

Policy and Identity

the ecology of self and the negotiation of interests in an organization

SFU EDUCATION 817-5
Policy Processes
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People are certainly affected by policy decisions, but how is the policy process affected by the identities of policy makers? How does the process, in turn, affect the identities of the people involved? Who is the self that engages with policy? What revelation occurs at the policy table? I would like to build a concept around these possibilities; engage in some theory-making on the potential for policy to shape the character, voice, and self-concept of individuals involved. To do so, I would like to envision the policy process through an ecosystem metaphor, and propose some risks and rewards associated with revelation and evolution of identity as it is worked by the meeting of individuals over policy issues.

What is meant by identity? For the purpose of this discussion, I would suggest that identity is the distinct and persistent self-constructed character and image of an individual. One's identity might make sense to the onlooker in terms of external comparisons (e.g. stereotypes or labels), but it is also evidenced by voice (as in a writer's personality being present in her words) or by the 'horizons of significance' with which an individual relates. These horizons, an idea from Charles Taylor (1991) are the result of personal decisions to connect to something of authentic value. Taylor suggests that in understanding our quest for authenticity we "are endowed with a

moral sense, an intuitive feeling for what is right and wrong... morality has, in a sense, a voice within" (p. 26). It is this desire to connect, to employ voice, which individuals bring in varying degrees to the policy process. Identity is also at stake in policy discussions as they bear on the self-concept and ability to establish voice for the people involved. People have many opportunities to build character and establish voice in their lives, but the deliberate and public exposure of ideas, biases, and personality at the policy table represents a unique opportunity to scrutinize the identity. It is as if a microscope is held up to one's ideas when policy is being debated, and the view is directed to those parts of an individual's identity that the individual chooses (or happens) to expose. This is the part of the policy process that is most like the self-directed building of identity as I have defined it, and also most like the interactions inside an ecosystem.

An ecosystem, strictly defined, is an organization of interactions between living things and their environment. Human-environment interaction has great potential for dealing with this split. Studies in ecology have created a new paradigm for scientific and humanistic inquiry -- the role of an ecosystem or connected components of a living system in understanding nature. This understanding can take the form of metaphor when applied to human interactions, as a means

to reveal the concrete, or it can be used literally to analyze human systems from an ecological perspective. The ecosystem can also be used as an organizational model (applied to policy process, for example) which, in turn, would suggest a move towards an organic or network paradigm (Illes, 1999).

An ecosystem is a construct, an organizational label placed on a group of species and habitats that makes sense of their collective interaction, much like a particular policy process (seen as an experiment in organization) is a label given to the net will of the policy players. A spruce tree at the edge of fern swale is part of the spruce-fern ecosystem; it offers unique qualities and needs to the environment and group of organisms with which it shares goals, but can also be seen as part of an adjacent ecosystem, a wet spruce-horsetail association below the swale. In either case, the spruce remains a spruce -- it has an identity which is at once solid and yet is received differently depending on the ecosystem it occupies. At a policy meeting, an individual will bring a different set of qualities and needs than he or she offers to the work environment before or the home environment after. The policy meeting simply affords a chance to provoke character-revealing debate; it is a mechanism for revelation (e.g. the components in an educational organization are

revealed to each other though policy and the means by which they interact are enabled). Regardless of the scope or widespread input into policy decisions, they are made by real people who bring wit, feeling, passion, and frustrations to their debate and decisions.

An ecosystem has some special characteristics which extend its metaphoric capabilities -- two overarching concepts, four key processes, and three general principles. The two concepts of competition and collaboration form the stage upon which species in an ecosystem act on each other. They also have the function of showing how a particular species expresses its strengths and weaknesses, its character as it is revealed on the site. This revelation takes (at least) four forms: the processes of symbiosis, parasitism, mutualism, and commensalism. Symbiosis involves a codependent relationship where two species offer something to each other in order to thrive. At the policy table, this could be compared to the negotiation of interests between two sets of players who require a coordinated solution to a problem; they must work together to succeed, or reveal a measure of collaborative identity to move forward. Parasitism involves one species preying on another in order to thrive. As a policy metaphor, this could be seen as the manipulation of people and ideas to serve interests, to gain something surreptitiously from the "host species" --

perhaps from the goodwill of the policy players, to profit from the budget associated with decisions, or to gain a disproportionate reward from a policy outcome. Mutualism is a system of shared benefits, not a necessary codependency like symbiosis, but a meeting of interests as is shown by the bird that feeds itself by plucking ticks off a grateful ox. For policy, mutualism is a common process, often written into philosophy statements or policy preambles (e.g. creating 'win-win solutions'). This process, sometimes competitive, sometimes collaborative, gives individuals freedom to reveal their character or invest their identity, although there is still the risk that one's effort to create a mutually beneficial policy can be seized by another for other designs. Commensalism is the process of species living together in the same habitat without competing with each other. Individuals 'along for the ride' at the policy table are engaging in commensalism, and although they may not employ their whole voice in the process, they reveal something of their character as they seek to serve an interest, observe the process, or learn from the experience without bearing on the other persons and ideas present. Of course, these processes have rough boundaries, and can be present at the same time with the same species (or people), but they provide a further level of focus on identity.

Three principles are at work in an ecosystem shaping the processes and giving form to the concepts: adaptation of species and ecosystems, communication within ecosystems, and interactions within ecosystems. The first of these, adaptation, is a necessary survival strategy for species, an ongoing quest for a niche or location ideally suited to the needs and character of an organism. Policy process affords the same opportunity -- a chance to gather resources, affect culture, and create security for the people affected by policy. The more individuals invest of themselves in the policy process (e.g. wielding power, displaying empathy, manipulating the process, sacrificing ground, displaying passion, holding out for principles), the more chance they will create a niche in which their interests (and identities) are secure. The niche-making that occurs in the policy process is part of a larger cycle at work, in the organizations that foster policy-making: "as with a loosely coupled institution such as the university, each individual (organism) in the organisation (ecosystem) is struggling to create or maintain a niche, conserving energy and resources to protect their investments" (Illes, 1999, p. 6). This struggle for security occurs elsewhere throughout life, but is particularly in focus and open to observation during the policy process.

As an operative principle, communication and interaction within ecosystems tells the story of how species (read people) display their character and voice their unique struggles for security of identity. If the analogy requires specific matches, the interaction principle could relate to the initiation and analysis stages of policy development, while the communication principle might relate to the formation and implementation stages. In most boreal forest ecosystems, one of the keystone species (an organism with a disproportionate amount of importance -- without it the ecosystem can collapse) is fungal mycelium. Small nodes at the end of branch-like structures "fix" or secure nitrogen for use by other plants. The mycelium, buried under the forest soil, acts as a communication link between organisms, adjusting nutrient supplies to meet the demands of the species present. For example, the mycelium can enable a fern to give up some of its mineral quota so that a nearby spruce tree can use elements. If something similar exists in the policy process, it might be described as the collective will of the players, perhaps even the latent power of the policy process to alter the identities of the policy players and alter the process in return. This action will be different at every policy discussion, reflecting the uniqueness of identity, just as one spruce tree's need for a mineral is met with another spruce tree's need to compete for water sought by the roots of ferns. This hand that

guides the process and reveals identity (by matching needs with resources) need not be invisible; fostering an environment where the identities of the people affected by the policy debate and outcome are honoured can be a design principle in the policy process, a conscious focus of the players, or even a step required by sponsor organizations.

Alongside niche development and the role of keystone species is the idea of biodiversity, the implication that more communication between more species results in a more resilient ecosystem. As a policy process and identity metaphor, biodiversity can be seen in terms of inclusion and exclusion. Voices excluded from the policy process will weaken the outcome and hinder the revelation and evolution of character. For example, if gender issues are excluded from a policy analysis meeting, the members' ability to display their thoughts on gender, and the potential for the process to affect changes in attitude is limited; the gender biases become buried in the language rather than exposed for consideration.

The ability of ecosystems and policy process to be changed by the players, and to reveal and affect the identity of the players, may be an inherent property or a deliberate strategy; "...organizations and their environments are engaged in a pattern of cocreation, where each

produces the other. Just as in nature, where the environment of an organism is composed of other organisms, organizational environments are in large measure composed of other organizations... Environments then become in some measure always negotiated environments rather than independent external forces" (Morgan, 1997, p.64). The cocreative capacity of policy process shows one way in which policy is "more than the text," has many dimensions, and is laden with values (Taylor et al, 1997, p. 15).

The ecological metaphor, used as a model for guiding a policy process, can create an inspirational vision, mobilize commitment, intensity, and energy, build uniqueness while allowing diversity, and foster social cohesion (Illes, 1999, p. 6). These possibilities are all fertile ground for the expression of identity (the alternative being repression), so while ecosystem view focuses attention on the character of the policy players, a deeper application of the metaphor has the potential for the transformation of identity. This, of course, depends on the amount one is willing to show of oneself in the policy process, but as people involve themselves with important issues, at least some part of their identity is at stake as they 'find their niche.' The risk of experimenting with transformative metaphors is that the policy process can change to the extent that the identity one has

revealed can be threatened when the players must shift their paradigms to adapt. bell hooks describes a similar phenomenon in discussing an effort to transform an educational institution to reflect a multicultural perspective (hooks, 1994, p. 36).

Policy is not created in a vacuum. Just as an ecosystem requires the external input of light and air, nutrient and water supply, the policy process involves external forces which can shape or reflect identity: "...public policies are often located within the broader legal and political framework; ...there are many different kinds of policies, some material since they involve allocating resources for their implementation, others symbolic since they are designed to create a social climate in which educational work can proceed, around a commitment to a particular set of values" (Taylor et al, 1997, p. 10). Where do these values come from? They are the values posited by the policy players, on behalf of themselves or others, and guided by the external forces and negotiated by the interaction of the policy process. The identity of the external forces, as it is experienced by the policy-makers, is similar to the expression ecosystem inputs (sun, air, water, soil) in particular forms such as slope position, prevailing winds, flood cycles, and nutrient flow.

The self that engages in policy processes is, perhaps, only a portion of a whole identity, but it is a part that is public, self-constructed, and vulnerable to change. Policy process challenges individuals to be authentic and claim space for their identities, or at least be true to themselves. Even a negative experience by one player at the policy table can be revealing as to the character of the other players, and offer a challenge to express personality and convictions. Imagining the process as an ecosystem gives the policy analyst a tool for recognizing identity, for seeing how people bring needs and offer resources. Using this tool can also yield empathy for the needs of others and appreciation for what they have to offer, just as an ecosystem requires an interdependence of unique identities in order to flourish.

References

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Back Matter

A small story helps illustrate some of the interpersonal tensions which the policy process brings under focus. This scenario (with names and details altered) is based on events in a public high school. Consider how ecosystem processes (e.g. competition, niche-building, role of keystone species) are at work in the meeting. Consider also how the identities of the individuals are at stake in the negotiation of interests, biases, values, and character, and how voice is muted or amplified by the process.

The meeting. June 10th, 3:20 pm, Room 136.

Everyone around the table was tense. Tom, Dick, Harriet, and myself knew what was going on, Harv and Janet were in the dark. I had called an extraordinary meeting of the department to discuss the fate of our leadership block. With cutbacks to the school district, our principal had decided to cut costs to the school by eliminating some of the preparation blocks designated for department chairs. Our department would be deprived of a designated time for the chair (this year, me) to coordinate department activities: planning meetings, developing policy, ordering learning resources, communicating with

staff and parents, attending school leadership meetings, dealing with professional challenges and curriculum change. Every year our department had elected a chair and the administration had supplied a prep block for the chair's use. The principal was proposing that in the coming year, a chair from a separate department would oversee activities in his department and ours as part of a solitary prep block. Our department had been down this road before, and our typical response had been that a department exists at the discretion of the teachers involved, the association was voluntary and outside of classroom duties; as professionals, teachers will likely benefit from the organization of a department, but this requires time and coordination, which in turn requires that one or more people be given release or prep time by the school to perform departmental duties. Four of us had met informally at lunch to agree to a response. Harv and Janet were not in on the agreement, as they had shown disinterest in the issue in the past and did not see a path of "resistance" as important. The room was tense because Tom and Dick had been angry all day after hearing that the principal had cut department blocks without consulting with any teachers. Their comments though out the day were cynical and deliberate, and the others in the room could sense their vibe. I was bringing forward a motion to issue a statement to our administration that our department would not cooperate with a

chair not chosen by us, and that department activities (outside of classroom responsibilities) would cease in the coming year.

Something similar had happened eight years earlier, and the result was administrative chaos and a restoration of departmental blocks. Our meeting followed the history of leadership struggles over the years, and centered on the need for a strong response to an administrator who was perceived (by at least four of us) to be shortsighted. Merv and Janet were reluctant to be so direct with our principal, and although they didn't care for his management style, they sympathized with the tight spot he was in with regards to school money. I had a feeling of hesitation then, that we were pushing these two to agree with us for the sake of consensus, but after stating their objections they agreed, in the main, with our objective. With careful rewording to the statement and convincing speeches from Dick and Harriet, the motion eventually passed unanimously and the meeting adjourned. I must admit to being a bit smug when it came to forwarding our statement to the administration -- "take that!" -- but we had to be content with an ambiguous response. Our principal reiterated that to rearrange the budget to allow full department blocks would be too difficult and that we would all have to live with "tightened belts." There was no feedback on our idea of suspending departmental activities in the coming year.