes form when "the qualitative determines the relevance and weight of distinctions, facts, concept and principles and inquiry" and "provides guidance in selection and rejection." Moreover, the qualitative in Dewey, so Pappas, "guides the proper

relation and proportion between the operations of inquiry", "functions "as the control-guidance provided by phases of undergoing and synthesis of all experimental inquiries", and finally, "guides judgment". The latter, Pappas points out, hinges on Dewey's specific "contextualism", an insistence that the "individual unique qualitative situation that we are in" provide the context for a given judgment.

All design begins with a thought and thinking is rooted in the qualities of our experience

This discussion of quality might present heavy lifting for the mere purpose of understanding what pragmatism brings to the policy process. But it is here that we find the key elements of a human-centered design approach that serves to explore the unknown. And it is the unknown that policy processes have to come to terms with in a VUCA world (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) which in itself is a problematic situation. Policymakers are challenged to inquire into and question the current approaches to policy design. In the effort to produce more citizen-centric policies and public services, the function of quality as outlined by Dewey and detailed by Pappas provides an alternative path to that of the analytic approach that falls increasingly short to our expectations.[6]

While Dewey is adamant about arriving at determinate situations that have previously been indeterminate, experiences people had – or did not have! – can lead them to look at systems and situations as 'determined'. It is the kind of situation that prevents any change as people perceive no viable option for any change to take place. These kinds of situations are familiar to experts in organizational change and behavioral change. Kurt Lewin (1951) pointed out that for change to happen a defrosting of a currently frozen and with that unchangeable situation needs to occur. His sequence of 'unfreeze-change-freeze' has been widely discussed, also by Karl Weick and Robert Quinn (1999). Dewey's determinate situation does not evoke the picture of a frozen situation but one where the whole is unified and makes sense to those coming in contact with that system. The situation itself remains dynamic. A determined situation may look dynamic too, as it is rich with actionism – without any real action.[7] This is the concern of Richard McKeon.

Richard McKeon (1957), the "forgotten pragmatist' (Selinger 2018) points out the role of communication in pluralistic democracies. McKeon offers a precise critique of the analytic approach that still dominates the policy process today.

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[6] The need and 'demand' for citizen-centric policies has been noted in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development: GOV/PGC/MPM/M(2012)1. Summary of the 31st Meeting of Senior Officials from Centres of Government (CoG), 22-24 October 2012, Lancaster House, London, UK.

[7] Within the German public sector, this is being made fun of with a rhyme: «Und wenn ich nicht mehr weiter weiss, bild' ich einen Arbeitskreis». Loosely translated it means that if I get stuck on an issue, I start a group to discuss it – fully knowing that there will be no action resulting from it.

> *The analyst of contemporary problems encounters these differences of perspective as opposed views and solutions, which he shows to be inadequate or false in the development of his own analysis. His statement is based on "facts" which have no alternative interpretation and which therefore preclude alternative antecedent histories. There is no direct or simple way of altering or supplementing the facts on which an analysis is based; and, as a consequence, efforts to initiate a "discussion" of problems usually produce "disputation" or, even worse; "controversy."*[8]

Once again, we find that policy-makers are facing problems of design. In this case, the problem is communication (Nelson 1957/1974; Buchanan 1995). To effect changes, policymaking and policy implementation depend on communication, much of which takes the form of discussions, disputes, controversies. They find that they have to find ways to

> *influence the conditions of communication for the purpose of moving from discussion, dispute and controversy to generate new possible agreements and action.*[9]

Casually rephrased, pragmatic inquiry serves people to think out of the box in order to become actionable. Indeed, McKeon proposes specific actions to side-step inaction: the first action aims to discover ambiguities in a given disputed, controversial and discussed issue. The second action focuses on the invention of new possibilities. The final and third action gives form to these new possibilities by way of expression of (new) values in a meaningful and accessible manner. These three actions describe a design inquiry that is intentionally open-ended and emergent, committed to allow for a solution to come into being through a process.

Unless designers can find ways to influence the conditions of communication to take place, a situation remains unchangeable. A determined situation in design is one where there is clarity and agreement about what can or ought to be designed; where resources and processes are established and where designing accommodates existing structures. The consequence is design for fit – new designs stabilize and manifest a system but do not support its transformation. What a person accepts as 'a given', considers factual and unchangeable, eludes the possibility of being different or taking on a different form. McKeon identifies communication as a way to overcome this actional impasse by discovering ambiguities in our different understandings so we can invent new possibilities and express commonly shared values in new products, serves and policies. How this applies to the policy process is shown in *Figure 1*.
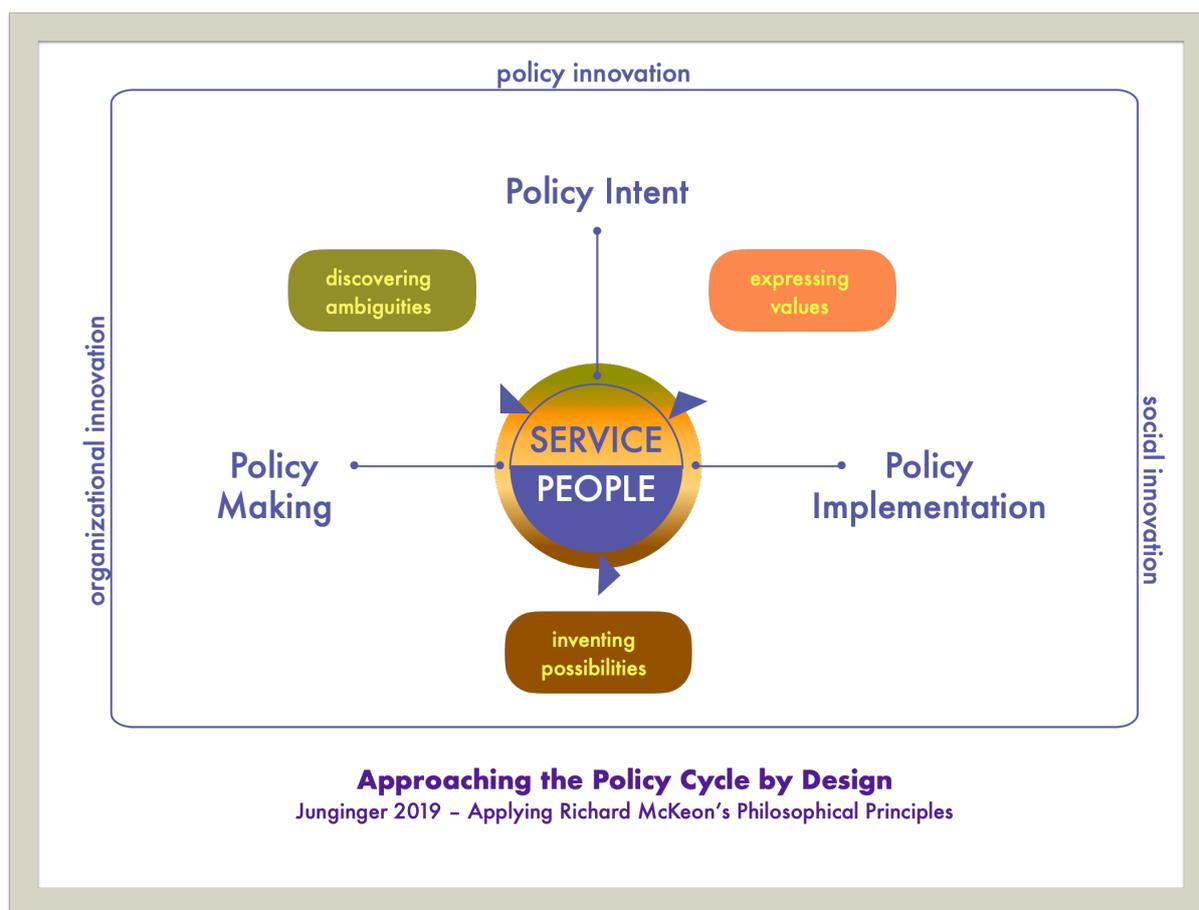
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[8] McKeon, R. 1957
[9] Ibid.

Figure 1

The Policy Cycle depicted in *Figure 1* illustrates how experience-based pragmatism aligns with the tasks and challenges of policy design. In this approach, quality serves as the background, the starting point and as a regulative principle of all thinking. This is possible because every phase of this policy cycle is informed by human experience and takes into consideration human interactions. Services, the very means through which people experience policies are conceived of and considered from the start and continuously aligned with the intent of the policy, the policy itself and the realities of the organizations and agencies that have to see them through to realization. This approach keeps people in focus throughout the policy process: people involved on the policy-making side, people involved in the policy implementation side and people who are on the receiving end of policies. It accommodates the rising demands by public managers to integrate policy-making with policy implementation (Eppel et al 2011) and embraces the ideas of prototyping policies (Andrews et al 2012). It further recognizes the need for constructive dialogue (Böhm)

Capano and Howlett (2014) report that some scholars, among them Dryzek and Ripley (1988) and deLeon (1988) remain convinced that the "high level of contingency in some decision-

making contexts" suggest that policies cannot be "designed" in the sense that a house or a piece of furniture can be. Although this view oversimplifies somewhat the complexities especially in modern building design, the intricacies and the many systems that come together in policy-making and policy implementation certainly go beyond these. Policy-making is more comparable to a large modern city. And like a large modern city constitutes a system we can never grasp in its complexity and as a hole, policy-making itself may escape our attempts. As John Dewey observed in the *Public and its Problems* (1927 [1954])), a state is not the result of direct and conscious intent as inventing a machine.

However, and this bring this brings us back to design, just as we experience a city (Lynch 1965), we experience policies. The experience we have is what we can build on and from. In a city, we want to feel safe, be able to relax and also to make a living. We can take steps, by design to get there. In a similar fashion, we know what we want from policies. We want them to address the problems we experience, we want them to be fair and we want them to reinforce our trust in government. Pragmatist philosophy reminds us that the way we experience policies is through the services and products that implement them.

The policy intent itself is the outcome of an inquiry into a problematic situation. This indicates the policy process begins before a problem has been formulated. Once a problem has been stated, key stakeholders have been identified. In the next step which targets policy formulation, fixations that exist come under scrutiny. The inquiry shifts to efforts to discover ambiguities that allow for the invention of new approaches and solutions. This phase brings people together in ways they usually do not engage with each other. At this stage the pragmatist approach foregoes the linear often hierarchical paths that have led to policies being developed in silos, following a relay style with only partial understanding of the overall policy intent and only partial accountability. In doing so, it connects policy-making and policy implementation. It is interesting here to note that pragmatism has been picked up in public administration, for example by Patricia Shield (1998, 2008) and Eppel et al (2011). A proactive effort to look out for new possibilities allows for invention in anticipation of future desirable outcomes. This is in contrast with much of the policy process focused on responsive measures. Finally, the possibilities are being realized by giving them form through specific products and services that are accessible, useful, usable for people – contributing to desirable social innovation.

Concluding Thoughts

This is a short paper and in its current state does not quite fulfill the requirements set out for this conference. However, the issues it touches on are relevant for this panel on revisiting pragmatism

for policy and hopefully provides enough food for thought to stimulate the conversations of this panel.

The key point is that experience-based pragmatism laid out by John Dewey and build on by Richard McKeon are of particular importance in the current efforts to arrive at more citizen-centric public policies and public services. When we start to look at the policy process from a pragmatist perspective, we shift the focus towards the qualities people experience through their interactions with other people, the environment, the material conditions and their spiritual world. Here, the pragmatist perspective is helpful in reconsidering the empirical observation and the understanding of the policy process in the context of social innovation.

Policies remain key instruments for social innovation. One of the prerequisites for social innovation and public sector innovation in a pluralistic democratic state is continuous communication among different groups and sectors, individual citizens, stakeholders and decisionmakers.

Following Cels, de Jong & Nauta (2012) social innovation "is primarily aimed at improving social outcomes and creating public value" and refers to "attempts to transform the way societies address social problems and produce public goods and services." In an ideal world, the policy process supports and facilitates this transformation, the creation of (desirable) social outcomes as well as the creation of public value. Such consensus appears to be a utopian objective in a pluralist democracy which positions the respect for differences in values as one of its hallmarks (Mouffe 2005). Calling for an "antagonistic" approach, Chantal Mouffe proposes to embrace this inability for consensus by shifting our focus to explore what is being contested. Carl DiSalvo (2012) applies this to design and argues for design to provide the space in which such contestations can happen. McKeon allows for a different angle yet, one that emphasizes the design process itself and applies pragmatist philosophy to turn a situation that appears to be fixed, given and unchangeable into one that can be re-envisioned and with that, redesigned. McKeon sidesteps a black and white analysis ('false' or 'inadequate') and does not enter into a contestation. This does not mean that frictions or tensions can be avoided. Both are anticipated and part of the process in the discovery of ambiguities that eventually allow for new possibilities to emerge. The German language is particularly clear about these "areas of play" ("Spielräume") that exist for people to make decisions and to take actions. Handlungsspielräume (the frame within which one may act), Ermessensspielräume (the frame within which one may decide) are terms commonly used in the legal context, for example. Such areas of play point to the direct impact and acceptance of human experience and the qualitative in their analysis of a problem.

Policy design, which can be characterized as a design problem on the fourth order (Buchanan 1998), is characterized by its wicked and complex nature (Rittel & Weber 1973). And although design strives to transform an existing situation into a preferred one (Simon 1969), wicked problems in design (Buchanan 1998) tend to contribute to inertia because the situation in which they emerge are indeterminate and these situations in and by themselves evoke inquiry to be questioned (Dewey 1938, p. 105). My own experience from teaching students in public policy allows me to observe that this is the polar opposite of what policy-makers tend to be taught or what has guided policy-making so far (also see Junginger 2014).

Quality as understood by John Dewey provides the background, point of departure and regulative principle of all thinking – and inquiring and can help us rethink the policy process. It can also help us influence the conditions of communication, which is the prerequisite for new ideas and solutions to emerge, as Richard McKeon shows. To summarize, I want to point out the once more the five consequences of a pragmatic approach to the policy process:

1. Shifting the starting point of the policy process from that of 'a problem' to that of a problematic situation.
2. A focus on human experience human interactions throughout the policy cycle, including people at all levels, policy makers, public managers, in civil society and members of the public.
3. Treasuring differences in views to get a deeper understanding of a problematic situation instead of shying away from diversity.
4. Inquiry first, problem-solving later.
5. Avoiding dualism and reduction, however convenient or expedient, instead collaboration and co-creation.

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