What Does Comparative Policy Analysis Have to Do with the Structure, Institution and Agency Debate?

Caner Bakir

Published online: 14 Sep 2022.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

Article views: 148

View related articles ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

What Does Comparative Policy Analysis Have to Do with the Structure, Institution and Agency Debate?

CANER BAKIR ⓘ *,**

*Department of International Relations, Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey, **Hoover Institution, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA

ABSTRACT   *A growing number of political and policy scientists have utilized institutional theory to explain how the purposeful actions of agents shape and are shaped by structural, institutional, and agential factors. Most current studies, however, have conflated and/or combined the fundamental concepts of structure, institution, and actor, overlooking how their interactions shape policy and institutional outcomes. Furthermore, such research lacks an approach that allows a more comprehensive means to integrate the various dimensions of such interactions. By studying these distinct but interdependent causal factors through an integrative approach, we provide a richer, more comprehensive understanding of contingent conditions, agency, and outcomes.*

Introduction: Structures, Institutions, and Agents

Structure, institution, and agency have long been among the central concepts in social sciences. This is because interactions that occur *within* and *among* these multiple, complementary, and interdependent causal factors are at the center of social relations. A better understanding of such interactions expands our ability to unpack the multiple causes of policy and institutional outcomes. In this respect, political scientists informed by distinct ontological, epistemological, or methodological understandings of structuration theory (Giddens 1994), realist sociology (Bhaskar 1975, 2015; Archer 1995), or institutional theory (Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Jessop 2001; Hay 2002; Parsons 2007; Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Morgan et al. 2010; Peters 2019), to name a few, are interested in how the purposeful actions of agents (i.e. agency) shape and are shaped by structural and institutional contexts.

Caner Bakir is a professor of political science, with particular emphasis on international and comparative political economy, and public policy and administration, of the College of Administrative Sciences and Economics at Koç University. He is a Visiting Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and the director of the Center for Research on Globalization, Peace and Democratic Governance (GLODEM).
Correspondence Address: Caner Bakir, Department of International Relations, Koç University, Istanbul, 34450, Turkey. Email: cbakir@ku.edu.tr; cbakir@stanford.edu

Structures consist of cultural, material, relational, spatial, and temporal/historical contexts (see Elder-Vass 2010). They offer broader background contexts within which institutions and actors operate and interact. Institutions refer to formal (e.g. laws and regulations) and informal (e.g. ideas) rules that guide the behavior of actors through logics of appropriateness and/or instrumentality (Campbell 2004). Both written (formal) and unwritten (informal) *institutions* inform agential actions through incentives and disincentives to generate desired or preferred outcomes. Such institutions are embedded within structural contexts. Actors are individuals, organizations, or collective entities embedded within structural and institutional contexts (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Actor's agency broadly refers to the actor's intentional *actions* taken to achieve desired or preferred outcomes. It relates to "the power that individuals possess that enables them to realize their chosen goal [i.e. the power of agency]" and "action that is independent of the constraining power of social structure [i.e. agentic power]" (Campbell 2009, pp. 408–416). Distinct but interrelated structural, institutional, and agency-level causal factors are nested and interact with one another in dynamic political and policy-making processes (Bakir 2013).

How do interactions within and among structural, institutional, and agential causal factors take place, and to what effect? Can causal links between structures, institutions, and agency be established through an integrative theoretical framework? Most scholars recognize interplay among these multiple causal factors. However, there are several fundamental issues that constrain our ability to uncover and understand such interactions and their effects (Bakir 2013, 2017; Bakir and Jarvis 2017, pp. 463–474; Bakir and Gunduz 2017, pp. 489–490, 494–495; 2020, pp. 20–21). Although political and policy scientists recognize these explanatory factors as causal elements, they combine or conflate their analytic properties and overlook their individual, interactive, and/or collective effects. Specifically, as for the definition and operationalization of institutions, there are five persistent and pernicious errors. First, political and policy scientists generally combine structures and institutions: "The concept of political system, which constitutes the core of system-theoretical thought, refers to the totality of structures (institutions) and rules (procedures) that places political and social actors (parties, associations, organizations, individuals) in rule-guided interactions with one another in order to fulfil system-preserving functions and reproduce them constantly in a circuit-like manner" (Merkel et al. 2019, p. 19). Second, institutions are reduced to formal rules and regulations (or formal institutions) only, detaching ideas from institutions as a separate analytical category: "special attention is to be paid to the need for a clear analytical distinction between ideas and institutions" (Béland 2016, p. 735; 2009, p. 701). Third, informal institutions (e.g. ideas) are reduced to culture (or vice versa) and delegated to residual categories. For example, the most cited and widely adopted definition notes that institutions are:

> the humanly devised constraints that structure human interactions. They are made up of formal constraints (rules, laws, constitutions), informal constraints (norms of behavior, convention, and self-imposed codes of conduct), and their enforcement characteristics . . . [informal constraints] come from socially transmitted information and are part of the heritage that we call culture. (North 1990, p. 37)

In their comprehensive review of the relationship between culture and institutions, Alesina and Giuliano (2015, p. 902) adopt an approach that "was followed in most of the empirical papers trying to disentangle the two concepts":

> We prefer the term *culture* over *informal institutions*; we find it more appropriate and less confusing. Similarly, for brevity, we sometimes refer to formal institutions simply as *institutions*. Formal and informal institutions (or culture, as we prefer to call them) can be complementary and can interact.

Fourth, on many occasions institutions are conflated with organizational or collective actors:

> They [institutions] can be either formal government organizational structures or informal norms that are in place in a country for the sake of arranging and under-taking policy work. ... Informal institutional structures include the general public, nongovernmental organizations, and private sector groups that are not official institutions. (Yan et al. 2020, p. 763; see also Alesina and Giuliano 2015, n. 18 at p. 902)

For example, institutions are conflated with "public bureaucracies" (Dahlstrom and Lapuente 2022, p. 25.1) and the "IGO", or intergovernmental organization (Johnson and Urpelainen 2014, p. 182). In a similar vein, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is an international intergovernmental organization rather than an institution. As an actor, it writes the rules (e.g. conditionalities noted in Stand-by Agreements) with the intention to shape its client states' actions: the neoclassical economic paradigm informs program-matic policy ideas such as the (post-)Washington consensus promoted by the IMF, reflecting vested interests of international financial actors. A recent literature review on "how ideas matter in public policy" unfortunately offers abundant examples of this conceptual vagueness and confusion (see Swinkels 2020): "ideas can be defined as *beliefs* held by individuals or *adopted by institutions* that influence their actions and attitudes" (Beland and Cox 2011, p. 6, cited in Swinkels 2020, p. 283, emphases added). In this instance, ideas are reduced to cultural beliefs, and institutions are conflated with organizations. Finally, it is also common to separate interests and ideas from institutions: "Existing policy change frameworks can be distilled into three key elements, or expla-natory variables: institutions (processes, context), interests (actors, power) and ideas (content, evidence, values), known as the '3Is'" (Shearer et al. 2016, pp. 1200–1201). However, as Hay rightly notes "[i]nterests are not merely a reflection of perceived material circumstance [i.e. socially constructed], but relate, crucially, to the normative orientation of the actor towards her external environment" (Hay 2004, p. 224; see also 2011, p. 79). In this respect, contingent contexts may create a conducive environment where agents are able to reflect on their given material conditions whilst defining their material interests. Arguably, the different ontological and epistemological assumptions (Hay 2006) and/or limited penetration into the institutional theory guiding these con-ceptualizations are responsible for these confusions and inconsistencies. The result has been a rather fragmented utilization of institutional theory, impeding further advances in comparative politics and policy literatures.

Why bother with the conceptual vagueness and confusion surrounding these terms? These fundamental concepts (i.e. structure, institution, and actor) should not be combined and/or conflated "because if, for example, culture and informal institutions are combined, or collective actors such as states are conflated with institutions, or organizational actors such as political parties and parliamentary committees are conflated with institutions and vice versa, scholars overlook their relationships, interactions and influences" (Bakir, in this issue; Bakir 2013, pp. 81–87, 97–105). This limits our ability to unpack and understand the multiple causes of policy and institutional outcomes. For example, culture refers to a set of norms, values, and practices shared by a group of people residing in a country or group of countries (for the significance of culture in policy analysis, see Geva-May 2002). It is both a societal-level concept and a collective phenomenon. Culture, like informal institutions such as normative and cognitive types of ideas, influences actor behavior and agential action. In contrast to culture, however, ideas are operationalized at an individual level rather than a societal level. They are embedded in the cultural context. Thus, a culture and an idea describe two distinct but intertwined causal factors with individual, interactive, and/or collective effects on agential actions. For example, dependency theory as a public philosophy was the main informal structure from the 1950s to the 1970s in Latin America (Gunder Frank 1966). This public philosophy was based on the view that the economic underdevelopment of poor periphery (Latin American) countries was due to their unequal exchange with the rich core (developed countries) in capitalist economic relations, trade, finance, and investment. This was against the background of the programmatic policy idea of Import Substitution Industrialization (i.e. trade and economic policies aimed to achieve economic development and self-sufficiency through national economic production of industrial products replacing foreign imports). These informal structures and institutions collectively informed the policy design preferences of principal decision-makers. The main formal institutions of the ISI included authoritative policy instruments such as interest rate ceilings on deposits and credit, high reserve requirements on bank deposits, and compulsory and state-directed credit allocations to companies operating in preferred strategic sectors (Gómez 1994). These multiple structural and institutional complementarities, for example, reinforced strong incentives for commercial banks to channel retail deposits and foreign loans to state-owned enterprises and to government budget deficit financing.

In addition to the conceptual ambiguity and confusion, the comparative politics and public policy literatures lack a combined perspective that explicitly focuses on cross-level and comparative analyses of contextual effects and agential actions that are contrasted, theorized, and measured. The current scholarship has not made progress in offering more *analytic eclectic* theoretical frameworks intended to bridge the structural, institutional, and agential perspectives in an interdisciplinary fashion or to generate a more comprehensive understanding of when, where, how, why, whether, or whose agential actions produce intended policy and/or institutional outcomes in *real*-world policy and practice (for a discussion of analytic eclecticism, see Sil and Katzenstein 2010). This is the second main issue that limits our ability to unpack and understand the political and policy processes and their outcomes. The point here is not that such interactions between context and action (see, for example, Cairney 2020; Howlett et al. 2020; Geva-May et al. 2021) and causal mechanisms (see, for example, Capano and

Howlett 2009, 2021) are not studied but that causal mechanisms arising from these interactions are often overlooked and underappreciated.

Although structures, institutions, and agents are ontologically distinct, they are intertwined layers of multiple forms of stratified reality (for an overview of critical realism, see McAnulla 2006; Hinds and Dickson 2021). If structures, institutions, and agents have been treated as ontologically distinct from one another, but at the same time are all interdependent and nested in the irreducible strata of reality (i.e. "real", "actual", and "empirical" levels), then there is also a need for a theoretical, conceptual, and methodological approach that will result in a better understanding of contingent factors and agency, and their effects. Failure to do so, however, will lead to the persistence of fragmented literature, inconclusive mixed results or variation in research findings, and the lack of policy-relevant research that resonates with the nested levels of reality in policy and political analyses. On this note, this themed issue takes a modest step forward to provide a richer, more comprehensive understanding of policy processes and outcomes.

In this respect, *complementarities* and *enabling conditions* are the central concepts that operationalize these interactions (Bakir 2013, pp. 21–36, 2017). This is because they present *contingent conditions* for the activation of agential actions and their effects. They are critical factors behind individual agency's causal powers. Here, structural and institutional complementarities refer to the interdependence of structural and institutional influences on agential actions. They *motivate* agential action through incentives that *reinforce* one another and/or incentives that *compensate* for the deficiencies of one another (for a discussion of institutional complementarity, see Crouch 2005, 2010; Campbell 2011). Thus, the identification of multiple structural and institutional complementarities is critical to an understanding of the influences at multiple levels that shape decisions and agential actions, thereby creating outcomes.

In addition to the study of complementarities, we also call for a need to detect and analyze structural-, institutional-, and agential-level *enabling conditions* (for enabling conditions, see Battilana 2006; Battilana and D'Aunno 2009; Battilana et al. 2009; Fligstein and McAdam 2012). These enabling conditions *empower* actor agency and *accompany* complementarities at the multiple contextual levels and forms of reality. Enabling conditions arise from the structural level (e.g. ideology, culture, type of policy network, religion, gender, class, networks/relationships, elections, political regime change, paradigm change, and macroeconomic shock), institutional level (e.g. laws, regulations, presidential degrees, and/or various types and forms of ideas), and agential level (e.g. social status, position, and skills) factors that enable or constrain agential action (Bakir 2013; Bakir and Gunduz, 2010, 2017). In a similar vein, an agency empowered by the contingent conditions also transforms structures and institutions (Bakir 2003, 2009; Bakir et al. 2021).

This perspective is interested in how complementarities and enabling conditions interact with agents and generate causal mechanisms informing agential action (from structures and institutions to agents). It is also concerned with how the agency of actors (purposeful actions) activates the causal powers of complementarities and enabling conditions to modify or reproduce various contexts (from agents to structures and institutions). It should be noted that if multiple structural, institutional, and/or agential factors work against one another, generating predominantly conflicting incentives and

hindering conditions, then agential actions are most likely to generate poor policy and/or institutional outcomes (Bakir 2013, 2017). Thus, a set of complementarities and enabling conditions performs a causal role in such agential actions "when one group of structural, institutional, and agency-level conditions overrides that of the contradictory group in affecting agency behaviour" (Bakir 2013, p. 21). How can we explain agential inaction and policy/institutional persistence from this perspective? When competing conditions and agents are countered by contradictory ones, they may cancel each other out, resulting in no agential action or institutional inertia.

Furthermore, such an integrative perspective focusing on the interactions among these multiple factors can help identify causal mechanisms and explain agential actions and their effects in the real world (Bakir 2013, 2017, 2020, 2021; Bakir et al. 2021). It is not concerned with dense, empirical description of macro-, meso-, or micro-contexts. In this respect, it is not only focused on outcomes filtered through human experience, understanding, and interpretation (i.e. the empirical level of reality) or those occurring with or without a human filter (i.e. the actual level of reality). Rather, it also accounts for unobservable factors (e.g. culture, relationships, and ideas) and multi-level interactions between various forms of the contingent contexts and agential actions that generate causal mechanisms (i.e. the real level of reality) and produce patterns of events (i.e. actual level of reality) that become experiences and actions (i.e. empirical level of reality).

The COVID-19 pandemic functions as an illustrative example. As an existential global threat to public health, it has had severe outcomes, including "hospitalization with a diagnosis of acute respiratory failure, need for noninvasive ventilation (NIV), admission to an intensive care unit (ICU) including all persons requiring invasive mechanical ventilation, or death (including discharge to hospice)" (Yek et al. 2022, p. 19). However, whether or not the SARS-CoV-2 virus produced these outcomes is not only limited to a patient's conditions such as age, genetic risk, and other health risk factors at the individual level. It also depends on a variety of other conducive, contingent conditions. For example, at the outset of the pandemic, "Turkey perform[ed] strikingly better than most of the developed countries in Europe with a fatality rate of 2.8 per cent, recovery rate of 77.3 per cent, and critical cases treated under … (ICU) is just 0.4 per cent of all cases" (Bakir 2020, p. 426). The Turkish state managers adopted multiple instrument mixes (including substantive authoritative policy and information-based tools) that operated predominantly under multiple enabling conditions and complementarities. Regarding structural-level enabling conditions, the political structure of the presidential system enabled the Turkish state to introduce swift and decisive policy responses while avoiding vetoes or other delays that would otherwise have occurred in the parliamentary system of government. The related complementary cultural aspect of the political structure consisted of the normative shared values of the ministers and bureaucrats. Their decisions and actions, for example, were informed by loyalty, obedience, and commitment to implement the directions of the president and/or the presidential office. Furthermore, various complementary formal political institutions performed the combined roles of enabling conditions and complementarities for the suppliers and recipients of the COVID-19 policy responses. These *formal institutional resources* (including the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey, laws, and presidential decrees) *enabled* the agency of the president, but as institutional complementarities, they also reinforced the preferred behavior of target audiences by generating incentives for compliance. An additional unique institution

performed the dual functions of institutional reinforcement and compensation – "the Social Security and Universal Health Insurance Law of 2008 which resulted in universal health coverage" (Bakir 2020, p. 435). In the absence of financial burden, the 2008 law, for example, reinforced incentives for citizens from various socioeconomic statuses to access and benefit from healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also compensated for the private health insurance schemes that excluded pandemics. In addition to this institutional complementarity appearing in the form of both reinforcement and compensation, the demographic structure of the population as a structural factor also enabled public sector actors to undertake effective authoritative policy actions: the nationwide curfew targeted those under 20 (25.5 million people) and those over 65 (7.5 million people), corresponding to 33 million people, or about 40 per cent of the total population. Furthermore, as an informal structural complementarity, the Turkish family culture also reinforced policy effectiveness. This culture involves strong kinship ties in which "families are the principal sources of material and psychological welfare for both (adult) children and elderly" (Bakir 2020, pp. 435–436). Such cultural values inform the logic of appropriateness at the informal institutional level that shape the relationship between a parent and child (i.e. real level of reality) in that adult children care for elderly parents who have traditionally assumed parental roles (i.e. actual level of reality). At an empirical level of reality, "unsurprisingly, less than 0.05 per cent of those over 65 were care home residents in Turkey which contributed to limiting COVID-19 deaths in care homes" (Bakir 2020, p. 436). The Turkish society also has a long history of handling diverse health crises; at the agential level, this historical trajectory has informed the Ministry of Health's organizational policy capacity and has affected healthcare workers' resilience. Furthermore, the state had taken actions in the past to upgrade its physical infrastructure and initiated privatization processes in the healthcare sector. As a result, Turkey presently has the fourth highest ICU capacity in Europe. In sum, the multiple interdependent and complementary structural-, institutional-, and agential-level enabling conditions, as well as the structural and institutional complementarities, have informed multiple agential actions and the policy effectiveness, thereby generating relatively less severe COVID-19 outcomes in Turkey.

The five articles in this special issue explore a broad range of structural, institutional, and agential theoretical perspectives, representing a variety of ontological, epistemological, and methodological viewpoints. Collectively, they highlight the overlooked linkages between distinct but interrelated structural, institutional, and agential causal factors, as well as their individual, interactive, or collective effects. The studies address two main questions: (1) What are the structural, institutional, and agential causal factors that shape policy and/or institutional outcomes?, and (2) What are the interactions among and effects of these causal factors?

The remainder of this introduction summarizes this special issue's arguments concerning the main structural, institutional, and actor-level causes and effects of agential actions. It concludes by discussing promising directions for future research on comparative politics and public policy.

Overview of This Collection

In the real world, the most promising approaches (theoretically, methodologically, and empirically) should aim to recognize and embrace multiple causalities (as opposed to

mono-causality) in an interdisciplinary and comparative fashion. This themed issue contains one theoretical article and four empirical research articles that employ divergent ontological, epistemological, and methodological approaches and cover a wide range of policy sectors. The theoretical article focuses on how an analytic eclectic view of structural, institutional, and agential interactions advance our knowledge of comparative politics and public policy. The research articles engage with these interactions and their effects, representing a range of policy topics and geographic diversity including populist Welfare State Regimes (WSR) in Brazil, China, India, and Turkey; education and employment policy reforms in Italy; the Family Allowance Program and the Family Farming Program in Brazil; and the emergence of European regulations used to govern the collaborative economy.

Bakir (in this issue) introduces an analytic eclectic Structure, Institution, and Agency (SIA) framework. This is an integrated, interdisciplinary, and multi-leveled theoretical framework. Informed by critical realism (for an overview, see McAnulla 2006; Hinds and Dickson 2021) and analytic eclecticism (Sil and Katzenstein 2010), this perspective recognizes distinct causal factors that are interdependent but also not reducible to one another. It enables a cross-level and comparative research design, theorization, and analysis. Bakir argues that "desired or preferred policy and/or institutional outcomes are most likely when multiple structural and institutional complementarities (from structures and institutions to agents) and multiple structural, institutional and agential enabling conditions accompany one another in motivating and empowering actors (from agents to structures and institutions) to engage in purposeful agential actions" (see Bakir in this issue). Complementarities and enabling conditions accompany one another and generate causal mechanisms informing agential actions, whereby agency functions to maintain or advance the *preferences* (i.e. material vested interests defined by ideas, also known as logic of instrumentality) and/or *desires* (i.e. non-material, cognized/valued goals, also known as logic of appropriateness) that generate policy and/or institutional outcomes.

Drawing on the SIA framework and a comparative analysis of distinct WSRs in Brazil, China, India, and Turkey, Yoruk and Gencer (in this issue) argue that a more generous welfare state regime in the populist WSR cluster is most likely to occur when institutions of Import Subsidization Industrialization (ISI), contentious politics among state and societal actors, and state capacity are high (see Figure 2 in Yoruk and Gencer, this issue). Specifically, they argue that there were three main structural, institutional, and agential factors that shaped agential actions and policy outcomes across countries. First, the presence of the ISI as a dominant programmatic policy idea informed relevant formal institutions and practices that layered past productive relations over time. Second, there were agential-level interactions between governments and organized labor for policy change in the form of protests by the poor during the structural context of the neoliberal economic transformation. Third, strong state capacity as an agential-level enabling condition was critical in the introduction of institutional complementarities reinforcing incentives for governments and bureaucrats to take actions towards the introduction and maintenance of more generous WSR development (institutional outcome).

Galanti and Barbota offer a comparative analysis of labor market reform through the Italian Jobs Act (JA) and 2014–2015 education reform program called "Good School". They focus on how an institutional entrepreneur (then prime minister Matteo Renzi) used

various narratives during the reform process. Informed by the SIA framework, they argue that institutional entrepreneur is more likely to be successful in delivering preferred policy outcomes when structural and institutional complementarities reinforcing similar incentives motivate him to act, and when structural, institutional, and agential conditions enable them to strategically adapt his narratives according to dynamic contextual conditions. Specifically, Italy's fiscal and economic crises and European/local elections at the structural level interacted with divergent institutions that shape relations among labor, business, and political actors in labor and education sectors, informing Renzi's different strategic actions as a policy and institutional entrepreneur (see Figure 1 in Galanti and Barbota, this issue). Renzi also had agency-level enabling conditions including social status and social/discursive skills that complemented his agential actions. As such, this individual agency nested in macro-, meso-, and micro-contexts strategically adapt his narratives to deliver desired outcomes.

Informed by the SIA and drawing on comparative cases of the Brazilian Family Allowance Program (conditional cash transfer policy) and the Food Purchase Program (a family farming program), Porto shows that the international diffusion of such programs resulted from the intentional actions of human agency (i.e. policy ambassadors) enabled by multiple structural, institutional, and agential factors. A careful look at the case analyses reveal that there are interactions among national structures (e.g. the democratization process) and international structures (e.g. acceleration of the globalization process that facilitates the exchange flow of ideas as informal institutions across countries). In this respect, programmatic policy ideas on the conditional cash transfer and family farming programs were present as informal institutions. They were promoted by the World Bank to inform the actions of policy ambassadors. They offered the necessary incentives and resources for policy ambassadors to act. In this respect, they also created legitimacy for agential action that resulted in formal institutions. Furthermore, a policy ambassador's social status and tangible/intangible resources at the micro-level – including knowledge and expertise, legitimacy and reputation, access to and alliance with international actors (e.g. World Bank), and the state's policy capacity – further enabled the agential actions of these individuals. In sum, multiple, structural, institutional, and agential factors offered the necessary incentives and resources for policy ambassadors to act.

Cox offers a rare account of efforts to construct a collaborative economy when divergent actors lack strong common interests and shared worldviews. Indeed, the construction of stable and routinized interactions within such *newly emerging* policy sectors poses various challenges. Cox's qualitative study shows that in the absence of institutional complementarities that promote shared institutional logic among multiple actors, the lack of low personnel turnover practice that would facilitate socialization at the agential level, policy entrepreneurs are least likely to control the framing of a policy discourse in a newly emerging policy field containing divergent actors. Specifically, Cox examines the emergence of European Union regulations in the collaborative economy, showing that the construction of a "collaborative economy" does not only arise from the intentional actions of ideational entrepreneurs who use coordinative discourse to dominate discursive competition. He argues that the process of building a collaborative economy was constrained by "contingency factors" such as competing institutional logics and turnover in office. These factors "introduce a great deal of contingency into

the discursive process" by informing the effectiveness of coordinative discourse in the policy process.

Conclusions

This themed issue aims to encourage scholarly interest in an integrative view of inter-actions within and among multiple structures, institutions, and agents in order to under-stand their causal effects. It calls for further exploration of agential actions and policy/institutional outcomes with special reference to contingent conditions and stratified levels of reality. Such an interdisciplinary and comparative understanding should be central to future developments in comparative politics and public policy research. This is because contingent conditions, agential action, and the three domains of reality are intertwined (for a similar realist point, see Tsoukas 1994). For instance, a policy entrepreneur's government agenda-setting powers cannot be explained by reducing them to "attributes, strategies, skills" (see Mintrom 2019) or "a pattern of action" (Capano and Galanti 2021). These are micro-level analyses focusing on empirical domains *only* (see also Battilana and D'Aunno 2009). Rather, it is better explained by *also* relating them to structural and institutional complementarities and enabling conditions nested in the three domains of reality from which they drive their motivations, perceptions, reasoning, and resources (for an exploration of institutionalization of policy ideas through combining policy and institutional entrepreneurship, see Bakir et al. 2021, pp. 403–404, 409–411).

The articles in this themed issue take a modest step forward in this direction and raise important themes. First, all contributors avoid combining and/or conflating structure, institution, and actor/agency concepts. Second, this issue focuses on the interactions within and among structures, institutions, and agents, as well as on their causal effects that trigger the agential actions leading to policy and institutional outcomes. All the articles place emphasis on such interactions and their effects. Bakir highlights common problems of conflating and combining the three fundamental concepts (i.e. structure, institution, and actor) and argues that ignoring their interactions will simply disregard their interrelated and complementary causal effects. Does this occur because there is very little importance in such interactions or because such a research agenda lacks an integrative approach? What has been lacking, Bakir argues, is an accelerated progress in our theoretical perspective and path-dependent research practice towards understand-ing how multiple, cross-level, interdependent, and complementary causal factors affect agential action, policy and institutional outcomes. Thus, he advances the SIA theoretical framework. Drawing on the SIA framework, the articles of Yoruk and Alpers, Galanti and Barbotas, and Porto engage (albeit with varying theoretical degrees) with how multiple complementarities and enabling conditions inform agential action that generates policy outcomes. Third, all of the empirical articles contribute to the knowledge of comparative public policy research. Erdem and Alper offer multiple case studies provid-ing within-country and cross-national comparisons of the emergence of WSRs in devel-oping countries. Drawing on the comparison of labor and education policy sectors over time in Italy, Galanti and Barota show that successful individual agency (policy and institutional entrepreneurs) leading to desired policy outcomes is most likely to occur when they exploit complementarities and enabling conditions arising from the interac-tions among the structural, institutional, and agential levels. Porto offers a comparison of

the internationalization of programmatic policy ideas including the Family Allowance and Food Purchase programs in Brazil. He shows that successful policy transfer is most likely to occur when domestic and international structural factors, as well as institutional factors, motivate and empower individual agency through social status, skills, and transnational networks. In his discussion of the evolution of the collaborative economy regulation at the European Union level, Cox offers a comparative analysis of the interplay between agential actions and contingent conditions including structural (e.g. policy field characteristics and/or elections), institutional (e.g. a newly emerging field's competing institutional logics that result in the lack of shared understandings among various actors, and the practice of high personal turnover), and agential factors (e.g. exploitation of discursive skills).

Policy workers will benefit from these comparative, interdisciplinary, and multiple levels of analyses. By taking a step toward understanding the interactions between contingent contextual conditions and agential action through an integrative approach, these findings have at least one main implication for policy practice. The central cautionary note for policy workers is to understand contingencies and align their strategic actions in response to those contingencies: structural, institutional, and agential conditions, agency, and three levels of reality are distinct but also intertwined. In this respect, policy practitioners should be able to identify when, how, why, and whose agential actions matter in order to drive policy and institutional change effectively. This will give them a useful theoretical perspective with which to understand, for example, why policy design, change, transfer, innovation, intervention, and implementation are effective in one temporal dimension, policy sector, or country but not in another. It will also help them to understand whether the agential actions of public sector actors (including policy or institutional entrepreneurs) are likely to generate intentional or unintentional outcomes.

The main limitation of this collective effort is the lack of a comparative case study approach that uses methodology informed by the critical realist philosophy's ontology and epistemology (for an effort to remedy this common deficit in the literature, see Fletcher 2017). Taking this into account, the contributions in this themed issue serve as invitations to further research. Much remains to be done in this research stream. One promising avenue for future research will be to incorporate the SIA perspective (see Bakir forthcoming) in order to bridge the critical realist perspective (Bhaskar 1975, 2015; Archer 1995) that combines and conflates structures and institutions, and realist evaluation (Pawson and Tilley 1997; Pawson 2006) that combines and conflates structures, institutions, and agents (see, for example, Akgunay and Bakir forthcoming). We also need a systematic exploration of the relative importance of structural, institutional and agential factors in much neglected institutionalization processes. This effort should be complemented by a set of transparent and rigorous qualitative research designs that are sensitive to and systematic about documenting such causal factors (see Bakir 2017, pp. 223–226). Another area into which this study can be extended is the examination of how individual agency (e.g. policy and institutional entrepreneurs) is located in the multiple complementarities and enabling conditions, as well as in the real, actual, and empirical domains, during policy and institutional entrepreneurship. This is because agency that relate to policy or institutional entrepreneurship are products of interdependent contingent factors. Thus, their exploration cannot be

analyzed by solely examining the agential actions of individuals manifested in the empirical world. If policy or institutional entrepreneurship is seen predominately as what specific groups of individuals do, then this functionalist view of human agency is operationalized with special reference to attributes, skills, and strategies. To limit the view of policy change to this micro-level analysis at the empirical level *only* is to constrain what the Multiple Streams Framework (Kingdon 1995) has to offer comparative policy analysis. By adopting critical realist ontology, epistemology and methodology in an integrative approach, scholars will not limit their analysis of individual agency and policy outcomes to the empirical level, allowing them to move beyond observed features and micro-actions of such entrepreneurs. It is the Editor's hope that the ideas and findings presented generate further interest in comparative and interdisciplinary research in political and policy analysis focusing on complementarities and enabling conditions operating at multiple levels. How do conducive complementarities and enabling conditions generate causal mechanisms that activate the agency of such individuals, generating entrepreneurship processes that manifest themselves empirically?

Acknowledgements

Funding

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Caner Bakir http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8166-4623

References

Akgunay, S. and Bakir, C., forthcoming, Unfolding macro-prudential mechanisms: Central bank-led mechanisms during the post-GFC Turkish experience. *New Perspectives on Turkey*.

Alesina, A. and Giuliano, P., 2015, Culture and institutions. *Journal of Economic Literature*, **53**(4), pp. 898–944. doi:10.1257/jel.53.4.898

Archer, M., 1995, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Bakir, C. 2003, Who needs a review of the financial system in Australia? The case of the Wallis Inquiry, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, **38**(3), pp. 511–534.

Bakir, C. 2009, Policy entrepreneurship and institutional change: Multi-level governance of central banking reform. *Governance*: *An International Journal of Policy, Administration and Institutions*, **22**(4), pp. 571–598.

Bakir, C., 2013, *Bank Behavior and Resilience: The Effect of Structures, Institutions and Agents* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan).

Bakir, C., 2017, How can interactions among interdependent structures, institutions, and agents inform financial stability? What we have still to learn from global financial crisis. *Policy Sciences*, **50**(2), pp. 217–239. doi:10.1007/s11077-016-9261-1

Bakir, C., 2020, The Turkish state's responses to existential COVID-19 crisis. *Policy and Society*, **39**(3), pp. 424–441. doi:10.1080/14494035.2020.1783786

Bakir, C., 2021, Actions, contexts, mechanisms and outcomes in macroprudential policy design and implementation. *Public Policy and Administration*, **36**(2), pp. 205–231. doi:10.1177/0952076719827057

Bakir, C., forthcoming, Why do comparative public policy and political economy scholars need an analytic eclectic view of structure, institution and agency? *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*.

Bakir, C. and Gunduz, A., 2010, The importance of policy entrepreneurs in developing countries: A systematic review and future research agenda. *Public Administration and Development*, **39**(3), pp. 1–24.

Bakir, C. and Jarvis, D.S.L., 2017, Contextualising the context in policy entrepreneurship and institutional change. *Policy and Society*, **36**(4), pp. 465–478. doi:10.1080/14494035.2017.1393589

Bakir, C., Akgunay, S., and Coban, M., 2021, Why does the combination of policy entrepreneur and institutional entrepreneur roles matter for the institutionalization of policy ideas? *Policy Sciences*, **54**(2), pp. 397–422. doi:10.1007/s11077-021-09417-3

Battilana, J., 2006, Agency and institutions: The enabling role of individuals' social position. *Organization*, **13**(5), pp. 653–676. doi:10.1177/1350508406067008

Battilana, J. and D'Aunno, T., 2009, Institutional work and the paradox of embedded agency, in: T. Lawrence, R. Suddaby, and B. Leca (Eds) *Institutional Work: A New Agenda for Institutional Studies of Organization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), pp. 31–58.

Battilana, J., Leca, B., and Boxenbaum, E., 2009, How actors change institutions: Towards theory of institutional entrepreneurship. *The Academy of Management Annals*, **3**(1), pp. 65–107. doi:10.5465/19416520903053598

Béland, D., 2009, Ideas, institutions, and policy change. *Journal of European Public Policy*, **16**(5), pp. 701–718. doi:10.1080/13501760902983382

Béland, D., 2016, Ideas and institutions in social policy research. *Social Policy and Administration*, **50**(6), pp. 734–750. doi:10.1111/spol.12258

Belánd, D. and Cox, R. H., 2011, *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press).

Bhaskar, R., 1975, *A Realist Theory of Science* (London: Version).

Bhaskar, R., 2015, *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Oxford: Routledge).

Cairney, P., 2020, *Understanding Public Policy*, 2nd ed. (London: Red Globe Press).

Campbell, J. L., 2004, *Institutional Change and Globalization* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

Campbell, C., 2009, Distinguishing the power of agency from agentic power: A note on Weber and the "Black Box" of personal agency. *Sociological Theory*, **27**(4), pp. 407–418. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9558.2009.01355.x

Campbell, J. L., 2011, The U.S. financial crisis: Lessons for theories of institutional complementarity. *Socioeconomic Review*, **9**(2), pp. 211–234. doi:10.1093/ser/mwq034

Campbell, J. L. and Pedersen, O. K. (Eds), 2001, *The Rise of Neoliberalism and Institutional Analysis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

Capano, G. and Galanti, T., 2021, From policy entrepreneurs to policy entrepreneurship: Actors and actions in public policy innovation. *Policy & Politics*, **49**(3), pp. 321–342.

Capano, G. and Howlett, M., 2009, Introduction: The determinants of policy change: Advancing the debate. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*, **11**(1), pp. 1–5.

Capano, G. and Howlett, M., 2021, Causal logics and mechanisms in policy design: How and why adopting a mechanistic perspective can improve policy design. *Public Policy and Administration*, **36**(2), pp. 141–162. doi:10.1177/0952076719827068

Crouch, C., 2005, Three meanings of complementarity. *Socioeconomic Review*, **3**(2), pp. 359–363. doi:10.1093/SER/mwi015

Crouch, C., 2010, Complementarity, in: G. Morgan, J. L. Campbell, C. Crouch, O. K. Pedersen, and R. Whitley (Eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Institutional Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 117–137.

Dahlstrom, C. and Lapuente, V., 2022, Comparative bureaucratic politics, *Annual Review of Political Science*, **25**(1), pp. 25.1–25.21.

Elder-Vass, D., 2010, *The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Emirbayer, M. and Mische, A., 1998, What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology*, **103**(4), pp. 962–1023.

Fletcher, A. J., 2017, Applying critical realism in qualitative research methodology meets method. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, **20**(2), pp. 181–194.

Fligstein, N. and McAdam, D., 2012, *A Theory of Fields* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Geva-May, I., Peters, G., and Muhleisen, J., 2021, *Institutions and Governance in Comparative Policy Analysis Studies* (London: Routledge).

Geva-May, I., 2002, Cultural theory: The neglected variable in the craft of policy analysis. *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, **4**(3), pp. 243–265.

Giddens, A., 1994, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press).

Gómez, I. E. A., 1994, Financial deregulation and prudent regulation: The case of Mexico during the 1990s. *Economía Mexicana. Nueva Época*, III, núm. 2, segundo semestre de 1994, pp. 379–411.

Gunder Frank, A., 1966, *The Development of Under-development* (Berkeley: University of California Press).

Hay, C., 2002, *Political Analysis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

Hay, C., 2004, Ideas, interests and institutions in the comparative political economy of great transformations. *Review of International Political Economy*, **11**(1), pp. 204–226. doi:10.1080/0969229042000179811

Hay, C., 2006, Political ontology, in: R. E. Goodin and C. Tilly (Eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 78–96.

Hay, C., 2011, Ideas and the construction of interests, in: D. Béland and R. H. Cox (Eds) *Ideas and Politics in Social Science Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 65–82.

Hinds, K. and Dickson, K., 2021, Realist synthesis: A critique and an alternative. *Journal of Critical Realism*, **20**(1), pp. 1–17. doi:10.1080/14767430.2020.1860425

Howlett, M., Ramesh, M., and Perl, A., 2020, *Studying Public Policy: Principles and Processes*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Jessop, B., 2001, Institutional re(turns) and the strategic – relational approach. *Environment and Planning A*, **33**(7), pp. 1213–1235. doi:10.1068/a32183

Johnson. T. and Urpelainen, J., 2014, International bureaucrats and the formation of intergovernmental organizations: Institutional design discretion sweetens the pot. *International Organization*, **68**, pp. 177–209.

Kingdon, J., 1995, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Harper Collins).

Mahoney, J. and Thelen, K. (Eds) 2010, *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power* (New York, NY: Cambridge Press).

McAnulla, S. D., 2006, Challenging the new interpretivist approach: Towards a critical realist alternative. *British Politics*, **1**(1), pp. 113–138. doi:10.1057/palgrave.bp.4200013

Merkel, W., Kollmorgen, R., and Wagener, H. (Eds), 2019, *The Handbook of Political, Social, and Economic Transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Mintrom, M., 2019, So you want to be a policy entrepreneur? *Policy Design and Practice*, **2**(4), pp. 307–323. doi:10.1080/25741292.2019.1675989

Morgan, G. C., John, L., Crouch, C., Pedersen, O. K., and Whitley, R., April 2010, *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Institutional Analysis* (Oxford University Press). doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199233762.003.0001

North, D. C., 1990, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press).

Parsons, 2007, *How to Map Arguments in Political Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Pawson, R., 2006, *Evidence-Based Policy: A Realist Perspective* (London: Sage).

Pawson, R. and Tilley, N., 1997, *Realistic Evaluation* (London: Sage).

Peters, G., 2019, Institutional theory in political science: The new institutionalism. Perspectives from Central and Eastern Europe. *Journal of Public Administration and Policy*, **12**(2), pp. 281–285.

Shearer, J. C., Abelson, J., Kouyate, B., Lavis, J. N., and Walt, G., 2016, Why do policies change? Institutions, interests, ideas and networks in three cases of policy reform, *Health Policy and Planning*, **31**, pp. 1200–1211.

Sil, R. and Katzenstein, P., 2010, Analytic eclecticism in the study of world politics: Reconfiguring problems and mechanisms across research traditions. *Perspectives on Politics*, **8**(2), pp. 411–431. doi:10.1017/S1537592710001179

Swinkels, M., 2020, How ideas matter in public policy: A review of concepts, mechanisms, and methods. *International Review of Public Policy*, **2**(3), pp. 281–316. doi:10.4000/irpp.1343

Tsoukas, H., 1994, What is management? An outline of a metatheory. *British Journal of Management*, **5**(4), pp. 289–301. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8551.1994.tb00080.x

Yan, B., Zhang, X., Wu, L., Zhu, H., and Chen, B., 2020, Why do countries respond differently to COVID-19? A comparative study of Sweden, China, France, and Japan. *American Review of Public Administration*, **50**(6–7), pp. 762–769.

Yek, C., Warner, S., Wiltz, J. L., Sun, J., Adjei, S., Mancera, A., Silk, B. J., Gundlapalli, A. V., Harris, A. M., Boehmer, T. K., and Kadri, S. S., 2022, Risk factors for severe COVID-19 outcomes among persons aged ≥18 years who completed a primary COVID-19 vaccination series — 465 health care facilities December 2020–October 2021. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, **71**(1), pp. 19–25. 7 January. doi:10.15585/mmwr.mm7101a4