

Demystifying Multidisciplinarity in Policy Studies: A Case for Sociological Engagement in Public Policy Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Although the multi-disciplinarity of public policy studies is often captured by the notion of “policy sciences,” the most influential approaches, research designs, and dominant empirical outputs primarily emerge from the disciplines of political science and economics. This has relegated other policy sciences to the periphery of public policy discourse. This study examines the role of sociology—one of the most underappreciated yet promising disciplines in generating society-relevant and society-sensitive insights for evidence-based policy processes. Using a systematic review and interpretivism, the study explores how sociology engages with public policy analysis across four major arenas: conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and empirical. Findings indicate that sociological engagement in public policy analysis offers a broader perspective than other policy sciences, which often prioritize economic efficiency or technological innovation. Sociology accounts for historical contexts, social inequalities, and lived experiences, placing the human element at the center of policy discourse. Conceptually, the study highlights sociology’s contributions through analytically influential tools such as public sociology and policy networks. Theoretically, it illustrates the relevance of major sociological perspectives—including functionalism, conflict theory, and feminism—in shaping public policy discourse. Methodologically, the study finds that sociological research designs, such as phenomenology, narrative research, and ethnography, provide the necessary nuance for structuring, designing, formulating, implementing, monitoring, evaluating, and diffusing public policies in an increasingly globalized world. Empirically, two case studies—the influence of sociologists in developing responsible research and innovation policy for synthetic biology in the United Kingdom and the role of Prof. Chaitanya Mishra in advancing social welfare policies in Nepal—illustrate how sociological perspectives simultaneously challenge and complement dominant policy framings. The findings reaffirm that sociology should not be viewed merely as a peripheral policy science but as a pragmatic tool for fostering pro-society policies that address economic and technological imperatives while upholding social justice, equity, and long-term societal welfare.

Keywords: Sociology, Multidisciplinarity, Public Policy Analysis, Sociological Engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Public Policy Analysis; A Complex Multi-Disciplinary Field?

From its origins as “policy sciences” in the United States in the 1950s (Lasswell, 1951a; 1951b; 1956), public policy was conceived as an inherently multi-disciplinary field. Lasswell (1971) envisioned the study of public policy as drawing insights from multiple disciplines to produce holistic, evidence-based solutions to societal problems. For students and scholars of public policy, understanding the distinct contributions of each discipline is crucial. A comprehensive approach to policy analysis necessitates an appreciation of how various academic fields shape policy processes—both in theoretical discourse and practical application. Ideally, each of the policy sciences are viewed as capable of contributing to public policy analysis. While political science emphasizes governance structures and power dynamics, economics focuses on resource allocation, and law provides the legal framework for policy implementation. Sociology, however, introduces a critical dimension by interrogating the social implications of policies, offering unique and indispensable insights.

Writing over two decades after Lasswell, Wayne Parsons (1995) reaffirmed the inherently multi-disciplinary nature of public policy analysis. He described the field as "rich in different approaches, academic disciplines, models (heuristic and causal), metaphors, and maps" (p. 64). However, rather than take multidisciplinary as given and actual, a debate has arisen as to what exactly it means in actual public policy analysis. This has led some scholars to argue that the multi-and-inter-disciplinary engagements in public policy have been excessively theorized, with limited impact on actual policy debates and substantive issues (Peters & Pierre, 2006). Peters and Pierre (2006) contend that political science continues to dominate the discipline, shaping its theoretical and methodological foundations. Similarly, Hupe & Hill (2006), in their extensive *Handbook of Public Policy Analysis*, acknowledge the dominance of political science and public administration but note that sustained efforts have been made toward realizing Lasswell's vision of "policy sciences." They argue that without genuine multi-disciplinary engagement, public policy analysis risks becoming conceptually narrow and methodologically rigid. Indeed, the defining characteristic of public policy studies lies in its complexity, differentiation, and capacity to integrate diverse academic perspectives. As Hupe and Hill (2006) observe, "the academic study of public policy has also been expanding to include a wider range of academic disciplines and approaches" (p. 1).

A critical examination of public policy literature reveals two distinct yet interdependent dichotomies. In the first dichotomy, we can distinguish between hyper-multidisciplinarians and optimistic skeptics. Hyper-multidisciplinarians, such as Lasswell and his contemporaries, view public policy as inherently multidisciplinary and advocate for a fully integrated field of policy science. In contrast, optimistic skeptics, such as Peters & Pierre (2006), do not entirely oppose multidisciplinary engagements in public policy but critically assess the challenges that hinder the realization of the Lasswellian ideal. Their skepticism stems from recognizing institutional, epistemological, and methodological barriers that complicate seamless multidisciplinary integration. In the second dichotomy, we can differentiate between theorists and analysts. Both hyper-multidisciplinarians and critical skeptics can be categorized as theorists, as they predominantly engage in conceptualizing the nature of public policy studies from political science and public administration perspectives. Their primary focus is on theorizing within the frameworks of public policy processes -itself only one of the paradigms in policy studies (see, for example, Lasswell, 1951a, 1951b, 1956; Peters & Pierre, 2006; Hupe & Hill, 2006). Analysts, on the other hand, do not only approach public policy primarily through a political science lens but are themselves products of multidisciplinary scholarship. Notable works in this category include Dunn (2012) and Gasper (2006). These works critically examine the contributions of political science and economics to public policy analysis, even at highly technical levels. For instance, Gasper (2006), in *Policy Evaluation: From Managerialism and Econocracy to a Governance Perspective*, highlights the risks associated with the increasing dominance of economic approaches in public policy evaluation. He argues that economics, particularly in policy evaluation, tends to replace governance-oriented concerns of political science with a more technocratic and economic approach, where ethical considerations are subordinated to efficiency metrics. This shift manifests through economic tools such as cost-benefit analysis and the logical framework approach, which prioritize forecasting, simulation, and profit-based rational choice over broader social and governance issues.

Dunn (2012), in his comprehensive work on policy analysis as a technical field, echoes similar concerns. In his chapter on policy monitoring and evaluation, he contends that the interaction between policy studies and economics has been asymmetrical, with economic interpretations of policy processes increasingly overshadowing the ethical and governance-focused dimensions championed by political science. He draws a sharp distinction between monitoring and evaluation, arguing that the essence of evaluation—ethical analysis of policy impacts—has been gradually displaced by profit-oriented assumptions embedded in criteria such as effectiveness, efficiency, responsiveness, sustainability, among others. As a result, evaluation has been reduced to a process of generating empirical evidence on policy success or failure, a function that aligns more with monitoring rather than with its original ethical and analytical purpose.

In a context where multidisciplinary is reduced to a contest of counter-influence—between political science's governance paradigms and economics' emphasis on managerialism and profit-based rationalizations of what constitutes good policy and impactful policy outcomes—the role of other disciplines, particularly those capable of revolutionizing the ethics- and society-oriented dimensions of policy analysis, such as sociology, remains uncertain. It is, therefore, crucial for public policy scholars to demystify multidisciplinary by acknowledging and accounting for the specific contributions of disciplines that have been marginalized in public policy analysis,

such as sociology. This paper addresses this gap by examining sociology's engagements with public policy analysis across four key dimensions: conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and empirical.

More broadly, the influence of different disciplines extends beyond scholarly debates on how best to understand public policy; it also shapes the substantive issues that each discipline brings to the forefront. In this regard, Thibodeaux (2015) asserts that *"any unidimensional analysis of policy should be somewhat suspect, although each scholar will remain a prisoner of his or her academic training"* (p. 6). Structurally, this paper is divided into three main sections. The first section introduces and critically examines the key debates in relevant literature, highlighting the complexities surrounding the notion of multidisciplinary in public policy studies. This section also includes the problem statement. The second section outlines the research methodology, while the third presents the findings and discussion, organized around the four key analytical dimensions: conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and empirical.

Problem Statement

This study reviewed to analytically appraise the contribution of sociology in and with public policy analysis – which itself occurs across the policy continuum, from policy structuring to succession and or termination (Dunn, 2012). The central argument is that public policy analysis is inherently multidisciplinary, drawing from disciplines such as political science, economics, sociology, law, public administration, and anthropology, among others (Depres, 1991). However, literature shows that multi-disciplinary is reductionist concept implying the struggles between political science and economics to influence each other in researching and theorizing the policy processes. Consequently, there remains a significant gap in the engagements between sociology and public policy studies often leading to fragmented policy analyses that overlook the complex interplay between technical, econocratic, and social dimensions of policymaking, implementation and evaluation. This lack of integration serves to limit the capacity of policymakers to craft holistic, inclusive, and effective public policies that address both structural and societal concerns. This despite sociology's capacity to bridge the gap between technical policy formulations and societal needs. Consequently, the study sought to conceptually, theoretically, methodically, and empirically appraise the relevance of sociological insights in public policy analysis. It therefore advocates for a greater appreciation of sociology's role in shaping public policy by ensuring that policies are not only technically and economically sound but also socially responsible and just. The study seeks to answer the following questions.

What are the conceptual, theoretical, and empirical contributions of sociology to public policy analysis?

How have sociologists and sociological perspectives influenced public policy, particularly in cases involving disruptive policy discourses?

What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of sociologists engaged in public policy processes, and how can these insights inform interdisciplinary policy analysis?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology adopted in the study involved collecting secondary data using Google Scholar and Sci-Hub platforms. The downloads were then used to create a database from which to base the paper's arguments. Using these web-searches, the researcher used key words such as sociology, public policy, sociological engagement, relationship between Sociology and public policy, multi-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary. The data was then analyzed through thematic content analysis and presented in an interpretive manner.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

For analytic reasons, sociology's contributions to public policy were categorized into conceptual, theoretical, methodical and empirical. Conceptually, the field of sociology has availed certain terminologies that have since become a core part of policy analysis at different stages. Theoretically, the study of public policy, and political science has borrowed very heavily from mainstream and alternative approaches to understanding sociological objectives of study. Methodically, sociology has influenced policy research through its traditionally-

sociologically leaning research designs such ethnographic studies, phenomenology, and narrative research. Empirically, evidence, though scattered suffice that sociology has had impacts on substantive policy issues across multiple scales. The following pages will briefly illuminate on these three categories of sociology's engagements with public policy analysis.

Conceptual Contributions

There many concepts in sociology that have fundamentally informed public policy studies. This paper uses to concepts to underscore sociology's significance in enriching public policy analysis. One of the most important concepts that structure sociologists' contributions to public policy debates is '*public sociology*'. According Ghimire (n.d), public sociology connotes that the different members of the publics and subsequently their interactions are a critical subject of study for sociologists. This contention was demonstrated by the 2004 American Sociological Association's (ASA) slogan: 'sociology and the public agenda' (*Ibid*, p. 44). Hence, sociologists have played a critical role in researching and arguing that the public and their social interactions cannot be disconnected from public policy processes. They have bargained very strongly that public interests must permeate policy making processes and those non-social aspects of public policies must be seen from a public sociology perspective, that is, that everything public policy is targeted at the human beings who are not machines but rather social animals (Weiss, 1993; Burawoy, 2007). Ghimire (n.d) adds that the scope of the concept public policy is not static but increasingly changing. For example, he makes the assertion that before long, public sociology was focused on the domestic sphere, actors, processes and issues but recently, scope has been expanded to cover extra-territorial actors such as trans-national and global actor and their influence in public policy processes, be it policy formulation implementation of termination, using a number of tools including technology-facilitated construction of transnational publics. Additionally, public sociology according to Ghimire (n.d) was over focused on policy formulation but recently has covered policy implementation, calling on multiple policy actors to partake of the implementation process using hybrid models – top-down, bottom-up. This means that sociologists are now researching and advising actors on the policy implementation problematics using sociological tools of communication such as policy publics.

The second key conceptual contribution to public policy processes and studies has been the concept of *networks* and *networks analysis* (see e.g., Kasera & Owiso, 2021 for its applicability in cross-border security governance policy context). Dubois (2012) posits that in the study of the production and implementation of public policies, analysis in terms of networks is no doubt the approach most frequently adopted. He traces the origins of the concept in sociological research largely in the 1970s in the USA and Great Britain and contends that the concept of networks as applied to public policy analysis has given rise to new descriptive and prescriptive conceptual tools which have all enhanced conceptual clarity in public policy analysis. Such concepts trace their origins in networks research in sociological work including the concept of the *policy community*, 'which designates the set of actors, of varying status – politicians, civil servants, experts, representatives of interest groups, etc., who interact in defining a policy' (Dubioi, 2012, p. 2). Subsequently, the concept of the *issue network* has come to designate more specifically the network formed around the resolution of a certain type of problem (Galès & Thatcher, 1995).

According to Dubois (2012) the initial intention of the concept networks in public policy studies or in policy sociology was very simple. Essentially implies that state or governmental actors are not the only actors who determine the orientations of policy processes. The concept implies that important and unavoidable is the need to integrate into the analysis, their relations with private actors, essentially interest groups who, as is well known, for example as commonplace in the Anglo-American political systems of *lobbying* but also widely spread across the globe. Hence, it is interesting that the now celebrated concept of governance -the core goal for public policy-borrows largely from sociology of network analysis.¹

Added to the sub-concepts of policy community, issues network and lobbying, Dubois (2012) adds Cerny's (2001) concept of iron triangle², Bergeron *et. al.* (1998) concept of advocacy coalitions and Haas's (1992)

¹ As applied in sociology's sub-field of sociology of public policy.

² Cerny (2001) contends that an iron triangle framework see public policy making and other processes as in three sided policy process-politicians, bureaucrats and interest groups.

concept of epistemic community. Making reference to the USA system, he argues that Members of the specialist Congressional committees, civil servants in the relevant federal agencies and the corresponding interest groups are linked in *iron triangles*. The concept of iron triangles implies the traditional formations or actorship in public policy in the sense of *government* as opposed to the new innovation of governance. Hence policy triangle refers to a policy network whereby the government takes the lead in the process as the ‘governing actor’³. Dubois then conceives advocacy coalitions as the next layer of networks following after iron triangle perceiving them as ‘the actors in heterogeneous positions brought together by a problem of which they share a common vision form *advocacy coalitions* (p. 2).

Finally, the most hybrid layer of networks according to Dubois is what has been referred to as epistemic community. He asserts in this regard that the experts, civil servants, politicians and other promoters of public policies who have the same ways of thinking and analyzing make up an *epistemic community*. Hence, an epistemic community as a sub-concept of the networks as applied in public policy contains three main contentions: a) the community is inherently transnational, inter-national and global in scale, b) actors are governmental, non-governmental and institutional and individuals, b) what brings the members of the community together is the pursuit for a common goal which is possible when policies are harmonized and interests compromised.

In this context, the concept epistemic communities connotes very closely Cerny’s (2001) concept of *Golden Pentangles*”⁴. A concept which is very directly relevant to what Hupe & Hill (2006) calls the *public of multiple layers of governance*. A movement from government policy networks or Iron Triangles where the government takes the lead and plays the lead ‘acting actor’ (*Ibid*, p. 22) to *Governance* where the governing actor is not very clear. This is perhaps what the complex independent theorists termed the *multiple channels of action* in a globalized world (see, Keohane & Nye, 2012). Overall, the network research which is strongly traceable from sociology has provided policy analysis with a requisite analytical framework upon which to unpack and deepen understanding of the underlying interactions between actors in public policy processes.

A third concept common in sociological work and which has fundamentally informed public policy analysis is the concept of *concrete action systems*. The concept was formalized by Crozier & Friedberg (1981)⁵ and has since occupied a core place in the sociology of organizations (see, Dubois, 2012, p. 3). Appraising the utility of this concept in public policy as a field of study, Dupuy & Thoenig, 1983 and Grémion (1976) aver that by drawing attention to the real relations between actors and so moving beyond the juridical analysis of formal organizations, it has shed light, in particular, on the modes of functioning of bureaucracies, the management of reforms and the power games behind local policies. Three limitations are however highlighted about the utility of the concept in public policy. Firstly, it thus presents a depoliticized vision of public intervention, detached from the electoral game and more generally from relations of political exchange, secondly, it postulates a non-hierarchization of action systems which make it impossible to account for the phenomena of the concentration of powers, lastly, it lies in the fact that the strategic and interactionist vision prevalent in the concept of the action system leads to neglect of the symbolic dimension of the exercise of power and therefore of the conduct of policies’ (Dubois, 2012, p. 4).

Theoretical Significance

Sociology is concerned with social interactions and how such processes occur, when they can occur and under what circumstances and so on. To systematically study social interactions, sociologists have agreed on certain general organizing frameworks to define major variables to study in sociological studies. These are what can be called sociological theories. Three major/mainstream theories cut-across in major university text-books of sociology (e.g., Mills, 2000; Dukheim, 2013; Berger, 1967; Tomley, 2019; Ferris, 2020): functionalism, social interaction, and conflict theory. Lately, other, so-called alternative approaches have also emerged have been

³ See e.g., Hupe & Hill (2006, p.22-28) for a compressive exposition of this proposition.

⁴ According to Cerny (2001) as read by Ghimire (n.d) golden pentangles represent highly stylized fashion of a five sided process along the three-sided iron triangles. One of the added two actors are international as well as transnational actors like IMF, World Bank, WTO, etc. and another is cross-cutting structural factors like cross-border nongovernmental structures and actors, from transnational markets to civil society.

⁵ See Crozier & Friedberg (1981). Crozier M. and Friedberg E., 1981. *Actors and Systems, the Politics of Collective Action*. Chicago; Chicago University Press. For a wonderful analysis, utility and limitations of this concept.

properly applied in sociological studies to understand old and new research domains in sociology. These include: feminism, social constructivism, green theory and the like.

Sociology has particular interests with institutions. From the times Durkheim to Parsons to modern day theorists and researchers, sociology has had as its unit of analysis, various institutions that structure social interactions within a given society in space and time (see, Depres (1991; Lascoumes & Gales, 2007; Thibodeaux, 2015). A fundamental institution has been the family. This section, appreciates the role of two mainstream sociological theories: functionalism and conflict theory and one alternative approach: feminism in informing the public policies concerned with the institution of the family. This is presented in the paragraphs that follow.

Sociological Perspectives influence ideas about social policies. Such views are often structured as occurring in a pendulum with the New Right on one extreme and who believe in policies to support the traditional nuclear family to Radical Feminists on the other extreme, and some of whom argue for the abolition of the nuclear family.

Functionalists see society as built on harmony and consensus (shared values), and free from conflicts. They see the state as acting in the interests of society as a whole and its social policies as being for the good of all. Functionalists see policies as helping families to perform their functions more effectively and making life better for their members. For example, Fletcher (1966) argues that the introduction of health, education and housing policies in the years since the industrial revolution has gradually led to the development of a welfare state that supports the family in performing its functions more effectively. Such arguments can be supported with facts such as the government support of education, health, and the social protection of the vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the persons with disability (PWD), and people facing acute hunger situations and so on. For example, in Kenya since 2003 when late President Mwai Kibaki came to power, the Government embarked on free primary education and subsidized secondary education something that has had tremendous benefits to the institution of the family since students from humble backgrounds have had the chance to get educated and take up responsibilities for the members of their families, as well as contribute to national development processes through taxation, innovation, or remittances if they get a chance to work outside Kenya. The movement towards universal access to health has also had very good benefits of the family as poor families can seek medication in near health centers. Though this is still facing challenges in Kenya (see, the Parliamentary Budget Office of Kenya [PBO], 2018; 2019), it is a step in a worthy direction. For critics around functionalist oriented policies on the family, two have been pointed out by conflict theorists. First, functionalism assumes that all family members will benefit of the social welfare programs which is not the case and secondly that it assumes that there is a 'march of progress with social policies, gradually making life better, which is a view (see, Donzelot, 1977).

A second major theory is the conflict theory. Several writers use the assumptions of a conflict theory to provide an alternative view to functionalism and hence inform public policies around the family institution. I will use Donzelot (1977) to show what conflict theory has to offer to public policies concerning the family. Donzelot (1977) argues that society is in conflict and does not really share values and work toward a common goal albeit in different parts and roles as is the argument in functionalism. Hence he sees policy as a form of state power and control over families. He applies Foucault's (1976) concept of surveillance (observing and monitoring). Foucault sees power not just as something held by the government or the state, but as diffused (spread) throughout society and found within all relationships. In particular, Foucault sees professionals such as doctors and social workers as exercising power over their clients by using their expert knowledge to turn them into 'cases' to be dealt with.

Donzelot applies these ideas to the family. He is interested in how professionals carry out surveillance of families. He argues that social workers, health visitors and doctors use their knowledge to control and change families. Donzelot calls this 'the policing of families'. Surveillance is not targeted equally at all social classes. Poor families are much more likely to be seen as 'problem families' and as the causes of crime and anti-social behaviour. These are the families that professionals target for 'improvement'. For example, the state may seek to control and regulate family life by imposing compulsory Parenting Orders through the courts. Parents of young offenders, truants or badly behaved children may be forced to attend parenting classes to learn the 'correct' way to bring up children.

Donzelot rejects the Functionalists' march of progress view that social policy and the professionals who carry it out have created a better society. Instead he sees social policy as oppressing certain types of families. By focusing on the micro level of how the 'caring professions' act as agents of social control through the surveillance of families, Donzelot shows the importance of professional knowledge as a form of power and control. However, Marxists and Feminists criticize Donzelot for failing to identify clearly who benefits from such policies of surveillance. Marxists argue that social policies generally operate in the interests of the capitalist class, while Feminists argue men are the beneficiaries.

The criticisms notwithstanding, conflict theory has had fundamental impact not just in public policies but also in the politicking especially in low-resources regions and countries. For example, the hustlers' verses dynasties campaign framework that underpinned 2022 Kenya's elections is conflict theory in practice. President Ruto, then deputy president tagged Raila, his opponent as coming from one of the dynastic families in Kenya, and on that ground was unable to pursue a national development would be pro-hustlers families and would champion for the development and continued exploitation of the poor by the reach or dynasties. Beyond just politicking, President Ruto has finally implemented as a national policy the Hustler's Fund promise, arguing that it was a framework to uplift the majority of poor youths and families from poverty.

Feminism is one of the most applied alternative theories to understanding sociological phenomena. However, the notion of feminism has recently been exposed to criticism with most feminist writers arguing that it does connote, as previously, an agreement among and between feminists about the development program befitting both men and women, but rather that it connotes many theories or world views altogether. Hence, key exponents like Judith (1999) finds the notion of Feminisms more applicable than the former. Within the feminisms she set out a number of feminist theories/perspectives key of which [and which I use in this paper] is Liberal Feminism. Liberal Feminists argue that that changes such as the equal pay act and increasingly generous maternity leave and pay are sufficient to bring about gender equality. In the USA, the following social policies have led to greater gender equality: The divorce act of 1969 gave women the right to divorce on an equal footing to men – which led to a spike in the divorce rate. The equal pay act of 1972 was an important step towards women's independence from men. Increasingly generous maternity cover and pay made it easier for women to have children and then return to work.

In Kenya, Liberal Feminist perspectives have also permeated the spheres of government and policy making from within and without and this has witnessed a number of progressive policies and laws being implemented. These include policies on female genital mutilation, paternal leaves, gender and development policy, the national policy on child labor, child trafficking, education entry behavior waivers for ASAL girls, the national and county government's policies and acts on sexual and gender-based violence and so on.

Methodical Contributions

Sociology has made profound methodological contributions to public policy research, particularly through its traditional signature qualitative approach research designs such as ethnography, narrative research, and phenomenology (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These sociologically-sensitive designs have fundamentally transformed policy research through their emergence as essential tools in policy analysis by complementing the dominant positivist and post-positivist quantitatively-leaning designs and methods preferred in other policy sciences such as political science (especially as practiced in North America) and economics. While quantitative designs emphasize statistical generalizability of policy problems, choices and decisions, qualitative approaches enable a deeper understanding of policy impacts, uncovering the lived experiences, cultural contexts, and power dynamics shaping policy outcomes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The use of these sociological research designs in policy research has allowed scholars to move beyond mere numerical data to capture the complexities and nuances of how policies are perceived, implemented, and experienced by different societal groups.

Ethnography, one of the most established methodologies in sociology, has played a critical role in policy research by offering immersive, long-term insights into policy implementation and social change. Ethnographers embed themselves in communities to observe and document real-world interactions, revealing discrepancies between policy intentions and their on-the-ground effects. For example, Auyero (2012) conducted an ethnographic study on welfare policies in Argentina, exposing how bureaucratic inefficiencies and structural violence shape the

lived experiences of welfare recipients. Similarly, Brayne (2014) used ethnographic research to examine predictive policing in the United States, demonstrating how algorithm-driven policing disproportionately targets marginalized communities, reinforcing existing social inequalities. These findings, and more, provide policymakers with nuanced yet breakthrough new/non-conventionally-conforming perspectives that cannot be captured through surveys or economic modeling alone, thus highlighting the indispensable role of ethnography in crafting socially responsive policies.

Narrative research has also significantly influenced public policy by focusing on the personal and collective experiences of individuals affected by policies (Frost & Ouellette, 2011; Jones & McBeth, 2010; Pierce, Smith-Walter & Peterson, 2014; Roe, 1994; Shanahan, McBeth & Hathaway, 2011). Through storytelling and personal accounts, narrative research helps policymakers understand how policies shape identity, behavior, and public perceptions and vice versa (Shanahan, McBeth & Hathaway, 2011). Riessman (2008) highlights the value of narrative research in healthcare policy, where patient narratives provide rich insights into the challenges of accessing medical care and the emotional toll of navigating complex health systems. In social welfare policy, Fraser & Gordon (1994) used narrative analysis to examine how the discourse around welfare recipients influences policy decisions, often reinforcing negative stereotypes rather than addressing structural barriers. By capturing the voices of policy beneficiaries and stakeholders, narrative research can foster a more inclusive policy-making process that accounts for diverse perspectives and lived realities.

Lastly, phenomenology, which focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences, has become a valuable methodological tool in evaluating the subjective impacts of policy (Thani, 2012; Aini, 2024; Al-Habil, 2011; Cárdenas et al., 2022). Unlike traditional survey-based research, phenomenological studies delve into how individuals internalize and interpret policy interventions, how policy communities practice policy analysis (Ozturk-Calikoglu & Cekic, 2021), making sense of innovative concepts such as “policy entrepreneurs” and revealing new nuances useful for problematizing policy processes (Ohemeng & Grant, 2023). Van Manen (2016) argues that phenomenology helps uncover the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of policy impacts that are often overlooked in quantitative studies. In the field of education policy, phenomenological research has been used to examine the experiences of marginalized students in standardized testing regimes, revealing the stress and alienation that rigid assessment structures create (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Similarly, in migration policy, studies using phenomenological approaches have highlighted the emotional toll of restrictive immigration laws on refugee communities, leading to policy recommendations that prioritize mental health support and social integration (Becker, 2014).

Summarily, incorporating ethnography, narrative research, and phenomenology into public policy analysis, sociology expands the epistemological foundations of policy research. These largely sociological design toolkits can help ensure that policy decisions are informed by both measurable trends and the lived realities of affected communities. In doing so, sociological methods challenge the dominance of quantitative approaches, advocating for a more holistic understanding of policy processes that includes diverse voices, experiences, and socio-cultural contexts.

Empirical Significance

Sociology and sociologists have had serious impact on varied substantive policy issues. The purpose of this section is not to enumerate the roles and contribution so sociology and sociologists in public policy processes, but to show that sociology, like other social sciences, brings a different but critical vision to public policy discussions, which often harmonize technical framings of public policy with fairer societal notions. Two examples are used to back this assertion.

Sociologists and the quest for a responsible research and innovation synthetic biology policy in the United Kingdom

In the first phase, sociologists and sociological perspectives have had massive impact on in social regulation of synthetic biology in the United Kingdom. Marris & Calvert (2018) documents the processes of bargaining for a responsible research and innovation synthetic biology roadmap in the UK. Both scholars being renowned sociologists were brought on board to see into it that the visions of the hard core researchers (the

biotechnologists) were balanced by societal needs. In their writing documenting the process and their involvement in the bargaining for a synthetic biology policy which would balance in terms of intensions and regulated in terms of its negative social impacts such as loss of jobs, environmental diversity, health and safety and bio-terrorism (for very comprehensive discussion on the societal perspectives of synthetic biology, see, e.g., Trump, 2017). Marris & Calvert (2018) report that the role of social scientists, especially sociologists in the processes of formulating and implementing public policies especially those around highly disruptive technologies such as synthetic biology, nanotechnology and artificial intelligence cannot be gainsaid. Their argument that natural scientists are so much naturally accustomed to framing emerging technologies in good light, only highlighting the enormous ‘promises’ they portend to the society when adopted and implemented. However, social scientists, especially those operating within the sociology’s sub-field of science and society studies (SSS) work to ensure that the ‘societal vision’ (*Ibid*, p. 9) of emerging technologies are brought to the fore and that public policies take cognizance of the underlying current and anticipated social issues that the technologies may portend.

The scholars report that during the processes of bargaining for the social aspects of the technology which were to go for into 2016 UK Synthetic Biology, there was open divergence between their views as sociologists and the views of the biotechnologists with biotechnologists framing the technology as very good for the economy of the UK and needing urgent adoption across all value chains in the UK. On their part, the scholars report that they hard to provide an alternative vision, the societal vision, and ensure that the document properly touched on ‘public purpose’ (Jayanti, 2020) notions. It was in this bargaining for the content that policy document that they suggested the concept of responsible research and innovation which provided for the limitations among researchers/biotechnologists and laid out frameworks for curtailing anticipated risks such as on environmental, health, biodiversity, bio-war and so on.

Hence, this is a key contribution of sociology. It is a practical contribution of the field to one of the most lucrative areas of research and development (R&D) as well as Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) largely in the developed world (see, Jayanti, 2020; Bar-Yam, Byers-Corbin, Casagrande, Eichler, Lin, A., Oesterreiche et al., 2012), but the developing countries have also exhibited constant public discourses including research on this area of STI (Ning, Aggarwal, Poh, et al., 2018; ISAAA AfriCentre, 2017).

The role of Prof. Mishra in propagating social welfare state in Nepal

Increased sociological engagement in public policy processes has witnessed continued involvement of key sociologists in critical dockets within governments. In the developing countries, this involvement has in certain cases revolutionized how social policy is perceived and implemented. This sub-section will use the case of Nepal and the involvement of Prof. Mishra in the propagation of social welfare state in that country.

Ghimire (n.d) traces the origins of sociology in Nepal when he argues reports that the institutional development of sociology started in Nepal from 1981 with establishment of the Department of Sociology and anthropology in Tribhuvan University. He adds that since then, the sociological engagement has been increasing in public policy making process particularly through the appointment of key sociologists to critical social welfare dockets. In 2004 renowned sociologist of Nepal, Chaitanya Mishra was appointed as a member of National Planning Commission (NPC). During his tenure, he contributed in making policy of providing annual grants to all village development committees (VDCs) of Nepal under “*Afnogaun afai banau*” program (see Ghimire, n.d). Similarly, the concept of social security allowance was started by him legally for the first time (*Ibid*). Mishra was key in taking up seriously such social protection endeavors, in two areas of social policies which have been treated by the government and his predecessors as not important policies since the onset of liberal politics and economics in 1990 which also witnessed the 1990 political movement is Nepal (*Ibid*) taken as most important policies after the political movement of 1990. This makes clear about the importance of sociological engagement in policy making process and showcases the alternative that public policy makers with sociological training bring to the table – a socialist, welfarist dimension of public policy making.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study highlight the significant conceptual, theoretical, methodological and empirical contributions of sociology to public policy analysis. Conceptually, particularly through the concepts of public

sociology, network analysis, and concrete action systems. These concepts have enriched policy discourse by providing frameworks for understanding the interplay between social actors and public policy processes.

The concept of public sociology underscores the importance of public interests in policy processes. Findings suggest that sociologists, by nature of their society-leaning, society-sensitive training, have consistently advocated for integrating public concerns into policymaking. This aligns with the argument that policies should be viewed through a public sociology lens, emphasizing the social nature of policy beneficiaries (Weiss, 1993; Burawoy, 2007). Additionally, as Ghimire (n.d) points out, public sociology has evolved to include transnational actors and policy implementation, expanding its relevance in global policy discourse. This shift indicates that sociology's engagement in policy research is becoming more dynamic, responding to the complexities of governance beyond domestic boundaries.

Network analysis further enhances policy studies by demonstrating that policy actors extend beyond public officials to include private actors, interest groups, and international stakeholders. Findings reveal that sociological research has contributed critical concepts such as policy communities, issue networks, iron triangles, and epistemic communities (Dubois, 2012; Cerny, 2001). These findings confirm that policy formation and implementation are not solely determined by governments but by a web of actors influencing policy direction. This underscores the relevance of sociological perspectives in understanding governance as a multi-layered and interactive process rather than a linear government-led approach. The findings also highlight the relevance of the concept of concrete action systems, which shifts focus from formal organizational structures to actual interactions among policy actors. This has proven particularly useful in analyzing bureaucratic functions and local policy management (Dupuy & Thoenig, 1983; Grémion, 1976). However, limitations such as depoliticization of public intervention and neglect of power concentration indicate that while this concept is useful, it requires integration with broader political analyses for comprehensive policy studies.

Theoretically, the findings indicate that sociological theories provide crucial analytical lenses for understanding the formulation and impact of social policies related to the family. Functionalism, conflict theory, and feminism have been particularly influential in shaping policy discourse on family structures and welfare programs. Functionalist perspectives highlight the role of social policies in enhancing family functions. The study finds that policies on education, healthcare, and social welfare support the family unit, as argued by Fletcher (1966). This aligns with the Kenyan case, where initiatives like free primary education and universal healthcare have had positive impacts on families, promoting socioeconomic mobility. However, the findings also validate critiques that functionalist approaches assume all family members benefit equally from policies, ignoring inequalities (Donzelot, 1977).

Conflict theory presents an alternative view, emphasizing power dynamics in policymaking. The findings illustrate how policies can serve as tools of state control, particularly in marginalized communities (Foucault, 1976; Donzelot, 1977). The study finds that surveillance mechanisms in family-related policies often disproportionately target poor households, reinforcing social stratification. This perspective is particularly relevant in understanding Kenya's political landscape, where economic disparities were instrumentalized in the 2022 elections through the 'hustlers vs. dynasties' narrative. The subsequent implementation of the Hustler's Fund exemplifies how conflict theory manifests in policy framing and public discourse.

Feminist theories, particularly liberal feminism, provide insights into the gendered dimensions of family policies. Findings indicate that policies promoting gender equality, such as divorce laws and equal pay regulations, have transformed family structures and enhanced women's autonomy. However, as contemporary feminist scholars argue, feminism is not monolithic, and policies must consider diverse feminist perspectives to address intersectional inequalities effectively (Judith, 1999).

Empirically, the study findings show that Sociology's contributions to public policy analysis extend beyond data collection and statistical modeling; they provide a critical lens through which policymakers can evaluate the underlying social structures, power dynamics, and unintended consequences of policy interventions. Unlike purely technical approaches that often emphasize economic efficiency or technological innovation, sociological inquiry introduces a broader perspective that accounts for historical contexts, social inequalities, and lived

experiences. This ability to contextualize policy within social realities ensures that public policies are not only technically sound but also socially just and practically implementable.

For instance, the case of synthetic biology policy in the UK illustrates sociology's unique contribution to balancing technological optimism with societal concerns. While biotechnologists framed synthetic biology as an economic and scientific breakthrough, sociologists like Marris and Calvert (2018) critically assessed its broader implications, such as labor market disruptions, environmental risks, and ethical concerns. Their role was not merely to present empirical data but to introduce a counter-narrative that questioned the unchecked adoption of new technologies without considering their social ramifications. This reflects a key analytical function of sociology in policy analysis—challenging dominant policy framings and advocating for a more holistic, precautionary approach to innovation governance.

Similarly, the involvement of Prof. Chaitanya Mishra in Nepal's National Planning Commission highlights sociology's capacity to reshape policy discourse in favor of social welfare. Mishra's advocacy for village grants and social security allowances was not a technical recommendation based on fiscal feasibility alone but an intervention grounded in sociological assessments of social vulnerability, historical neglect of welfare policies, and the need for state intervention in economic redistribution. His contributions demonstrate how sociologists can leverage empirical research to challenge neoliberal policy orientations that prioritize market efficiency over social protection. This case reinforces the argument that sociology's role in public policy is not limited to providing empirical findings but extends to reinterpreting policy priorities and advocating for alternative governance models.

Methodologically, we see that there is a huge value addition that emerge from policy research that pays keen attention to sociologically-leaning research designs, especially phenomenology, narrative research, ethnography. The wide range of applicability of these designs to study issues across policy problems, politics and policy solutions showcase the increasing influence of sociology on the methodological front.

Through these examples, it becomes clear that sociology does not merely inform policy with empirical data but also shapes the very frameworks through which policy problems are defined and addressed. By questioning assumptions, highlighting marginalized perspectives, and promoting inclusive policy designs, sociological analysis serves as a critical counterweight to purely technocratic decision-making. This underscores the discipline's enduring relevance in ensuring that public policies are not only evidence-based but also socially responsible and ethically grounded.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that sociology offers indispensable conceptual, theoretical and methodological tools for public policy analysis. Empirically, case studies of sociological engagements like the UK's synthetic biology strategy study, reveal that sociology can have real impact on the public when properly engaged with public policy analysis. These insights affirm the necessity of integrating sociological perspectives in policy research to ensure policies are socially responsive, inclusive, and reflective of complex societal interactions.

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Author Contribution

OAK conceived, researched, wrote, revised and submitted the article.

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