

The Policy-Theory Relationship

Yannis A. Stivachtis^{1*}

¹Yannis A. Stivachtis, Associate Professor, International Studies Program, Virginia Tech, USA

The relevance of knowledge to practice has always been fundamental in the examination of the utility of the university to the society in which it is embedded. As a result, politicians as well as the general public wish to know whether knowledge produced in a university setting can be used to promote the goals or serve the needs of the society broadly defined. Central to this concern is the relationship between theory and policy.

One of the main goals of the Journal of Political Science and Public Affairs (JPSPA) is to provide a forum where scholarship meets the needs of practitioners. Consequently, this inaugural editorial will seek to address the theory-policy relationship. Although its focus will be on International Relations, which constitutes my own specialization, similar or even identical concerns can be raised for the field of Political Science as a whole.

Christopher Hill outlines five noteworthy questions about the relationship between policy-making and scholarship. First, to what extent do policy-makers and practitioners define and approach problems in the similar ways? In other words, do theorists and policy-makers in speak the same language? Do they frame questions in the same terms and apply the same importance to the same aspects of debates?

Second, how balanced is the relationship between theorists and practitioners? Are policy-makers taking more information and direction from epistemic sources, or is it the other way around? Do theorists look to issues of implementation to influence their academic work more than practitioners look to theorists? This is an important question when we begin to think about the ways in which we can strengthen and redefine the relationship between the two realms.

Third, what relationship does theory have to power? The work of philosopher Michel Foucault focuses largely on this question. Ultimately, he argues that theory implicates power in many ways. For example, there is a lot of power in being able to explain how the world works, especially when it comes to determining how state actors view their relationship to the rest of the international community. International Relations, as a subfield of Political Science, theorize a lot about war which constitutes one of the greatest tests of power. Thus, we cannot discuss International Relations theory without an emphasis on the relationship between power and knowledge.

Fourth, do academics focus too much on the actions of politicians? Should we always be looking at what politicians or policy-makers are doing to frame research questions, or aspects of scholarly debate? While contemporary events are important, and political decisions are inevitably foundational to Political Science, there is the danger of not leaving enough room for the theorist to govern their own area of research. With so much emphasis on the practices of politicians, what new theories can academics put their energy into? The lesson of this question, then, is that as theorists we should be concerned with the questions what are posed in a scholarly dimension, rather than simply responding to (either legitimizing or condemning) the actions of politicians. Political scientists, in other words, must come up with their own ideas.

Finally, Hill asks how we can effectively translate academic ideas

into the world of policy and practice. While he notes the importance of maintaining academic autonomy and not overly focusing on the actions of politicians, the work of academics would be in vain if it was not somehow used to implement policy or affect society somehow. As previously discussed, there is no inherent divide between the worlds of policy and theory. It follows, then, that there will be a transfer of knowledge between the two realms. The question is how to best do this, while resisting the conflation of the policy and theory. In relation to this question, the role of the think-tank is often raised. Think tanks are frequently seen as a median or a hybrid of the two worlds of theory and policy. The types of individuals who work in think tanks are often a mixture of academics and policy analysts. One the one hand, this is a good space for the translation of theory into the language of policy makers. Yet, there is often criticism of think tanks, from both sides, for the overall inability to complete the difficult task of navigating between theory and practice.

These five questions give rise to three general dilemmas of International Relations Theory. Acknowledging the difficulties in the job of the International Relations theorist to comment on current affairs, should International Relations as a discipline focus more on the historical aspect of the international system or the contemporary aspects? If we look at the majority of work and research being completed in the field of International Relations, it focuses on events of the twentieth century, with a heavy emphasis on the post-WWII world. Yet, there were interactions between states and civilizations long before 1945. Academics in International Relations, in general, tend to focus too much on recent or contemporary events, rather than further theorizing about the past. An historical aspect would allow the theorist to separate him/herself from the realm of the practitioner, to distinguish the work done a bit more. This would also alleviate the problem of publishing research on current affairs only to see it be outdated by the time it becomes mass-produced.

This dilemma is partly born out of the fact that International Relations is a relatively young field of study, especially in comparison to fields like history or political science, which have been institutionalized for much longer. International Relations emerged as an independent field of study after the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Thus, after the First World War, academics began to look at the way in which the international system of states interacted and how decisions were made in the anarchic system. International Relations is an applied social science, and so it has from the very beginning had an emphasis on the integration of theory and practice.

***Corresponding author:** Yannis A. Stivachtis, Associate Professor, International Studies Program, Virginia Tech, USA, E-mail: ystivach@vt.edu

Received November 29, 2012; **Accepted** December 04, 2012; **Published** December 07, 2012

Citation: Stivachtis YA (2013) The Policy-Theory Relationship. J Political Sciences & Public Affairs 1:e101. doi:10.4172/2332-0761.1000e101

Copyright: © 2013 Stivachtis YA. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Moreover, the relationship between the developments of international politics and the university deepened after World War II, when we really began to see an emphasis on the theory of the balance of power emerge in theoretical discourses and debates. This was greatly influenced by the outcome of the war, namely the observation that a certain degree of balance of power was restored in Europe after decades of wars and the delicate interwar period. This dominance of realism in the university and in scholarly debates shows the extent to which current affairs affects the type of theory that is produced.

Increasingly, academia is characterized by scholars being experts in an area of current affairs rather than in historical questions. For example, European Studies is a growing and increasingly important subfield of International Relations in which academics focus on studying the European Union. Since there is no historic precedent for an organization like the European Union, it necessarily means that work is done on contemporary affairs. International Relations theorists, then, have focused on writing a “history of the present” which is dangerous in that it does not afford the distance of time, which helps us more clearly see events.

Furthermore, how do International Relations theorists distinguish themselves from historians? Even if there were a greater emphasis on the historical aspect of International Relations, what would make it different from a historian looking at the history of the state system? The result of all of these questions is that International Relations remains a highly multi-disciplinary discipline, that is, it draws from several other disciplines to create a new outlook on the international system.

We should note, too, that theory and ideology are vastly different. Yet, there is a strong concern as to whether or not an academic can be value-free in their research. Indeed, this is a valid question in all disciplines, yet normative concepts and questions are very influential in the field of International Relations. To what extent should we allow these to influence the type of theory that is being produced? Academics often unconsciously bring normative assumptions into their work, only to legitimate them through research. Again, this is a concern not only with International Relations, but also across disciplines. We must bring into questions the way in which we frame analyses and research questions, especially when they will affect real policy implementations. It is possible to find a balance in which academics can acknowledge that no one is value-free and account for this by not being rigid in their beliefs, and allowing room for change depending on changing evidence and information.

Lastly, because of this relationship between the academy and

the practitioner, there is a question to what extent we can maintain academic independence. While we acknowledge that all practitioners theorize, and theory in itself is a practice, how far should academics involve themselves in current affair debates? Again, our example of the current Iraq war demonstrates this dilemma. International Relations show the relationship between real world consequences and the implementation of theory, but how and when should the theorist insert themselves in these debates? There is a large amount of responsibility that comes with being an academic, an expert in a certain field. One must take their knowledge and potential power and influence seriously, and make a value judgment when it is necessary to become a public intellectual. For, this is a large part of being a scholar; not simply being able to explain something through theory, but also being able to do something about it. What good is theory if it is never applied to anything? The central problem here, then, is one of agenda setting, of recognizing the time and place for academics and practitioners to collaborate and converge ideas. Rather than having the direction of the discipline following the precedent or changes in the policy world, there should be an active maintenance of the importance of keeping independence from the policy world, not necessarily being too influenced by what is happening in the “real world”. In other words, we should try to always maintain a level of academic freedom, while acknowledging the large moral responsibility and power that the scholar has in influencing contemporary affairs.

How then do academics approach the relationship with practitioners? As students of International Relations, how should we approach this complex relationship between theory and practice? We know that we cannot separate the two realms, that there is a porous border between them. The academic should be able to simultaneously talk to citizens, journalists, and engage with the policy world all while still maintaining a distinction between their realm and that of policy-makers. There is a difference between helping to engage the public in academic issues that affect their lives and becoming a “best seller academic”, which can dissolve the boundaries between academic rigor and everyday politics, and lead to questions about the efficacy of International Relations as its own discipline. There is a need for different ways of conceptualizing and understanding our world; to try and solve some of the most pressing issues facing humanity and the academic helps us to explain how the world works. While it is never possible to completely separate the worlds of policy and theory, we need to be well versed in both, to maximize the effect that International Relations can have on both the academe and on current affairs. Ultimately, it is important to remember that all scholars are practitioners, and vice versa.