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PSCI 213: Essay 2

### Beyond Words: Understanding the Impact of Symbols in Public Policy for Policy Analysts

Public policymaking involves more than just debates over technical aspects, as successful policy also requires winning over the opinions of policymakers and the public, especially. Throughout her book, *Policy Paradox*, Deborah Stone examines the dynamics of policy making, exploring the different ways problems are defined and framed in today's political system, challenging the classic rational model of policy analysis. Throughout the book she applies her argument of the polis model for policymaking to various processes of problem definition and framing, seeking to make analysts more aware of different strategies for determining an issue's existence, and its framing and methods for addressing through policy making. In Chapter 7, "Symbols," Stone examines the role of symbols, outlining the role of symbols as an often overlooked, yet fundamentally important and influential tool in shaping political narratives and public opinion. Her arguments about the importance of symbols in policy emphasize their influence on policy interpretation, framing, and support. Through her analysis of symbol usage in policy debates, Stone provides policy analysts with a more nuanced understanding of how concepts and images can shape discussions and bolster support for particular policy positions. Her argument about symbolism can be incredibly useful for policy analysts by highlighting its indispensable role and the influence symbols can over policymaking and advocacy.

In Chapter 7, "Symbols," Stone introduces her examination of the role of symbols in policy framing. She explains symbols as being "anything that stands for something else" (2012, 157), and could be an object, a person, a place, words, songs, pictures, logos, or actions. Symbols, as Stone posits, are fundamental elements shaping how policies are perceived,

understood, and acted upon. The basis of her argument rests on the assertion that symbols carry meanings exceeding their physical existence. These symbols act as a portrayal of complex ideas, emotions, and values, influencing the public and policymakers in subtle, yet significant ways.

Symbols, Stone explains, act as a form of storytelling. They can paint narrative stories, useful for defining or contesting policy problems, and these stories can take the form of stories of change or stories of power (Stone 2012, 158). It is these stories that can make or break selling a policy, through its success in convincing a group to support or protest it. With the stories, symbols become instrumental to policy framing, the process of shaping, forming, and communicating a policy. For example, the depiction of immigrants as criminals has been used to symbolize the migrant crisis, telling a story about the crisis and pushing for policy to target this issue (Farris and Silber Mohamed 2018). The imagery of immigrants as criminals transcends the immediate representation to evoke emotions, highlight the urgency of the issue, mobilizing public and political support for relevant policies.

Symbols play a crucial role in defining and framing policy problems, acting as powerful tools in the hands of policymakers, activists, and media outlets to shape public perception and agenda. A detailed examination of this reveals that symbols, no matter their form, typically condense complex issues into comprehensible and emotionally charged narratives (Stone 2012, 169-171). Stone also draws attention to the inherent ambiguity of symbols, noting that their power lies within this. This ambiguity allows stakeholders to interpret symbols to align with their beliefs, values, and interests to appeal for collective action (Stone 2012, 182). For instance, images of detention centers are often employed to symbolize the human cost of immigration policies, particularly in discussions of overcrowding, prompting discussions of ethical, legal, and humanitarian grounds, while other representations focus on the undocumented status of those

detained, interested in punishing illegal behavior (Farris and Silber Mohamed 2018). By using such symbols, policy actors can highlight certain aspects of a policy issue and disguise others, directing public attention and responses toward specific perspectives. Symbols condense complicated background context and emotions of an issue, shaping the understandings and prioritization of policy problems by the public and policymakers. By examining how symbols are created and implemented, analysts can gain insights into underlying values, fears, and aspirations driving policy, allowing for a more complete understanding of policy framing's complexities.

When evaluating the efficacy of Stone's analysis in "Symbols" for policy analysts, it is clear her insights are necessary for policy analysts to keep in mind. Her analysis and description of symbols' roles are useful for understanding the complex nature of policy framing and public persuasion. Symbols, as Stone describes, are fundamental factors shaping perceptions and receptions of policies by the public, operating as a means of influence and control (2012, 159-160). Recognizing symbolic dimensions and their ambiguous nature in policy framing and political communication is crucial for analyzing and designing policy narratives and strategies. For example, for analysts working on immigration policies, understanding symbols like "the border wall" or "detention centers," (Farris and Silber Mohamad 2018) the stories crafted around them, and how they resonate or mobilize different groups is critical for analyzing policy and predicting outcomes. If analysts can apply an accurate understanding of symbols, their narratives, and subsequent outcomes, they can more effectively design policies and communications for a diverse audience.

While Stone's analysis is incredibly important because of its insights, it is also important to note its limitations, one such being the fine line between using symbols for positive change and exploiting for manipulative ends. Stone exemplifies this through descriptions of example

symbol usage and the awareness analysts must develop for assessing symbols and the underlying assumptions (Stone 2012, 178), but gives minimal discussions of ethical considerations. The two-sided nature of symbolism due to the ambiguity of symbols highlights the ethical considerations policy analysts must make when designing or assessing policies that ultimately impact on people's lives. Furthermore, it is important to understand the nature of this ambiguity as a limitation, as well as a source of power, as it can lead to misunderstandings that if not well accounted for and interpreted by analysts, hinders their analysis and policy designs. By acknowledging the limitations, Stone's analysis of symbols and narratives strengthens the tools of policy analysts by helping create a better foundation for understanding issues, policy framing, ultimately enhancing the creation of better policies and communications for diverse populations.

Deborah Stone's exploration of the role of symbols and their narratives in policy framing in Chapter 7, "Symbols," of her book *Policy Paradox*, is important for policy analysts to understand for interpreting, framing, and communicating policy issues and solutions. Beyond analysts, the analysis she provides is useful for all involved in the policymaking process. By recognizing the power of symbols in shaping dialogues, setting agendas, and activating support, actors can more effectively engage in the process and contribute to more informed and nuanced policies. Understanding the symbolic nature of policy issues helps policy actors better assess the underlying values, conflicts, and perspectives driving political agendas and issues. Therefore, it is critical, particularly amid "fake news," misinformation, and highly polarized content, that anyone interested in shaping, analyzing, or understanding policy understand Stone's insights on the way symbols are being used in political society and policy communications today.

## References

- Farris, Emily, and Heather Silber Mohamed. 2018. “The News Media Usually Show Immigrants as Dangerous Criminals. That’s Changed — for Now, at Least.” *Washington Post*, June 27, 2018. Accessed March 18, 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/06/27/the-news-media-usually-show-immigrants-as-dangerous-criminals-thats-changed-for-now-at-least/>.
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