PPOL 5111 Foundations in Public Policy II: Thinking About Institutions

W 3-5:45 pm, Room 5566 (Lifts 27/28)

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This is a theory-building seminar that is meant to develop our capacities to think institutionally. Beginning with a look at what scholars mean by the term, institution, we proceed through how institutions are described and explained (i.e., why do they exist, how are they maintained). Much of what you have learned, in other classes, about policy can be reinterpreted using the language of institutions. As policy scholars, what do we gain when we think and talk institutionally? Institutional descriptions range from the most formal (i.e., institutional models) to the least (i.e., the world of practice). Towards the end, we will begin to pay greater attention to theorization, learning how to employ social theory (e.g., Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu) to better explain institutions in society. Students are asked to identify policy issues/questions that they are focusing on over the duration of their graduate career and, then, asked to interpret these in institutional terms. The goal of it all is to imagine how institutional thinking can help each of us advance our own research agendas. Students may take this class without having taken PPOL 5110 (with approval of instructor). The class is open to any PPOL graduate student (with approval).

ASSESSMENT/GRADING

Discussion / Participation	25%
Short Essays / Problem Sets (3)	25%
Final Paper	25%
Final Writing Exercise (in class, written)	20%
Professional Practices ``	5%

Discussion: An important part of the learning has to do with working with the concepts in class in real time. This requires that each student "talk the talk" of institutions, and this is achieved by speaking in class. The act of speaking and writing distills our incipient ideas and puts them in a more thoroughly constructed form. The expectation is that the student tries out concepts joining in the discussions each week. Students need to have read the readings before coming to class, as the learning revolves around building on the concepts in the readings and generating new knowledge through discussion and reflection.

Short Essays: Three problem sets will be handed out. These essay type questions are an opportunity to synthesize what they learn in class and in the readings and apply concepts to different situations in policy life. They are meant to spur deeper thinking about institutions.

Final Paper: In the first two meetings, students will be encouraged to describe one policy question or topic that they have found interesting and would like to continue thinking about the rest of their graduate career. The more specific the policy problem/issue, the better. The goal of the final paper is to begin thinking about this policy issue in institutional terms, and to develop an agenda for conducting an institutional analysis of this issue. Specs for the final paper will be provided by Meeting 6.

Professional Practices: Students (and teachers) are expected to conduct themselves professionally throughout the term and to engage in professional practices (including delivering deliverables on time, maintaining professional demeanor, communicating, etc.). Do not use AI in this class.

Final Writing Exercise: In lieu of a final exam, a writing exercise will be scheduled for Wednesday, Nov. 19. It will be a sit-down, silent, closed notes/books, no-devices written exam that is meant to give the student an opportunity to theorize on paper without the use of google, ai, or other digital sources –just writing one's own thoughts.

READINGS

The reading list can be accessed at:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1UFXj4itjHpcBFBPAF3HlXO2DRwMCO8w0gvNxuVEfbL4/edit
Readings will be emailed to the students a week before they will be taken up in class (until they are uploaded to Canvas). These readings are diverse and don't necessarily hang together coherently --the task of connection is the student's, as we employ a constructivist model of learning. We use a hermeneutic process of interpretation to make sense of these readings --first individually and, then, together in class. Good reading is good theorizing.

SCHEDULE

Week 1 Sept. 3 What Are Institutions?

What does it mean to think institutionally? How do we policy scholars incorporate institutionalism into how we analyze public policy? We begin by discussing what various lines of scholarship around 'institutionalism' mean by the word, institution, and we apply this definition to various phenomena we see in society. Institutions are described in different ways, at different scales of analysis (from macro to micro), and we discuss how our discussions throughout the course will move from scale to scale. We inquire into what conditions are needed to sustain an institution (including a discussion of some ideas from Mary Douglas). Lastly, each student is encouraged to discuss a policy issue or problem that engages their thinking (and which they maintain over the course of their graduate career), the goal being to translate these into institutional terms by the end of the course.

Week 2 Sept. 10 Macro: Institutions as Text

At the highest level of abstraction and generality, institutions are constituted by texts/analogies/discourses that define their typology. Often, these texts stem from strong ideological narratives that create institutional blueprints. We will study how these blueprints work and how they generate isomorphism across the field. We will use the example of models of international development to illustrate how these generative (or genetic) texts operate. We will employ the 'dialectic table' as an analytical device for comparative analysis of institutional typologies (using the Jacobs reading as a case). Lastly, we discuss the problems encountered with the model of institutions as text being imposed upon context.

Week 3 Sept. 17 Meso: Institutions as Rational Outcomes

We begin a closer look at institutions as rational solutions to problems of collective action. In this meeting, we will employ some elemental (even game-theoretic) examples to illustrate the collective action problem and the institutional models prescribed to solve them. Our discussion will take up Mancur Olson (and other early rational choice theorists) to Elinor Ostrom and her alternative solution to classic political economic solutions. Much of Ostrom's work describes institutions as rule systems, but the question is: how are these rule-systems maintained and enforced? We will appply collective action theory to environmental issues (i.e., Hardin's model of the commons).

Week 4 Sept. 24 Theorizing Beyond the Rational Model

Building on the previous meeting's discussion of collective action theory, we begin building strategies for theory-building, in this case, conceptualizing new approaches to collective action. We build on Douglas' critique of institutional theory from the rational choice school. We will see how strategies for theorizing can lead to new institutional models. Theorizing about institutions entail critical analysis of extant models, and we develop skills in such analysis. As other scholars (like Sen) have done, a conventional critique begins with sketching the limitations of homo economicus (or the assumption of individual rationality). We work out how alternative formulations can lead to alternative instiutional solutions, using global climate change action as an illustrative example. Students are encouraged to take up their own examples, as well.

Week 5 Oct. 1 No Meeting (Holiday)

Week 6 Oct. 8 Micro: Employing Social Theory (Foucault)

Good reading is good theorizing. In this and the following meeting, we will go through the discipline and art of how to read theory. This will help us in using social theory to deepen our analysis of institutional life.

This week, we will read (on our own, and collectively in class) excerpts from Discipline and Punish. we employ a hermeneutic approach to interpretation. First, we share strategies for making sense of theoretical texts. We then realize how these texts actually pertain to institutional life we find around us. Next, we begin to employ the concepts, translating these to institutional terms, imagining how we can each use these in our own research agendas. We begin the class with discussion of strategies for reading.

Week 7 Oct. 15 Meso: Institutional Sociology
We peruse the ideas of the new institutionalists (from various fields, but particularly from organizational sociology --e.g., Powell and Dimaggio). We examine conditions that promote isomorphism in the field and study examples of this. In contrast, what conditions foster polymorphism (and how do we differentiate institutions)? How does institionalist theory re-orient our perspective on public policy in ways that inform our analysis? What are institutional logics, and how do these shape the behavior of policy actors? We focus on logics of appropriateness and reflect on the value of understanding institutions as texts.

Week 8 Oct. 22 Micro: Employing Social Theory (Bourdieu)
Continuing from the previous meeting, in this class we take up excerpts from A Theory of Practice. While theorists of practice do not classify their ideas in institutional terms, we should recognize their import for institutionalist thought. What is practice, and how do we theorize it? What are its logics, and can these be thought of as institutional logics? How do concepts from this theory of practice inform our own resarch around describing and analyzing institutions in the realm of public policy?

Week 9 Oct. 29 No Meeting (Holiday)

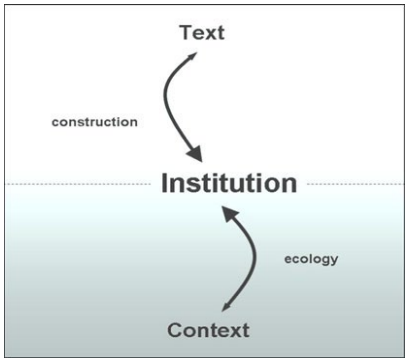
Week 10 Nov. 5 Theorizing Beyond the Formal: Relationality in Policy
Bourdieu wrote, in a set of notes for his doctoral students, that thinking relationally can mean focusing not just on the traditional objects of our inquiry but on the relations (or spaces) between them. This strategy can help us deepen our inquiry into the role of institutions in public policy. Institutions are often described in formal terms and, so, we ask: how do we describe, then analyze, the informal/licit/tacit forces that influence what policies evolve and how they are enacted? What does it mean to take a phenomenological approach to institutional description? What intellectual strategies can we use to begin theorizing about the 'spaces in between'?

Week 10 Nov. 12 Additional Themes, Research Directions
We reflect on implications of institutional theory for our own research agendas. How have policy scholars used (and not used) institutional theory? What new insights do we get when we employ an institutional lens, and in what ways does this differ (or overlap with) the policy perspective? An additional set of readings will be assigned prior to this week. We discuss the final assignment/reflection piece.

Week 11 Nov. 19 In-Class Writing Exercise
The third writing exercise is meant to solicit your ideas "in the raw" –i.e., no laptops, no phones, just pen and paper. No need to even have access to the readings. It's not an exam but just an exercise where you practice committing words to paper without any intervening media. But we will conduct it like a mock exam. This is good practice for PQEs and other exercises that encourage you to think on the spot.

Week 12 Nov. 26 Student Presentations
Each student will give a short presentation on their final paper research, thus far. This is an exercise in discourse –just talk through your work, no need for powerpoint, no need to read from a printout, etc. Just talk through it.

Note: Over the course of the semester, we will be referring to the following diagram.



09/01/25

OTHER MATTERS

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY CODE

All work must be entirely your own. Please cite the relevant work whenever you borrow ideas from others, using the proper reference format (e.g., APA, MLA). Examples of violations of the academic integrity code include but are not limited to: failure to use quotation marks when quoting, failure to give full credit when paraphrasing, use of others' ideas or work products, submission of work prepared through impermissible collaboration, and submission of work prepared by you for another class. (Your work in this class may be related to your work in another class, but the work you submit for this class should not duplicate that submitted for another class. If you anticipate an exception, please do not hesitate to ask.) Violation of the Academic Integrity Code may result in failure in the course, as well as more serious academic sanctions. For details about the academic integrity code, please refer to https://acadreg.ust.hk/generalreg.html.

Students have the option of checking for plagiarism before turning in each homework, for example using the anti-plagiarism software Turnitin available on Canvas. A rule of thumb is that the similarity score should not exceed 15%, excluding references. Though use of software for spell and grammar check are acceptable, students in PPOL 5111 are asked not to use AI to write their essays or reports.

LATE HOMEWORK POLICY

The only legitimate justification for late homework submission is sick leave or other emergency. Depending on the length of sick leave, you may be asked to present proof of sickness such as a "certificate of sickness" which is obtainable from the doctor. In any other case, extensions on homework due dates are granted only on a case by case basis, and you will need to request extensions from the instructor at least five days before the due dates. For instance, if you have several assignments due at the same time, you may request an extension, which may or may not be granted. When extensions are granted, your submissions will not be penalized.

The "hard deadline" for each assignment is 2 days past the original due date. Late submissions are penalized if extensions are not granted beforehand: your grade will be reduced by 30% if the homework is one day overdue, and by 50% if two days overdue. Any submissions are not accepted beyond the hard deadline.

HEALTH AND HYGIENE

If you are feeling under the weather (and certainly if you test positive for COVID), please stay home and work out, with the professor, how to make up for the missed discussion. The professor will see to it that you can catch up with the material discussed. It may even be possible to join by zoom (again, you would need to discuss these options with the professor).