Introduction

Over the past two decades we have witnessed a multiplication of academic books and articles dealing directly with the role of ideas in public and social policy (to mention only a few of these books: Béland and Cox, 2011; Blyth, 2002; Genieys and Smyrl, 2008; Gilbert, 2002; Gofas and Hay, 2010; Merrien, 2001). The objective of this chapter is to discuss the variety of ideational processes that may affect social policy stability and change over time. The chapter begins with a general discussion of the role of ideas that leads to a critical survey of key ideational factors. This discussion leads in turn to brief remarks about the need for historical ideational analysis, the issue of why some ideas may become more influential than others, and the appropriate research methods for empirical ideational analysis.

Ideas

Ideas may be defined in different ways. In the context of this chapter, we define ideas primarily “as the changing and historically-constructed ‘causal beliefs’ of individual and collective actors” that help shape their perception (Béland, 2016: 736; see also Béland and Cox, 2011; Goldstein and Keohane, 1993). Centered on agency and the role of concrete social and political actors (Smyrl and Genieys, 2008), this understanding of the role of ideas in social policy starts from the perspective that instead of being epiphenomena, ideas can directly shape human behavior and policy decisions (Campbell, 2004). Interacting with other types of explanatory factors such as institutional rules and structural pressures (Padamsee, 2009; Parsons, 2007), ideas take different forms and it is necessary to break down ideational processes to trace the potential impact of social policy actors and decisions (Béland and Waddan, 2015). Considering this, instead of talking about ideas in general, the main part of this chapter discusses several ideational categories in the following order: problem definitions, policy paradigms, frames and discourse, cultural categories and public sentiments, and core social policy concepts. Because all these ideational categories are historical constructions that change over time, this discussion of such categories leads directly to considerations about historical analysis and the problem of infinite regress in ideational analysis. Finally, the last section of the main part of the chapter turns to the tricky and
underexplored question of why some ideas are more influential than others over time. The concept of valence is introduced to address this question.

**Variety of ideas**

**Problems**

Before policy actors tackle particular problems, they must define them. This is why problem definitions are among the most significant ideas to shape policy debates and outcomes. The construction of social and economic problems as well as attempts to push them onto the social policy agenda entails political struggles over their definition, which is typically contested. This is why actors try to impose their definition of a particular problem when the time comes to address it through the creation, the elimination or the reform of social programs (Kingdon, 2011; Rochefort and Cobb, 1994; Stone, 1997).

In social policy debates, the construction of policy definitions regularly concerns what C. Wright Mills (1959) once called “sociological imagination,” which point to the possibility for individuals to grasp the relationship between their own life and the historical and social forces that could influence it. Here problem definition is about how personal issues become seen as social problems, a situation that makes it easier for policy actors to push them onto the agenda (Béland, 2009a). For instance, during most of the nineteenth century, joblessness was typically perceived as a personal issue related to one’s character flaws. Gradually, however, the concept of unemployment emerged to define a social – collective – problem that transcended personal character: involuntary joblessness related to economic cycles and structures (Walters, 2000).

Another aspect of problem definition is the way actors can link different issues that had not been articulated together before. In recent years, much has been written about the relationship between climate change and a host of social policy issues. This new understanding of social policy as having direct relevance for key environmental concerns is the product of ideational processes through which the problem of climate change becomes relevant for social policy actors, who had previously ignored it or perceived it as something outside their realm of policy research and practice (for an early example of the definition of climate change as a social policy issue see Gough et al., 2008).

In this process of problem definition, academics and other experts generally play a central role, as they can reflect on how seemingly distinct policy issues are related to one another. Think-tanks and international organizations can also play a direct role in shaping and reshaping problem definitions. For instance, through its 1994 report the World Bank played a major role in defining demographic aging as a policy problem across the world and not only in the Global North (Orenstein, 2008). Simultaneously, regarding family and labor market issues, the OECD has been at the forefront of a number of problem definition debates over the years (Mahon and McBride, 2008). Finally, the European Union (EU) has played a key role in the diffusion of a number of problem definitions. A prime example of this is the idea of social exclusion, which emerged in France before taking a transnational life partly through EU publications and policy networks (Daly, 2006). This suggests that problem definition, like other ideational processes discussed below, can assume a transnational nature. At the same time, national actors can alter the meaning of particular problem definitions to account for concrete economic, social and political realities on the ground. The example of the rise of the idea of social exclusion during the Blair years in the United Kingdom illustrates this claim, as this very idea took on distinct meanings embedded in the ideological logic of New Labour (Béland, 2007; Levitas, 2005).
Paradigms

Located at the background of the policy-making arena (Campbell, 2004), policy paradigms constitute “a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the very nature of the problems they are meant to be addressing” (Hall, 1993: 279). This means that, although policy paradigms feature problem definitions, they are much broader because they also include policy goals and assumptions about what programs (i.e., policy instruments) can help actors solve specific problems. The assumption at the core of paradigm analysis as defined by Peter A. Hall (1993) is that policy paradigms tend to reproduce over time, which leads to incremental adjustments concerning the levels and settings of existing policy instruments (first-order change), and the choice of policy instruments (second-order change). For him, paradigm shifts (third-order change), which involve a departure from ideational reproduction through the replacement of a paradigm by another, are rare and they involve a change in the goals of actors and the way such goals relate to each another.

Because they link different policy ideas together and help shape the perceived interests and preferences of actors, policy paradigms must reach a certain level of coherence to bring actors together and reproduce over time. Concurrently, the analysis of policy paradigms tends to be more straightforward in the field of economic policy, where broad academic theories such as monetarism and Keynesianism shape policy debates in an explicit way (Hall, 1993; Palier, 2008). The fact that the general concept of paradigm is associated with the work of Thomas Kuhn (1962) on scientific revolutions reinforces the theoretical orientation of the term policy paradigm as used by scholars such as Peter Hall (1993) and his many followers. Yet the analogy between scientific and policy paradigms is problematic owing to the political nature of the policy-making process, which is far removed from scientific conventions (Muller, 2005).

Martin Carstensen (2011) argues that the concept of policy paradigm is so flawed that it might be better to leave it aside and focus instead on other ways in which ideas may change and relate to each another over time. Borrowing from authors such as John L. Campbell (2004), he argues that “bricolage” is a better metaphor for ideational change than “paradigm shift” because the term bricolage stresses the manner in which policy actors use their agency to borrow from different sources and create new policy ideas. In contrast to the concept of policy paradigm, bricolage emphasizes the eclectic nature of social policy actors rather than their drive to seek coherent intellectual frameworks (Carstensen, 2011).

Another issue raised by the concept of policy paradigm is methodological in nature. This is the case because the term “paradigm shift” typically remains fuzzy and scholars assume that a clear change in policy is necessarily the effect of an ideational (paradigm) shift. According to Pierre-Marc Daigneault (2014), the only way to assess whether a paradigm shift has occurred is to trace the ideas of policy actors over time rather than assuming that such ideas change simply because the policies with which they are associated change. In other words, we cannot assume that a policy departure on the ground is the result of a paradigm shift unless we can empirically prove that such a shift has occurred and has directly contributed to policy change in the first place. If these basic methodological conditions are reached, Daigneault (2014) rightly believes the concept of policy paradigm remains a relevant analytical tool for social policy scholars interested in studying policy stability and change over time.

Cultural categories and public sentiments

Even more than policy paradigms, cultural categories and public sentiments are generally located in the background of policy debates (Campbell, 2004). Cultural categories and public sentiments
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can be discussed within the same section because they both refer to the relatively stable assumptions and shared popular beliefs about policy issues. Yet it is appropriate to present these two concepts one after the other because they belong to two different bodies of literature, which would gain from interacting more systematically instead of existing in silos.

Culture is a broad concept that has long been used in social policy research (for an overview, see van Oorschot, 2007). Some students of culture focus on how cultural beliefs and ideas shape social policy development across countries. For instance, in a widely cited article, Birgit Pfau-Effinger (2005) suggests that cross-national differences in cultural assumptions about the economic, social and political realities can account for key policy variations from one country to the next. In her view, cultural ideas that prove dominant in a certain country are likely to “restrict the spectrum of possible policies of a welfare state” (Pfau-Effinger, 2005: 4). This type of analysis is consistent with the now classical scholarship of US scholars such as Seymour Martin Lipset (1996) and Roy Lubove (1986), who have turned to “national values” to explain “American exceptionalism” in social policy. This discussion of national values was criticized for being overly broad and unable to explain differences across social policy areas within the same country (Skocpol, 1992).

Taking into account this criticism, Brian Steensland (2008) moves away from the concept of national values to focus on more specifically defined “cultural categories” (i.e., shared cultural understandings of a specific issue or problem) that shape the policy assumptions of both public and policy actors. In his work on the debate over social assistance (welfare) reform in the United States during and after the Nixon years he suggests that, as a well-entrenched cultural category, “welfare” (a term that carries negative cultural meanings in the United States) made it harder for the Republican president to justify policy change because the meanings this term conveyed skewed public perceptions in a direction inimical to his social assistance reform proposal. More concretely, using the culturally (and negatively) charged language of “welfare” made it harder for President Nixon and his allies to propose a guaranteed income system that seemed inconsistent with what people in the United States imagined to be proper welfare policy (Steensland, 2008).

According to Campbell (2004: 94), public sentiments refer to “Ideas as public assumptions that constrain the normative range of legitimate programs available to decision makers.” Reading this definition, we can identify a clear overlap with the scholarship on cultural categories but also with the vast literature on public opinion and social policy. For proponents of public opinion analysis,

> elected officials have an incentive to incorporate the policy preferences of voters so as to reduce the risk of electoral losses for themselves (or the members of their party), and also reduce the possibility of public reprisals in the form of civil disobedience or protests. (Brooks and Manza, 2007: 27)

From this perspective, the public’s ideas about what is acceptable and unacceptable policy directly impact the social policy decisions of political actors who seek election and re-election. Yet, it is necessary to note that politicians do not always do what the public wants, when such public sentiments are clear in the first place, which is not always the case (Skocpol, 1992). Moreover, as we suggest in the next section, through framing and discursive processes, policy actors willingly tap into existing cultural categories and public sentiments to push for certain reform options. In other words, these actors strategically express their agency in their opining attempts to frame policy debates in ways that promote their goals while tapping into existing cultural and public beliefs and symbols.
Framing and discourse

The way actors frame policy issues and solutions can have a direct impact on the politics of social policy (Campbell, 2004; Schön and Rein, 1994). Framing processes are about how these actors strategically formulate public discourses which shape the perceptions of particular policy proposals that move in and out of the policy agenda. Actors opposing and supporting a policy alternative are likely to employ contrasted narratives to justify its adoption or rejection (Stone, 1997). At the same time, framing processes do more than simply promote or delegitimize certain policy alternatives, as they participate in what Robert Henry Cox (2001) calls “the social construction of the need to reform.” In other words, political actors strategically mobilize framing processes to foster or weaken reform imperatives. This is especially the case when there is no early consensus about whether social policy change is necessary in the first place.

Sociologists have directly contributed to the study of framing processes. For example, drawing upon the work of Erving Goffman (1974), social movement scholars have systematically explored such processes in order to better grasp why the construction of reality shapes social mobilization (Benford and Snow, 2000). This is why these scholars see social movements as “signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers” (Benford and Snow, 2000: 613). Social movements are not the only actors involved in framing processes, as journalists, politicians and writers create discourses that draw upon existing cultural categories and public sentiments to generate or weaken support for certain policy alternatives (Béland, 2009b).

Frame analysis shares a lot in common with what Vivien Schmidt (2011) calls “discursive institutionalism,” an approach that pays close attention to the ways in which political actors strategically produce discourses that target specific constituencies to impact the reform process. For her, existing political institutions determine the form such discourses take: “communicative discourse” seeking to persuade the whole population to support reform tends to emerge in more statist policy-making systems, while “coordinative discourse” seeking to persuade social partners to support reform is more prevalent within fragmented policy-making systems (Schmidt, 2002). This work provides a clear example of how ideas and institutions can interact in particular national contexts, an institutionalist ideational perspective that many other scholars have promoted over the years (e.g., Béland, 2009b; Campbell, 2004; Orenstein, 2008).

Core concepts and historical analysis

Other types of ideas that can be investigated are the core social policy concepts ever present in both academic and political debates about welfare programs. Concepts such as “social citizenship,” “welfare state” and “social investment” constitute “keywords” (Williams, 1976) in social policy language. These concepts can remain extremely vague and ambiguous, which can have positive consequences from a political standpoint when the goal is to bring people together (Jenson, 2010). For social policy scholars, however, vagueness is a problem because offering clear definitions is a requirement in any serious research area. Take the concept of welfare state, for example. As Daniel Wincott (2001: 409) claims, “While the expression ‘the welfare state’ has many interpretations and connotations – both academic and popular – there are surprisingly few clear discussions of the concept.” As changing historical constructions, core social policy concepts can have different meanings and scholars need to map these meanings (Béland and Petersen, 2014). This is not only the case of classic concepts like “welfare state” but seemingly recent ideas such as “social investment,” which scholars can trace over time to show how they might not be as new as what a superficial analysis would suggest (Smyth and Deeming, 2016).
This example points to the need for a systematic historical analysis of core social policy concepts (Béland and Petersen, 2014).

Beyond these core concepts, the historical analysis of different social policy ideas is a valuable intellectual project. For instance, in an article on US social assistance (welfare) reform, sociologists Margaret Somers and Fred Block show how conservatives successfully promoted the idea that social programs create the very social problems they are intended to solve, which they trace back to the English debate over poor law reform in the first decades of the nineteenth century (Somers and Block, 2005). Their analysis points to what Albert Hirschman’s calls the “perversity thesis,” the basic conservative idea that state interventions such as social programs bring about perverse effects which weaken the very foundations of social and economic order (Hirschman, 1991). At a more general level, Somers and Block (2005) demonstrate the added value of historically informed analyses of contemporary welfare state debates through the genealogical analysis of ideas such as “perversity.” The work of Mark Blyth (2002) on neoliberal ideas and how they spread and impact social programs over time and across jurisdictions further backs the claim that ideational analysis gains from adopting a long-term historical perspective.

At the same time, students of social policy should be aware of the problem of infinite regress in ideational analysis (Carstensen, 2015; Kingdon, 2011). According to John W. Kingdon (2011: 73), “An idea doesn’t start with the proximate source. It has a history. When one starts to trace the history of a proposal or concern back through time, there is no logical place to stop the process.” This is why he suggests that scholars should not even try to reconstruct the history of the contemporary policy ideas they analyze:

Because of the problem of infinite regress, the ultimate origin of an idea, concern, or proposal cannot be specified. Even if it could be, it would be difficult to determine whether an event at an earlier point in time was more important than an event at a later point. […] So tracing origins turns out to be futile.

(Kingdon, 2011: 73)

Yet, as the work of political scientist Jacob Hacker (1997) on the origin and evolution of the idea of “managed competition” in US healthcare policy shows, it is sometimes helpful to trace the history of a specific policy idea. Moreover, as the work of Somers and Block (2005) cited above suggests, comparing the fate of a policy idea in two different historical contexts can shed new light on contemporary social policy debates. Thus, even if Kingdon (2011) is right to caution researchers against the problem of infinite regress in ideational analysis, his claim becomes counterproductive if it convinces ideational scholars to get rid of long-term historical analysis altogether (Béland, 2016b).

**Why some ideas matter more than others**

One question that remains when one takes an historical and comparative perspective on the role of ideas in social policy is why some ideas matter more than others over time (Cox and Béland, 2013). Although it is clear that ideas carried by powerful actors are more likely to triumph than ideas promoted by politically weaker actors (Hansen and King, 2001), turning to the inherent characteristics of an idea and how it fits into a changing context is another potential way to assess why this idea becomes more influential than others. In other words, although it is clear that the presence of powerful and well-connected policy entrepreneurs may explain the popularity of a certain idea, the inherent valence of that idea also deserves attention. We can define valence as “an emotional quality of an idea that can be either positive or negative in its character, or high or low in its intensity” (Cox and Béland, 2013: 308). In this context,
ideas with high, positive valence generate a strong attractiveness and therefore are likely to have greater potential influence on policy change. By contrast, ideas with a negative valence are repulsive and are likely to generate opposition to the policy proposals associated to them.

(Cox and Béland, 2013: 308)

As defined here, valence may concern a particular frame, a policy proposal or a core social policy concept.

A combination of factors can alter the valance of an idea (Cox and Béland, 2013). First, the life cycle of an idea matters, as newer ideas may sound more attractive, and older ideas can lose some of their attractiveness over time. Second, the opening of a “policy window” (Kingdon, 2011) such as the election of a new government may help policy entrepreneurs promote certain ideas that fit well within a new economic, social or political environment. Third, because of their higher emotional appeal, abstract ideas such as “equality” and “solidarity” are typically more likely to generate higher valence than narrowly defined and technical ideas such as “tax rebate” and “automatic indexing,” which appeal more to experts than to broader constituencies. Fourth, how policy entrepreneurs depict the idea they seek to promote is extremely important. In other words, the discursive strategies of key actors can help promote certain ideas over others, which is why the agency and political astuteness of such actors can matter a great deal. In general, the valence of an idea is historically contingent and it is affected by broader and changing cultural and ideological patterns. Valence is an understudied concept in social policy research and more research on the topic is necessary to advance our knowledge about how the contextual and intrinsic qualities of ideas explain why some become more influential than others.

Methods for ideational analysis

This discussion about valence leads us to briefly address the issue of how to study the actual policy impact of particular ideas over time. Once the ideational factors under investigation have been clearly defined in contrast to other potential explanatory factors such as institutions and economic structures (Parsons, 2007), scholars can use a process tracing method to study how particular ideas and the actors carrying them interact with other factors over time (Jacobs, 2015). As Pierre-Marc Daigneault (2014) suggests, however, drawing a clear line between ideational shifts (potential independent variable) and concrete policy changes they may produce (dependent variable) is crucial to avoid tautological arguments (on the dependent variable problem in social policy research more generally, see Clasen and Siegel, 2007). This means that students of ideas must explore their potential causal impact by tracing how they might shape the preferences of actors and particular policy decisions (Daigneault, 2014). While doing this, these scholars can identify alternative explanations for these policy outcomes and combine ideational factors with institutional or structural factors when it proves necessary to solve a particular empirical puzzle (Parsons, 2007).

In terms of research design, ideational scholars have used different approaches in their empirical work. For instance, comparative analysis is a common approach to assess why some ideas and discourses emerge in particular institutional settings and not in others. Here the work of Schmidt (2002, 2011) cited above is particularly illustrative. According to her, the type of policy discourse that becomes dominant in a particular country varies according to institutional factors such as the party system and the involvement of social partners in policy-making. Only comparative analysis can reveal such a variation in discursive and institutional forms, and the relationship between the two (Schmidt, 2002). Conversely, some ideational scholars have used an historical analysis,
comparing the impact of a certain policy idea or frame during two different historical moments. This is the case of the above-cited work of Somers and Block (2005) on the “perversity thesis” and its impact in early mid-nineteenth-century England and late twentieth-century United States. By tracing the existence of this idea and its impact on concrete policy decisions during two historical periods, Somers and Block (2005) have developed a new approach to study ideational processes and their impact upon social policy across both time and space. Combining historical and comparative methods using such a process tracing approach is a compelling form of empirical analysis to which more ideational scholars could turn in the future.

Finally, there is the issue of data choice. What data can we use to trace the development of ideational processes over time and space while assessing their potential impact upon social policy? The most basic answer to this question is that the data sources used should vary based on the types of ideational processes under consideration. Here, Campbell’s (2004) distinction between background and foreground ideas is helpful in identifying the most relevant data sources at hand: on the one hand, when we deal with frames and discourses located at the foreground of policy debates, textual analysis of media content and political speeches. On the other hand, when we deal with policy paradigms located at the background of policy debates, expert interviews and the analysis of technical reports may prove more helpful. In the case of public sentiments, which are also typically located at the background of policy debates (Campbell, 2004), public opinion data such as polls are the data sources of choice. This last remark points to the fact that quantitative data can be useful to ideational researchers. Although most ideational scholarship draws primarily upon qualitative data and methods, there is room for more quantitative research about the role of ideas in social policy (Béland and Cox, 2011). For example, it is possible to measure the global diffusion of policy ideas using quantitative indicators. This is something which Jeffrey Chwieroth (2007) has done in his research on the influence of neoliberal ideas on the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

**Conclusion**

This chapter contributes to the ongoing discussion about “how ideas matter” (Jacobs, 2009; Mehta, 2011). Clearly, to address this question, scholars need to take into account the agency and diversity of actors involved in the formulation and diffusion of different types of social policy ideas (Genieys and Smyrl, 2008). At the same time, although ideas are seldom epiphenomenal (Campbell, 2004), they often matter when interacting with other types of explanatory factors such as structural and institutional forces (Padamsee, 2009; Parsons, 2007). Breaking down these factors into more concrete subcategories as we have done above for ideational processes should help map these interaction effects among different explanatory factors across social policy areas (Béland and Waddan, 2015; Campbell, 2004). As suggested above, historical analysis is an excellent way to study why some ideas matter more than others, as long as we understand that also taking into account structural and institutional factors, alongside actor mobilization, is essential in offering more insightful analyses of social policy change.

**References**


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