

A Systematic Conceptualization and Structuring of the Discourse on Public Policy Problems

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Abstract

This paper develops an ontological framework to conceptualize the ideal type of public policy discourse using a structured Input–Process–Output model. Drawing on insights from unpublished institutional documents—including internal observation notes and moderator reflections from policy roundtables—three Input elements (information, stakeholders, structure), four Process sub-elements (awareness, intervention, approach, ability), and two Output forms (structured and unstructured discourse) are systematically defined. Their combinatorial configuration yields 24 possible pathways through which a discourse may evolve. The ontology demonstrates how coherent inputs, supported by effective process elements, produce structured and goal-oriented discourse, whereas weak or misaligned inputs activate alternative pathways that culminate in unstructured engagement. By providing a parsimonious and analytically rigorous specification of discourse dynamics, this framework advances the methodological foundations of public policy analysis and offers a diagnostic tool for enhancing the design and facilitation of deliberative policy engagements.

Keywords: Ontological framework, Structured Model, Public Policy Problems

Introduction

In the public policy domain, attempting a discourse within a designed program on a wicked problem is challenging. It becomes complex when the profile of stakeholders is unstructured or heterogenous, having conflicting interests, ideas and approach to a problem. For a public policy researcher, answering the questions about why a particular discourse evolved in structured way or in an unstructured manner would assist in assessing, evaluating, and modifying the

program to meet the research and program objective. This could be done by deriving an ideal set of factors on the basis of empirical evidence from a public policy programs, and through a framework for ‘comprehensiveness’ and systematic analysis. An ‘ideal type’ concept from the knowledge base of sociology (Swedberg,2018) and an ‘ontological framework’ from the domain of public policy would assist in developing an ideal set of factors, and systematic and systemic framework.

Methodology

Ideal types are a conceptual tool developed by sociologist Max Weber in 20th century, which he used as a methodological tool to understand the social reality. According to New Webster Dictionary ‘Ideal’ is a “conception or standard of something in its highest perfection order”. As a methodology, Max Weber used the ideal type as a mental construct or model to engage in systematic understanding or characterization of social phenomena. These ideal types are not an abstract concept, but they are the concepts emerging out from the facts collected systematically that could assist in empirical research. This paper, borrowing from the epistemology of the ‘ideal types’, constructs an ontological framework for an ideal type of public policy discourse.

An ontological method would help in conceptualizing the domain and can be used to systematize the description of a domain which is complex. In the ontology, terminologies and taxonomies of the domain are systematically organized. It is an “explicit specification of a conceptualization,”(Gruber, 1995). “Our acceptance of the ontology is...similar in principle to our acceptance of a scientific theory, say a system of physics; we adopt, at least insofar as we are reasonable, the simplest conceptual scheme into which the disordered fragments of raw experience can be fitted and arranged”(Martin & Quine, 1953). This distinguishing feature of ontology is not an abstraction, not a discussion at the philosophical level, but it is between two extremes of practicality and human awareness(Ramaprasad & Syn, n.d.)ill-structured, large, and evolving. They can be analyzed in their entirety through literature reviews, citation analysis, statistical meta-analysis and other techniques. We present

ontological topography as a technique for visualizing and analyzing the ‘big picture’ of such a domain through the lens of an ontology. The topography highlights the bright, light, blind/blank spots of the domain – the topics which have been heavily emphasized, lightly emphasized, and overlooked (unconsciously and consciously).

An ontological framework would give a big picture of a public policy discourse. An ontological framework has been used by many authors in the domain of higher education, health, international law, e-governance, etc. The ontological method is applied to meta-analyse and synthesize a research domain systemically and systematically. This method is also used in the meta-analysis of policy problem, prediction and in decision making.

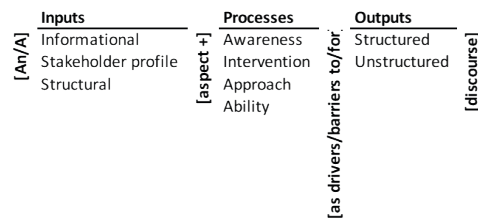


FIGURE 1: Ontology of Ideal Types in Public Policy Discourse

An ontology of an ideal type of public policy discourse illustrates the logical pathways leading to either a structured or an unstructured form of engagement (see Figure 1). The ontological framework conceptualizes public policy discourse as a systemic interaction among three dimensions—Inputs, Processes, and Outputs—each comprising minimal, mutually exclusive, and collectively exhaustive elements.

Framework is minimal, as it contains only the essential dimensions and elements required to represent the domain.

Nothing superfluous is included, and each component serves a necessary conceptual purpose. This minimalism ensures clarity, focus, and analytical precision. Second, the framework is systematic as the elements within each dimension are mutually exclusive—no two overlap in meaning—and collectively exhaustive so that, together, they fully represent the domain without gaps. This systematic structure prevents conceptual ambiguity and supports rigorous analysis. Third, framework is composable, allowing the elements of one dimension to be meaningfully combined with the elements of other dimensions. These combinations create analytical units that help researchers explore multiple configurations or pathways within the system. Finally, the framework is actionable, meaning that each cell or combination of elements suggests decisions, interventions, or insights that can inform practice. In the context of public policy discourse, this actionability enables practitioners to identify where breakdowns occur and what adjustments in inputs or processes might lead to more structured and effective engagements.

The Inputs dimension defines what the discourse *has* prior to its commencement, through the clarity of information provided, the profiles and expectations of stakeholders, and the structural design of the program. The Processes dimension represents what the discourse *does* as it unfolds, expressed through participants' awareness of the problem and one another's roles, the intervention enacted by moderators or institutions to guide the discussion, the approach adopted by participants in their interactional style and thematic engagement, and the ability they demonstrate in contributing meaningfully to the deliberation. The Outputs dimension reflects what the discourse *produces*, resulting in either

a structured or an unstructured form of engagement depending on how inputs and processes align throughout the interaction. The taxonomy of the dimensions and elements present in the framework is defined through a glossary (see Table 1).

This ontological decomposition provides an explicit, parsimonious specification of the domain and reveals the logical pathways through which discourse dynamics evolve. It enables a systematic and actionable understanding of how initial conditions and interactional mechanisms shape the nature and quality of public policy deliberation. Since the ontology comprises three Inputs, four Process sub-elements, and two possible Outputs, it yields 24 distinct combinatorial pathways through which a discourse may evolve.

A structured public policy discourse emerges when the elements across all dimensions of the ontology align coherently. When information is clearly articulated through a well-defined concept note, stakeholders are selected to ensure complementary expertise and balanced representation, and the program structure offers an explicit agenda with appropriate time allocation, the discourse begins with heightened awareness among participants regarding the problem and each other's roles. This awareness enables a more effective intervention by the moderator or institution, guiding the discussion toward shared objectives. A constructive approach subsequently develops, reflected in thematic focus, turn-taking, and mutual responsiveness. As participants exercise their ability—their capacity to contribute meaningfully, synthesize ideas, and build on prior inputs—the interaction stabilizes. This pathway—clear information → aligned stakeholders → coherent structure → participant awareness → effective intervention

→ constructive approach → demonstrated ability—logically culminates in a structured discourse.

Conversely, an unstructured discourse follows an adverse pathway. Ambiguous information, misaligned stakeholder expectations, and weak or undefined program structure result in limited or uneven awareness at the outset. This leads to ineffective or misdirected intervention, often allowing discussions to drift. Participants may adopt a fragmented or adversarial approach, expressed through digressions, dominance by a few actors, or topic drift. When these conditions constrain participants' ability to meaningfully engage or build coherence, the discourse becomes increasingly unstable. Such a pathway cumulatively produces an unstructured discourse, lacking thematic convergence, deliberative quality, and actionable outcomes.

The taxonomies and concepts used in this framework are derived from evidence gathered through internal observation notes, moderator reflections, and informal summaries of public policy roundtable discussions conducted at the Ramaiah Public Policy Centre (RPPC) between 2018–2022. These roundtables convened diverse stakeholders—including bureaucrats, academics, practitioners, civil society actors, and students—to deliberate on complex policy problems. Although some reports of these events exist informally online, they are not considered formal publications and are therefore not cited. The analysis is based on unpublished institutional materials and practitioner-level observations derived from the author's engagement with public policy roundtables. Although these sources are not part of peer-reviewed literature, they provide sufficiently rich empirical detail to support the ontological construction and uphold the analytical integrity of the study.

These materials provide rich empirical insights into stakeholder behaviours, interaction patterns, and discursive dynamics. The observed patterns were systematically coded to identify recurring themes, barriers, facilitators, and structural elements that influence whether a discourse evolves in a structured or unstructured manner.

Therefore, the taxonomies are not an abstract, but they are empirical. The logical linkage between the dimensions and its elements reflects a logical pathway to the nature of discourse. The identifiable barriers and drivers in conducting the discourse can be seen from the processes and inputs of the program design which will ultimately decide a structural and unstructured aspect of the outcome.

Discussion:

The framework follows an input-process-output model, where specific drivers and elements affect the nature of discourse. The inputs dimensions are the pre-program activities, the factors that shape initial conditions of the discourse. The processes dimensions are the activities during the program, how stakeholders and moderators interact, engage, and respond during the discourse. The outputs dimension is the results of the program, the final structure of the discourse (whether structured or unstructured). Each of the dimensions i.e., inputs-processes-outputs contains specific elements or taxonomy that influence the discourse dynamics.

The input dimension includes informational element which would give clarity in communicating the problem to invitees (e.g., the quality of the concept notes); Stakeholders profile element would provide awareness of the invited participants (e.g., whether they are bureaucrats or

academicians); Structural element would provide a clear definition of the program agenda and framework (e.g., pre-defined discussion and time management). Therefore, the inputs dimension would help in creating an environment where discourse is more likely to be structured or goal oriented.

Limitations

This study is based on unpublished institutional materials and practitioner observations, which may limit its generalizability across diverse policy contexts. The ontology captures ideal-typical pathways rather than empirical universality, and future research may refine or validate the framework through broader comparative studies.

Conclusion

The ontological framework of an ideal type of public policy discourse offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it advances the epistemology of the public policy process by providing a comprehensive and systematic representation of how discourses evolve, thereby clarifying the conditions under which engagements become structured or unstructured. Practically, the framework functions as an analytical 'measuring rod' for examining the quality of policy discourse. It enables policymakers, facilitators, and researchers to diagnose barriers, identify drivers, and improve the design of public policy engagements such as roundtable discussions, workshops, conferences, and seminars. By revealing the combinatorial pathways through which discourse dynamics unfold, the ontology supports more deliberate and informed planning of policy

dialogues, reinforcing both coherence and impact.

Table 1: Glossary

Inputs	Pre-program activities
Informational	Clarity in communicating the problem to invitees (eg: clarity of the concept note sent to invitees)
Stakeholders profile	Awareness of the profile of stakeholders invited (are they activists, academicians, bureaucrats, etc)
Structural	Clearly defining the agenda of the program, and the framework
Processes	Activities happening during the program
Awareness	Stakeholders are aware of the issue/problem
Intervention	Timely intervention from the moderators/ intervention by invitees (intervention by political or activists' group)
Approach	Ability of the invitees to understand systemic approach of the program
Ability	Ability to comprehend the problem
Outputs	Programs went as per structure or not
Structured	If program was to the satisfying level of the researcher (if it went as per plan) and met the objective of the program
Unstructured	If program was not to the satisfying level of the researcher (not went as per plan) and did not meet the objective of the program

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