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Title

Decentring Policy Networks: A Theoretical Agenda

Permalink

Journal

Public Administration, 87(1)

Author

Bevir, Mark

Publication Date

2009

Peer reviewed

DECENTRING POLICY NETWORKS: A THEORETICAL AGENDA

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This introduction starts by specifying the theoretical and analytical framework underpinning the range of essays in this special issue. It then provides an overview of the existing literature on policy networks and network governance in order to identify what a decentred approach might contribute. What follows is an account of decentred theory, a discussion of the potential alternatives it can offer to existing accounts and how these might be achieved through reconstructing networks by appealing to notions of situated agency and tradition; it concludes by considering the potential methodologies to be employed, with particular emphasis on ethnography.

INTRODUCTION

Policy networks consist of governmental and societal actors whose interactions with one another give rise to policies. They are actors linked through informal practices as well as (or even instead of) formal institutions. Typically, they operate through interdependent relationships, with a view to trying to secure their individual goals by collaborating with each other. Policy networks have long been a topic of study in the social sciences. More recently, they have been central to the literature on governance, which is often described as rule by and through networks. The essays in this special issue explore both the use and limitations of a decentred theory of policy networks and network governance. To decentre is to focus on the social construction of a practice through the ability of individuals to create and act on meanings. It is to unpack a practice in terms of the disparate and contingent beliefs and actions of individuals. A decentred governance approach involves challenging the idea that inexorable, impersonal forces are driving a shift from hierarchies to networks. Instead, it suggests that networks are constructed differently by many actors against the background of diverse traditions.

Adopting decentred theory, the contributors to this special issue attempt:

- to use textual and/or ethnographic analysis to explore the meanings found in a policy arena;
- where appropriate, to highlight competing, diverse sets of meaning in that policy arena;
- to reflect on the contingent historical roots of the relevant meanings – the traditions against the background of which the meanings arose.

This introductory essay explores the theory behind this research agenda, locating it in relation to the current literature on policy networks. The concluding essay both summarizes the main themes of the papers and reflects on the experience of working with decentred theory, examining its strengths and weaknesses, the problems that arose in applying it, and lessons for future research.

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THE STUDY OF POLICY NETWORKS

Börzel (1998) offers a useful starting point for reviewing the literature on policy networks by distinguishing between approaches that treat networks as interest intermediation and as governance. Her headings are helpful for navigating what is a now an extensive body of work (see also Rhodes 2006).

Networks as interest intermediation

Social scientists often treat policy networks as a meso-level concept. It links the micro-level of analysis, dealing with the role of interests and government in particular policy decisions, to the macro-level of analysis, dealing with broader questions about the distribution of power in modern society. Policy network analysis stresses the importance of organizational rather than personal relationships and focuses on the extent to which there is continuity in the interactions of interest groups and government departments. These interactions constitute a process of interest intermediation. In this view, policy networks move beyond a simple model of government based on firmly defined institutional boundaries and clearly observable power relations. Instead, networks are portrayed as sets of interdependent organizations which have to exchange resources to realize their goals (Marsh and Rhodes 1992, pp. 10–11). Relationships within networks are characterized by their power-dependent nature. Power is not seen as concentrated, but is distributed horizontally, as well as vertically. The policy networks approach requires a recognition of the complexity of the interactions between different organizations involved in the policy-making arena.

The idea of policy networks as interest intermediation feeds into typologies and lists of the characteristics of policy networks and policy communities (see Wilks and Wright 1987; Rhodes 1988, 1990; Coleman and Skøgstad 1990; Atkinson and Coleman 1992; Waarden 1992; Marsh and Rhodes 1992; for a critique, see Dowding 1995; Marsh and Smith 2000; Hay and Richards 2000; Evans 2001). These typologies suggest policy networks can vary along a continuum according to the closeness of the relationships in them. Marsh and Rhodes (1992) provide an example of such a typology. They propose a continuum from policy communities based on close relationships to issue networks based on loose relationships. A policy community has the following characteristics:

- a limited number of participants with some groups consciously excluded;
- frequent and high quality interaction between all members of the community on all matters related to the policy issues;
- consistency in values, membership and policy outcomes, which persist over time;
- consensus, with the ideology, values and broad policy preferences shared by all participants;
- exchange relationships based on all members of the policy community controlling some resources;
- power, more often than not understood as a positive-sum game.

In contrast, issue networks involve only policy consultation, characterized by:

- many participants;
- fluctuating interaction and access for the various members;
- the absence of consensus and the presence of conflict;
- interaction based on consultation rather than negotiation or bargaining;
- an unequal power relationship in which many participants may have few resources, little or no access and power is seen as a zero-sum game.

Obviously, the implication of using a continuum is that any network can be located at some point along it.

There is much debate about policy networks as interest intermediation. For example, Dowding (1995) criticizes it on three grounds. First, he argues the concept of policy networks is used as a metaphor, not an explanation. Second, he suggests the approach does not go beyond typology to specify causal relationships. Third, he argues the analysis of games and bargaining is undeveloped and even confused by the distinctions between the micro- (or individual), meso- (or network), and macro- (or state) levels of analysis. Dowding advocates a more deductive approach based on rational actor models of bargaining, as well as the need for more extensive quantitative network analysis (see, for example, Laumann and Knoke 1987).

Proponents of the idea of policy networks as interest intermediation reject such criticisms. They protest that rational choice approaches focus on agents and do not explore how the structure of the network affects the process of bargaining. Thus Marsh and Smith (2000) argue that network structures shape the preferences of actors; there is a dialectical relationship between structures and agents. In their view, at the micro-level, networks are comprised of strategically calculating subjects whose actions shape policy outcomes, but the preferences and interests of these actors cannot be assumed – they must be explained by a meso- or macro-level theory.

Networks as governance

More recent work treats policy networks as the heart of governance. The literature falls into two broad schools depending on how it seeks to explain network behaviour: power-dependence or rational choice. The two approaches are illustrated below by reference to the Anglo-Governance School and the Max-Planck-Institut für Gesellschaftsforschung.

Power-dependence

The Anglo-Governance school promoted much research through the Economic and Social Research Council's 'Local Governance' and 'Whitehall' programmes (Rhodes 1997, 2000; Stoker 1999, 2000; for further discussion, see Marinetto 2003; Bevir and Rhodes 2003). They deploy governance as a broader term than government. With the new governance, public services are provided by complex permutations of government and the private and voluntary sectors. The new governance arose as the functional differentiation of the state lead to greater complexity. Inter-organizational linkages became a defining characteristic of service delivery. The several agencies have to exchange resources if they are to deliver services effectively. Networks are a common form of social co-ordination, and managing inter-organizational links is just as important for private sector management as for public sector. Networks are a means of co-ordinating and allocating resources. They are an alternative to, not a hybrid of, markets and hierarchies, for they rely distinctively on trust, co-operation, and diplomacy.

Actor-centred institutionalism

The scholars at the Max-Planck-Institut also evoke networks as a significant change in the structure of government. Networks are specific structural arrangements that deal with policy problems. They are relatively stable clusters of public and private actors. The links between network actors allow for the exchange of information, trust, and other policy resources. Networks have their own integrative logic. The dominant decision rules stress both bargaining and sounding-out (Kenis and Schneider 1991, pp. 41–3).

To explain how policy networks work, Scharpf (1998) combines rational choice and the new institutionalism to produce actor-centred institutionalism. He argues that institutions are systems of rules that structure the opportunities for actors (individual and corporate) to realize their preferences. Policy arises from the interactions of boundedly rational actors whose beliefs and desires are shaped by the norms that govern their interactions (Scharpf 1998, p. 195). So, networks are an institutional setting in which public and private actors interact. They are informal, rule-governed institutions. The agreed rules build trust and foster communication while also reducing uncertainty. They are the basis of non-hierarchic co-ordination. Scharpf then uses game theory to analyse and explain these rule-governed interactions.

Networks as management

There is much agreement that governance as networks is both a common and important form of governing structure in advanced industrial societies. The spread of networks in an era of governance has fuelled research on how to manage them. The 'governance club' of Walter Kickert, Jan Kooiman and their colleagues at Erasmus University Rotterdam, illustrates this concern (Kooiman 1993; Kickert 1997). The basic argument of the 'governance club' is that lack of legitimacy, complexity of policy processes, and the multitude of institutions concerned, reduces the state to being only one of many actors. Other institutions are, to a great extent, autonomous; they are self-governing. The state steers at a distance.

There are three main approaches to network management: the instrumental, interactive, and institutional. The instrumental approach is a top-down form of steering. It concentrates on ways in which government can exercise its legitimate authority. As such, it typically presumes a governmental department to be the focal organization in a network. The task of the central state is then to devise and impose tools that foster integration in and between networks and so enable the state to better attain its objectives. One problem with this instrumental approach is, of course, that it relies on government being able to exercise effective control when the whole study of networks and governance has exposed the ever-present problem of control deficits. The interactive approach to network management moves away from hierarchic modes of control. It presumes the mutual dependence of actors in networks. Collective action depends on co-operation, with goals and strategies developing out of mutual learning. Management thus requires negotiation and diplomacy. There is a need to understand others' objectives and build relations of trust with them. Chief executive officers in the public sector are urged to develop interpersonal, communication and listening skills. This interactive approach is often costly: cooperation is time-consuming; objectives can be blurred; and outcomes can be delayed. Finally, the institutional approach to network management focuses on the rules and structures against whose background the interactions take place. Management strategies seek to change relationships between actors, the distribution of resources, the rules of the game, and even values and perceptions. The aim is incremental changes in incentives and cultures. One problem with this approach is that institutions and their cultures are notoriously resistant to change.

DECENTRED THEORY

The above overview of the literature on networks seeks to offer a balanced summary of what is a continuing debate on the policy networks approach. In contrast, this section considers an alternative perspective – a decentred approach to policy networks.

What is decentred theory?

Decentred theory arose from reflecting on the question: 'what do networks look like from an anti-foundational perspective?' (Bevir 2003). Anti-foundationalism provides an alternative epistemology to the positivism informing much mainstream work on networks. Anti-foundationalists explicitly reject the idea of given truths, whether based on pure reasons or pure experience. As a result, they emphasize the constructed nature of concepts, actions and institutions. Constructivist theories suggest that meanings are the stuff of all the human sciences, where meanings are invented as much as found. Here anti-foundationalism has implications beyond the epistemological domain. Neither scholars nor their subjects have pure perceptions or pure reason. Those that are studied do not have pure experiences or interests. An individual's beliefs, desires or actions cannot be simply read-off from allegedly objective social facts about them. Rather, they construct their beliefs against the background of a tradition or discourse, and often in response to dilemmas or problems.

A decentred theory of networks draws attention to the meanings that inform the actions of the people involved. Most modernist empiricist approaches to networks tend to focus on objective characteristics and the oligopoly of the political market place. They stress the relationship of the size of networks to policy outcomes, and the strategies by which the centre might steer networks. To decentre networks is, in contrast, to focus on how they are constructed through the ability of individuals to create meanings in action. Decentred theory changes the conception of networks. It encourages networks to be treated as arising from the ways in which people act on beliefs they adopt against the background of traditions and in response to problems.

A decentred theory highlights the importance of beliefs, meanings, traditions and discourses. Any pattern of governance has failings. A decentred theory argues that different people have different views of these failings – views they constructed as inter-pretations of experience infused with traditions. When the perceived failings of gover-nance are in conflict with people's existing beliefs, they pose problems for them. These problems lead people to reconsider their beliefs and the traditions informing those beliefs. The decentred approach argues that people confront these problems against the back-ground of diverse traditions; there arises a political contest over what constitutes the nature of the failings and what should be done about them. Exponents of rival positions promote their particular ideas and policies. This contest can lead to a reform of gover-nance. Any reform can thus be understood as a product of a contest of meanings in action. The reformed pattern of rule established by this complex process displays new failings, poses new problems, and leads to competing proposals for reform.

There is a further contest over meanings – a contest in which the problems are often significantly different, and, in addition, where the traditions have been modified. All such contests take place in the context of laws and norms that prescribe how they should be conducted. Sometimes the relevant laws and norms have changed because of simul-taneous contests over their content and relevance. Yet while it is possible to distinguish analytically between a pattern of rule and a contest over its reform, this can rarely be done temporally (see Hay and Richards 2000). Rather, the activity of governing continues during most contests, and most contests occur partly within local practices of governing. What a decentred approach therefore emphasizes is the emergence of a complex and continuous process of interpretation, conflict and activity that produces ever-changing patterns of rule.

A decentred theory of networks entails a shift of topos from institutions to meanings in action. It argues that other approaches to networks restrain the centrifugal impulse of

the diverse beliefs of social actors. Current approaches reduce the diversity of networks and network governance to a logic of modernization, institutional norms, or a set of classifications or correlations across policy networks. Their proponents tame an otherwise chaotic picture of multiple actors, creating a contingent pattern of rule through their conflicting actions.

What difference does a decentred theory make?

There are four main differences between decentred theory and current approaches to networks. First, current approaches generally adopt a modernist empiricist epistemology. They often treat networks as social structures from which we can read-off the beliefs, interests and actions of individuals. The network to which an individual belongs, or the position an individual has within a network, allegedly defines the content of an actor's beliefs and interests. In contrast, a decentred theory regards networks as enacted by individuals. Rather than the beliefs and actions of individuals being determined by their 'objective' position, their beliefs and actions construct the nature of the network. Decentred theory encourages the researcher to explore the ways in which networks are made and remade through the activities of particular individuals.

Second, current explanations of change in networks rely on exogenous, not endogenous, causes. Thus, Marsh and Rhodes (1992, p. 261) argue that networks create routines for policy-making and that change is incremental. They identify four broad categories of change – economic, ideological, knowledge and institutional – all of which are external to the network. A decentred theory of networks implies people construct them by acting on the beliefs they adopt against the background of traditions. It emphasizes the need to look for the origins of change in people's contingent responses to dilemmas. By focusing on people's responses to dilemmas, exogenous change is built into the heart of networks, with change taking the form of confronting new experiences and responding to the actions of others.

Third, the network literature is characterized by typologies. A decentred theory challenges the idea that network dimensions and characteristics are given. It is probably a commonplace observation that even simple objects are not presented as pure perceptions but are constructed in part by the theories an individual holds true of the world. When attention turns to complex political objects, the notion that they are presented as immutable facts appears unsustainable. The 'facts' about networks are not 'given' but are constructed by individuals in the stories they hand down to one another. The study of networks, therefore, is inextricably bound up with interpreting the narratives on which they are based.

The final characteristic of the network literature is that it is practical, seeking to improve network management. We have shown there is an extensive literature on this topic. Current approaches to networks treat them as given facts – as if they are cars and the researcher is the car mechanic, finding the right tool to affect repairs. A decentred theory posits that networks cannot be understood apart from traditions. The people whose beliefs, interests and actions constitute a network necessarily acquire the relevant interests and beliefs against the background of traditions. In other words, there is no essentialist account of a network, but only the several stories of the participants and observers. So there can be no single tool kit for managing them. Instead practitioners learn by telling, listening to and comparing stories.

In short, a decentred theory turns the current approaches to networks on their heads by insisting that networks are enacted by individuals through the stories they tell one

another and cannot be treated as given facts. So, 'Where do we go?' How do we apply this decentred theory?

RECONSTRUCTING NETWORKS

Having summarized current approaches to policy networks and explored the alternative offered by decentred theory, this section develops decentred theory using the notions of situated agency and tradition.

Situated agents

There is some confusion among anti-foundationalists about the aggregate study of governing practices. Post-structuralists often provide aggregate accounts of practices by treating meanings as products of epistemes, discourses or some other quasi-structure defined by the relationship among the signs of which it is composed. Yet, these aggregate accounts seem to contradict their own stress on contingency and particularity: after all, beliefs and actions cannot be contingent if they are determined by quasi-structures. The concept of situated agency is a potential way out of this impasse.

First, it is important to distinguish between autonomy and agency. Autonomous individuals can, at least in principle, have experiences, reason, adopt beliefs and act, outside all contexts. On the other hand, agents can reason and act in novel ways, although they can do so only against the background of the contexts that influence them. Most anti-foundationalists reject autonomy because they believe all experiences and all reasoning embody theories; thus people can adopt beliefs only against the background of a prior set of theories, which at least initially must be made available to them by tradition. However, this rejection of autonomy does not entail a rejection of agency. Instead, it accepts that people set out against the background of a tradition but are still agents who can act and reason in novel ways to modify this background. Even if linguistic contexts form the background to people's statements, and social contexts form the background to their actions and practices, the content of their statements and actions does not come directly from these contexts. Instead, it comes from the ways in which they replicate, use, or respond to these contexts in accord with their intentions. Decentred theory need not throw agency out with autonomy. It can defend the capacity for agency while recognizing that it occurs within a social context that influences it. From this perspective, agency is not autonomous, it is situated.

Bang and Sørensen's (1999) story of the 'Everyday Maker' provides an example of situated agency. They interviewed 25 active citizens in the Nørrebro district of Copenhagen to see how they engaged with government. They observe that there is a long tradition of networking in Denmark. They argue Denmark has recently experienced the conflicting trends of political decentralization (which has further blurred the boundaries between public, private and voluntary sectors) and political internationalization (which has moved decision making upward to the EU). They describe this shift from government to 'governance networks' as ideal typical and suggest the governance of Denmark is a paradoxical mixture of government (hierarchy) and governance (networks).

In a system of governance, the 'Everyday Maker' focuses on immediate and concrete policy problems at the lowest possible level. Civic engagement is about finding a balance between autonomous and dependent relationships among elites and lay actors in networks that might be within or beyond the state. The 'Everyday Maker' is self-reliant, capable, perceives politics as a concrete and direct way of handling differences and disputes in everyday life, values community conceived as the setting for addressing common concerns,

believes in democratic values and procedures as applying to high and low levels of politics alike. Thus, Grethe (a grassroots activist) reflects that she has acquired the competence to act out various roles: contractor, board member and leader. There has been an explosion of issue networks, policy communities, policy projects and user boards, all involving actors from within and without government. The task of the 'Everyday Maker' is to enter in and participate at one of numerous entry points. Political activity has thus shifted somewhat from formal organizing to informal networking. In short, Bang and Sørensen draw a picture of Nørrebro's networks through the eyes of its political activists.

Traditions

One popular explanation for the growth of governance posits that advanced industrial societies grow by a process of functional and institutional specialization and the fragmentation of policies and politics (Rhodes 1988, pp. 371–87). For some authors, this differentiation is itself part of a larger context such as a shift from Fordism to post-Fordism (see Jessop 1997, pp. 308–15). In contrast, decentred theory stresses how different governmental traditions understand and respond to governance as networks. Networks are understood through traditions. In addition, networks construct or reconstruct their own traditions. People learn about the network and its constituent organizations through stories of famous events and characters. Traditions are passed on from person-to-person. They are learnt. Much will be taken for granted as common sense. Some will be challenged; for example, when beliefs collide and have to be changed or reconciled.

The appeal to tradition is the counterpart of rejecting autonomy, as well as defending situated agency. People are not autonomous, so their agency is always situated against an inherited set of beliefs and practices. Their beliefs and actions draw on an inherited tradition. The idea of a tradition captures the social context in which individuals both exercise their reason and act. Here, traditions are defined as a set of understandings someone receives during socialization. Hence, a governmental tradition is a set of inherited beliefs about the institutions and history of government.

Tradition is unavoidable only as a starting point, not as something that determines later performances. Later performances are products of creative, situated agency in the setting of tradition. It is therefore important to be cautious about representing tradition as an unavoidable presence in everything people do and, in so doing, underplay the role for situated agency. In particular, it should not be implied that tradition is constitutive of the beliefs people later come to hold or the actions they come to perform. Instead, tradition should be seen mainly as a first influence on people. The content of the tradition will appear in their later actions, only if their situated agency has not led them to change it, and every part of it is in principle open to such change.

This point can be illustrated by reference to dominant state traditions. Loughlin and Peters (1997, p. 46) distinguish between the Anglo-Saxon (no state) tradition; the Germanic (organic) tradition; the French (Jacobin) tradition; and the Scandinavian tradition which mixes the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic (see also Dyson 1980). In the Germanic tradition, state and civil society are part of one organic whole. The state is a transcendent entity. Its defining characteristic is that it is a *rechtsstaat*; that is a legal state vested with exceptional authority but constrained by its own laws. Civil servants are not just public employees, but personifications of state authority. The Anglo-Saxon tradition draws a clearer boundary between state and civil society; there is no legal basis to the state; and civil servants have no constitutional position. The Jacobin tradition sees the French state as the one and indivisible republic, exercising strong central authority to contain the antagonistic relations

between state and civil society. The Scandinavian tradition is also 'organic', characterized by *rechtsstaat*, but differs from the Germanic tradition in being a decentralized unitary state with a strong participation ethic. Of course, the above account of state traditions is broad brush. Traditions do not exist as ideal types from which specific instances can be compared. A more thorough account must cover the variety and nuances of traditions as learnt. Nonetheless, this illustrates how traditions shape different patterns of networks and network governance.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND ITS LESSONS

A decentred theory tries to resolve the difficulties that beset more positivist approaches to policy networks. It attempts to overcome structuralist accounts which emphasize that institutions fix the actions of individuals rather than being products of those actions. It criticizes notions such as path-dependency, instead arguing that an analysis of change should be rooted in the beliefs and actions of situated agents. And yet it allows political scientists to offer aggregate studies by using the concept of tradition to explain how they come to hold those beliefs and perform those actions. This section explores two key methods with which to apply decentred theory – textual analysis and, in particular, ethnography.

The case for ethnography

Decentred theory has the potential to open new research agendas. It can build on the existing knowledge of policy networks by pursuing studies that focus on the diverse meanings and actions of which they are composed. It emphasizes the need for studies that focus on the making and remaking of networks through the ability of individuals to create meanings that explore the origins of network change in the contingent responses of individuals to problems. Typically, such studies rely on ethnography, and also textual analysis, to explore the beliefs and actions not only of politicians, civil servants, public sector managers, but also street-level bureaucrats, non-governmental actors and citizens.

Ethnographers reconstruct the meanings of social actors by recovering other people's stories (see, for example, Geertz 1973, Chapter 1). Fenno (1990, p. 2) argues: '…the aim is to see the world as they see it, to adopt their vantage point on politics'. Hence, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, p. 2) observe, ethnography: '…captures the meaning of everyday human activities'. Typically, then, ethnograpic studies focus on individual behaviour in everyday contexts; the focus is also on gathering data from many sources; adopting an 'unstructured' approach; focusing on one group or locale; and, in analysing the data, stressing the: '…interpretation of the meanings and functions of human action' (Hammersley 1990, 1–2). It has two principal features as a source of data. First, it gets below and behind the surface of official accounts by providing texture, depth and nuance. Second, it lets interviewees explain the meaning of their actions, providing insights that can come only from the main characters involved in the story. Interviews and non-participant observation offer a type of political anthropology that yields 'thick descriptions'. The task is to write narratives of other people's narratives; that is, our 'constructions of other people's constructions of what they are up to' (Geertz 1973, pp. 9, 20–1; see also Heclo and Wildavsky 1974; Richards and Smith 2004; Bevir and Rhodes 2006).

Clearly, there are well documented methodological limitations to the ethnographic approach. It is commonly argued that ethnographic research on powerful actors encounters many difficulties. There is the endemic secrecy of many governments. Interviews are said to be an unreliable source of data because interviewees: '…unselfconsciously project

an official self-image' (Lee 1995, p. 149) and politicians are seen as self-serving to the point of being misleading (Richards 1996; Richards and Smith 2004). As Seldon (1995, p. 126) observes, he: '…frequently had reason to wonder whether some former ministers had served in the same administration so at variance were their accounts of the way co-ordination took place at the heart of Whitehall'. Moreover, there are often no written sources to triangulate the accuracy of interviews and their veracity is perhaps undermined when they are not attributed. Finally, it is claimed that non-participant observation always affects the behaviour of the observed. All these points are valid. None present insurmountable obstacles.

Learning from ethnography
Many accounts of networks and governance aspire to be comprehensive. They aim to provide a general theory or classification of how networks operate and why. For example, governance is often characterized as the bureaucratic hierarchies of the welfare state being replaced by multiplying networks. Such comprehensive accounts of network governance identify one or more defining features. This defining feature then acts as a central focus that attempts to explain other pertinent features of network governance. So, in this context, the spread of networks is used to explain the greater reliance by states on 'trust' and 'diplomatic' styles of management, or it embraces the search for co-ordination through joint ventures, partnerships, and holistic governance.

A decentred theory implies there is no comprehensive account of network governance. There is no necessary logical or structural process determining the form networks take, or whether they succeed or fail. Rather, an adequate account of networks shows how they arise and change due to diverse actions and practices inspired by varied meanings and traditions. Patterns of rule arise as the contingent products of diverse actions and political struggles informed by the beliefs of agents as they arise against a contingent background. This conclusion applies whether referring to public sector reform or the rise and fall of specific networks.

Once we reject the idea of a comprehensive account of networks and governance, we can no longer define them by any allegedly essential properties. Rather, it understands general concepts such as network and governance by using them in specific cases. 'Network' and 'governance' are seen as a set of family resemblances (Wittgenstein 1972). It does not master such family resemblances by discovering a theory or rule that precisely identifies when it should and should not be applied. Instead, its grasp of the concept is based on the ability to provide reasons why it should be applied in one case but not another, to draw analogies with other cases, and on occasions to point to criss-crossing similarities.

A decentred theory firstly embraces a diverse view of state authority and how that authority is exercised. It suggests patterns of rule arise as the contingent products of diverse actions and political struggles informed by the varied beliefs of situated agents. So, the notion of a monolithic state in control of itself and civil society is a myth. Policy always arises from interactions in networks. Patterns of rule always traverse the public, private, and voluntary sectors. The boundaries between state and civil society are always blurred. State authority is constantly remade, negotiated, and contested in widely different ways in various everyday practices.

Secondly, decentred theory views everyday practices as arising from situated agents whose beliefs and actions are informed by traditions and expressed in stories. In every network, these traditions can be identified, often through embodied rituals and routines.

Actors pass on these traditions in large part by telling one another stories about how things are done, and about what does and does not work. Network governance is not any given set of characteristics. It is the stories people use to construct, convey and explain traditions, dilemmas, and practices.

CONCLUSION

The social science literature on networks and governance identifies key changes and participants in government. A decentred theory of networks builds on this existing literature but attempts to offer a number of additional lessons. It argues that there is no essentialist account of networks that can be used to produce causal generalizations and to legitimate advice to policy-makers. A richer understanding of networks involves methodologies, such as textual analysis and ethnography, as a way of recovering meanings embedded in traditions – this then requires the researcher to write a construction about how other people construct the world. Finally, the decentred approach argues that for those advising government, there is no single tool kit they can use to steer networks. But, a decentred approach can attempt to define and redefine problems in new ways by telling policy-makers distinctive stories about their world and how it is governed (see, for example, Rein 1976). Here, then, the claim being made by a decentred approach is that it challenges the language of managerialism, markets and contracts, as well as the language of predictive social science. The subsequent essays in this special issue explore these and related claims.

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