Building a Policy Fields Framework to Inform Research on Nonprofit Organizations

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Although the importance of the public policy environment for strategic action of nonprofit organizations has become increasingly clear, research on nonprofits is often divorced from their policy context. The purpose of this article is to present a theoretically informed framework for analyzing policy environments that can inform nonprofit research. Drawing on insights from political science, organization theory, public management, and nonprofit studies, the authors propose that the framework reflects a policy field that is an identifiable set of elements in a specific environment that directly shapes local public service provision. These elements include the structures created by institutions that deliver public programs and the ways in which state and local actors interact with and shape these structures as they work on public problems. Through a research example, the article presents the policy field framework's analytic steps.

Keywords: nonprofits; public policy; networks; structuration theory

As the scope of public problems expands and as more policy decision making is devolved from the national government, local policy actors face an increasingly complex environment. Actors in state and local governments and a multitude of private organizations—both for-profit and not-for-profit—work in many fields to establish policy parameters, implement policy ideals, and craft programmatic responses to social problems. Furthermore, devolution and privatization have all contributed to the growth of the nonprofit sector more generally (Salamon, 2002a, 2002b), and scholarly interest in the evolving role of nonprofit organizations in these new public environments has increased (Gronbjerg & Salamon, 2002; Smith & Gronbjerg, 2006; Stone & Ostrower, 2007).

Recognition by scholars of the multifaceted relationship between government and nonprofit organizations is well established. Throughout the history of the United States, nonprofits have played complementary, supplementary, and adversarial roles

in relation to government (Young, 2006), and for more than 20 years, scholars have focused on theoretically and empirically exploring the nature of these roles. For example, Salamon (1987, 1992) based his third-party government concept on the argument that government provides services in particular areas where the voluntary sector fails; thus, the public and nonprofit sectors have historically played complementary roles. In developing a political theory for the nonprofit sector, Douglas (1987) explores why private entities need to exist, given the broad range of services provided by government. His answer suggests that nonprofits arise as an alternative to government where diversity of views, experimentation, and some freedom from bureaucratic constraints are valued by voters. More recent, as Clemens (2006) describes, theoretical interest has focused on nonprofit roles relative to democratic participation and political engagement.

A considerable body of research exists about how nonprofits interact with government through their roles as policy implementers. Here, research focuses on the influence of government contracting and other policy tools on the operation of nonprofit organizations. For example, work on government contracting calls attention to more contested facets of the government–nonprofit relationship and ways in which government policies, laws, regulation, and funding influence nonprofit mission and goals, staffing, and governance (Saidel & Harlan, 1998; Sandfort, Selden, & Sowa, in press; Smith, 2005; Smith & Lipsky, 1993; Stone, 1996; Van Slyke & Roch, 2004). The proliferation of various government tools also gives rise to a complex revenue environment that seems to be driving the creation of hybrid organizational forms and complex management strategies (Gronbjerg, 1993; Gronbjerg & Salamon, 2002; Sandfort et al., in press; Smith, 2006). And, more general, scholars from political science, sociology, nonprofit studies, and public management are actively grappling with how to conceptualize the complex policy environments that characterize third-party government. For example, increasing attention is paid to how nonprofits work together in networks with public and for-profit counterparts to address public problems, implement public policies, and deliver programs (Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Milward & Provan, 2000; O'Toole, 1997; Provan & Milward, 1995).

As we argue below, existing theories from political science, organization theory, public management, and nonprofit studies provide important insights into various components of policy environments. However, we need new ways to use these theories to advance research on the environment in which nonprofit activities occur. To that end, the purpose of this research note is not to develop a unified theory but rather to present a theoretically informed, conceptual framework that allows researchers to unpack the multilevel, multidimensional policy environments that affect many nonprofits. It is important to note that we developed this framework both inductively and deductively. We worked inductively first, using our research and practice experiences in the field to construct an initial framework. We then worked deductively to articulate more clearly the theoretical bases that informed the framework. The advantage of this approach is that it builds on field expertise about the complexity of the nonprofit

environment by bringing multiple theoretical perspectives to bear. The disadvantage of the approach is that the framework uses only certain aspects of theories and is not constructed to test competing theoretical approaches to understanding the environment (which would be a very useful extension of our work). Please refer to Table 1 for a summary of the aspects of theories that the framework emphasizes and de-emphasizes.

What does this framework represent? We propose that the framework, taken in total, reflects a *policy field*, which we define as an identifiable set of elements in a specific environment that directly shape local public service provision. These elements include the structures created by institutions involved in the delivery of particular substantive programs and the ways in which state and local actors interact with these structures.[1] Institutional relationships create structures that both shape how state and local actors work to solve public problems and, in turn, are shaped by the insight, innovation, and energy of these actors as they attempt to realize their programmatic and policy goals. The policy field framework helps one analyze how actual relationships among major institutions and key stakeholders influence the exertion of power and the flow of resources, such as money, information, and clients. The framework also details how these relationships and networks influence the work of nonprofit organizations themselves. We argue, therefore, that many nonprofit scholars can benefit from taking these environmental factors into account when designing research. In fact, adding the policy fields framework to research on nonprofit organizations can alter the very types of research questions that are significant for investigation.

In this article, we first discuss the major theories on which the policy field framework is built. Then, we more fully develop the framework with a research example to suggest how it can be operationalized with specific analytical tools. We conclude with a more general discussion of how this approach can inform nonprofit research and stimulate research questions beyond conventional bounds.

Dimensions of Policy Fields: Policy Contexts, Structuration, Networks, and Social Skills

Dimensions of the policy fields framework draw on theoretical insights from political science, sociology, and public management. Under third-party government, theories and concepts focusing on vertical and horizontal structural arrangements are relevant as are those that grapple with how human agency creates these arrangements. In fact, as we learned in the field, to better understand the complex structure and social processes of policy fields, we must use theories that, taken in total, cross analytical levels, including those that focus on (a) macro-level forces, including policy and institutional factors; (b) meso-level elements about organizational and interorganizational forces; and (c) micro-level factors concerning individual actors and the choices they make. Below, as we discuss each dimension of the policy fields framework, we include work from different levels of analysis.

Table 1
Theoretical "Building Blocks" for the Policy Fields Framework

Theory Base and Insights	Policy Fields Focus	What Is De-Emphasized in Policy Fields Focus?
Policy domains		
Set of organizations and institutions	Programs within a substantive policy area	National scope
Involved in one or more parts of the policy process	Focus on definitive nature of vertical relationships	Focus on policy formation process
Focus on substantive policy area		
Societal sectors		
Expand set to include others that significantly affect focal organizations	Link to intergovernmental relations	
Look at actors in both task and institutional environments	Focus on horizontal as well as vertical relationships	
Organizational fields		
Set of organizations that make up recognized area of institutional life	State and local levels	Focus on institutional isomorphism
Structuration of field as a process involving:	Pool of organizations and resources	
Interaction patterns		
Patterns of domination		
Increased information load		
Mutual recognition		
Structuration		
Institutions and human action or agency interact, making structuration a dynamic process	Importance of human agency in creating, maintaining, and modifying interorganizational relationships	Exclusive focus on the social system being studied
Hence, structures are both constraining and enabling	Reinforcement of importance of vertical and horizontal structures in limiting and directing this agency	
Schemas and resources are at intersection of institutions and action		
Social skill		
Ability of individual actors to analyze fields and persuade others to take collective action within fields or construct new ones	Importance of meaning made by program actors and understanding of strategic, context action that they develop through practice experience	Constraining dimensions of structures
Institutional entrepreneurs		
Policy networks		
Focus on nature and content of ties among organizations at the local and state levels that influence policy process	Multiple types of ties important in the resource flow	The static nature of service implementation networks

Policy Context

The literature on policy domains is especially salient to our theoretical framing because it draws attention to elements of political systems (e.g., the legislature or executive branch), stages of the policy process (agenda setting, policy formation, or implementation), and a substantive set of issues such as national defense, the environment, or health care (Burstein, 1991; Granados & Knoke, 2005; Knoke & Laumann, 1982; Laumann & Knoke, 1987). Most broadly, these scholars are interested in understanding the organizational state, that is, the range of organizations focused on producing collectively binding decisions, such as legislative acts or regulatory judgments, that alter the policy arena. Policy domain analysis usually focuses at the national level, exploring public and nongovernmental institutions and organizations involved in policy formation. The particular substance and social system within a policy domain are distinct from other domains; for example, policy formation in national defense draws on unique organizations, resources, and relationships that differ from the content and process of environmental policy or health care. Within domains, political scientists often explore how public problems are framed, ideas to solve problems are generated, and agendas for change are established (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1995; Knoke, Pappi, Broadbent, & Tsujinaka, 1996; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993).

Within sociology, scholars focus particular attention on the interests of organization-based actors, their mobilization of relationships and resources, and the unfolding of events to analyze and compare the policy formation process. As Burstein (1991) and Laumann and Knoke (1987) show, policy domains are socially and culturally constructed and arise through social interactions among actors as they define the nature of the problem and the solution. Therefore, although there is a conventional belief that policy domains can be substantively bound, reality often is more complex. Sometimes, the substantive issue cannot be isolated. As events occur, these social interactions provide important information to the organizations involved and may reconstruct the field before subsequent events unfold, especially when the nature of a problem and possible solutions are not well established. Individual actors cross the bounds of the policy domain to draw in resources from another domain. The significance of relationships and negotiations then comes from how actors transmit information, transact financial exchanges, or bridge understanding (Knoke et al., 1996; Laumann & Knoke, 1987). For example, when viewed through the lens of city and county public managers, economic development and environmental policy domains intersect at many points (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003).

Societal sectors, a concept from sociology, help broaden the concept of policy domain to more deeply reflect how the blurring across domains is a social and value-laden process. Scott and Meyer (1991) define societal sectors as "(1) a collection of organizations operating in the same domain, as identified by the similarity of their services, products or functions, (2) together with those organizations that critically

influence the performance of the focal organization" (p. 117). A societal sector, then, includes not just organizations within a specific domain but those organizations that support and/or constrain a particular focal organization. Therefore, a sector may include organizations from several policy domains to the extent that they influence each other's actions. It is important that the societal sectors concept also encompasses both the technical or task environment (with its focus on dyadic resource dependencies) and the institutional environment. An institutional environment represents norms, values, and sets of beliefs enacted through rules and regulations to which organizations must conform if they are to acquire the legitimacy necessary for survival (Scott & Meyer, 1991). The inclusion of the institutional environment addresses much of what Burstein (1991) describes as important social and cultural elements of policy domains.

As Scott and Meyer (1991) argue, *societal* implies not just horizontal connections among local organizations but vertical linkages to wider interorganizational systems within society. Especially for public sector agencies, these vertical linkages often represent their "authorizing environment" (Moore, 1995) from which they receive (and must maintain) the authority to act, including, for example, the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. In public affairs, the significance of intergovernmental relations in shaping these vertical linkages is well established. Although there is often assumed to be a hierarchical relationship among national, state, and local governments, scholars have shown that each level possesses sufficient legal, fiscal, and political independence to operate on its own behalf (Cho & Wright, 2004; Elazar, 1965; Goetz & Sidney, 1997; Milward & Wamsley, 1984). Like all types of interorganizational relationships within a societal sector, intergovernmental relations involve many different mechanisms, each developed through political and institutional processes. Intergovernmental relations are distinct, however, from other relationships within a societal sector because of legal mandates that establish fiscal and regulatory authority. In a time of devolution where lower levels of government increasingly take on responsibility for public action, attention to intergovernmental relationships and identification of where formal authority actually lies are essential to understanding the operation of a policy field.

Structuration of Fields

To bring our theoretical attention to the local context, we draw on scholarship that blends institutional theory with structuration theory. DiMaggio and Powell's (1983, 1991) concept of "the structuration of organization fields" is useful.[2] DiMaggio and Powell (1991) define organizational fields as "those organizations that in the aggregate constitute a recognized area of institutional life, including key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, [and] other orgs that produce similar services or products" (pp. 64-65). The structuration of fields is a process that reflects an increase in the extent of interaction among organizations, the emergence

of patterns of domination and coalitions among organizations, an increase in information load for organizations within a field, and the development of mutual awareness that interacting entities are involved in a common enterprise.

DiMaggio and Powell's definition of the structuration of organizational fields includes action and individual agency through, for example, explicit interaction among actors and acknowledgment of others (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). The most common application of the organization fields concept, however, has stressed the constraining nature of the institutional environment through coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures that create tendencies for organizations to look alike. In fact, empirical tests of institutional theory and the organizational fields construct have been criticized for how it has neglected the roles of individuals and social processes that alter structures of fields (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Cooney, 2007; Fligstein, 2001; Sandfort, 2003b; Scott, Deschenes, Hopkins, Newman, & McLaughlin, 2006).

Instead, recent conceptual and empirical work uses structuration theory to more explicitly include individual agency within tenets of institutional theory. Structuration theory emphasizes structures as both constraining and enabling (Giddens, 1984). Humans are knowledgeable about the contexts within which they operate and make choices about when to reinforce these structures and exert agency to try and change them. Yet, human behavior is also constrained by given structures; for example, to the degree that institutions are encoded in actors' practical knowledge, they influence everyday behavior and action (Barley & Tolbert, 1997). People draw on larger "interpretive schemes" to mediate between various courses of action and recreate the structure of their social systems (Cooney, 2007). There is an iterative, unpredictable process in structuration. Sandfort (2003b), for example, demonstrates how frontline workers in the welfare system are constrained within the formal mandates of the system while also engaging in social sense-making that directs their actions in ways that are different from frontline staff in other organizations. Structuration, therefore, is a dynamic process and includes both the constraining nature of institutions and the enabling elements of human knowledge, action, and power.

Policy Networks

At the local level, we are concerned not just with organizations or individual behavior within organizations but also linkages across organizational boundaries within a policy field. In line with much recent work in public management and governance, networks are increasingly understood to be *the* major unit of analysis and the context within which strategic public action takes place (Klijn et al., 2000; Milward & Provan, 2000; O'Toole & Meier, 2004). In a summary of network scholarship, Klijn (1997) concludes that there are three central characteristics of networks:

> They exist because of interdependencies between actors.
> They consist of a variety of actors, each with their own goals.
> They consist of relations of a more or less lasting nature.

For the implementation of policy, network theory directs our attention to a variety of state and local actors. Located in a particular place, a policy subsystem or a pool of organizations exists that is interested in a particular issue (Galaskiewicz, 1979; Goetz & Sidney, 1997; Hjern & Porter, 1981; Laumann & Pappi, 1976; Milward & Wamsley, 1984). The pool of organizations can include government, private nonprofits, small or large businesses, or philanthropic institutions. Their interest in a particular issue emerges from organizational reputations and staff expertise, as well as their assessments of the economic or political viability of engaging with others to work on the problem. Staff within each organization must assess what they can gain from participating in the pool, including, for example, resources, service to key constituents, legitimacy, insight into competitors, and so forth. It is notable how organizations in a given place work together in different capacities depending on the presenting problem. As Hjern and Porter (1981) discuss, one of the most interesting findings in the study of public policy implementation is how many organizations frequently work together on public programs despite having outwardly competitive relationships.

Some network scholars look at these programmatic linkages (Sandfort & Milward, 2008), whereas others map linkages between organizations in respect to financial relationships, information, service referrals, and professional support (Galaskiewicz, 1979; O'Toole, 1997; Provan & Milward, 1995; Provan, Veazie, Staten, & Teufel-Shone, 2005). Much of this research describes networks as static linkages, such as those that arise due to contracting or policy mandates, and few studies examine how network structures change over time (Isett & Provan, 2005). However, some scholars (Galaskiewicz, 1979; Kickert, Klijn, & Koppenjan, 1997) incorporate ideas similar to structuration theory—actors' perceptions, attitudes, and actions are shaped by and shape the networks in which they are embedded. Resource flows are created by actors' decisions and are institutionalized over time. This more dynamic notion of networks is most helpful for our endeavor because it provides conceptual grounding for our attention to strategic action emphasized in the policy fields construct.

Social Skill

Fligstein's concept of social skill is an important link among the organizational field concept in institutional theory, structuration theory, and the use of networks. Social skill, similar to Giddens's notion of an actor's "skilled performance," is the ability of actors to analyze an organizational field situation and then persuade others to pursue some collective action. "Others" may include those within the focal person's organization as well as in other organizations in the field. To gain cooperation, individuals may use direct authority, agenda setting, brokering, bargaining, compromising, and so forth.

For Fligstein, as for Giddens, structure and institutions are both constraining and enabling. Preexisting rules and resource distributions operate as sources of power. Actors, using social skill and drawing on rules and resources, can both reproduce

and form institutions. The reproduction of fields depends on skills of actors in dominant organizations, often under conditions of relative field stability. Under turbulent conditions, institutional entrepreneurs (DiMaggio, 1988), often from groups that challenge the existing institutional order, can use social skill to create new fields or transform existing ones.

The interaction among policy domains, networks, network members, and coalitions creates an especially fluid environment. The enactment of Fligstein's (2001) social skill means that, within a policy domain, network members may operate through coalitions to get others to pursue collective action, either reproducing existing organizational fields or creating new ones. For example, in a comparative case study of collaborations entered into by a single organization, Lawrence, Hardy, and Phillips (2002) describe the ability of collaborations or networks to alter existing fields. They find that high degrees of involvement and embeddedness among organizations in a field are more likely associated with the diffusion of new practices, rules, and technologies that potentially significantly change the field itself. Similarly, as Scott et al.'s (2006) study of youth services illustrates, the process of organizations working together on a common goal alters professional understanding, shifts practices and programs, and, ultimately, may shift public policy. In this study, nonprofits in a particular locale work with county human services departments, state departments of education, and local school districts in the policy field.

Summarizing the Theoretical Threads

The major theories and concepts we use as building blocks to develop the policy fields construct are summarized in Table 1. As is evident, these theories span units of analysis. Policy domains establish the general boundaries of the construct we are developing; we are focused on policy process within substantive policy areas. Within these substantive areas, the implementation of specific policy programs is critical; they establish the content that actors address through their work. The concept of societal sectors expands the types of organizations relevant within a policy field to those including both task and institutional environments. It also points to both vertical and horizontal relationships that cross policy domains. The organizational fields concept allows us to specify at the local level the set of organizations involved with policy implementation programs. Organizations, however, do not operate alone. Rather, they are often working through dynamic networks of interconnected members, organizations, and institutions that themselves influence and are influenced by characteristics of the policy domains in which they are embedded. Structuration theory connects us to the individual actor and his or her ability or social skill to influence and be influenced by the structure of organizational fields and networks. In using these concepts, however, we have—by necessity—moved away from some elements emphasized in each core theory. These elements are noted in Table 1.

Using Policy Fields in Research

Given devolution of policy making and implementation present in Third-party Government and the critical role nonprofits now play in delivering public programs, we believe the policy field framework advances research on the scope, effectiveness, and context of nonprofit organizations. Policy fields are environments of bounded structures shaping how state and/or local actors work. These fields are, in turn, shaped by the insight, innovation, and energy of these actors as they try to realize their programmatic and policy goals. In this section, we use the theoretical streams described above to define more carefully the components of a policy field and illustrate the use of this framework for nonprofit research.

Suppose a researcher were interested in exploring how welfare reform influenced social service provision in the late 1990s. After the passage of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant and reduction in welfare caseloads because of economic growth, significant public resources were available to nonprofit organizations for welfare-to-work and family support services. The researcher started with the following research question: Why did some organizations benefit financially from this environment whereas other human service organizations did not? A typical approach to this question might first concentrate on the contractual relationships between nonprofit service providers and Midwest County Department of Human Services, because that agency is responsible for funding employment services to welfare clients. However, the researcher also recognizes that welfare funding and mandates do not originate in the county but come from state and federal departments. In additional to TANF, funding for other employment services also comes from the federal Workforce Investment Act, implemented by the state's Department of Economic Security and the city's Department of Planning and Economic Development. The researcher also further learns that a public–private partnership of nonprofits and for-profit employers is actively involved in coordinating workforce development activities. A large local foundation and the United Way contributed essential funding to the partnership and some nonprofit members. The external environment is very complex. Policy fields analysis can be used to examine this context, by following particular steps.

Determine primary policy domain(s) in which actors are operating. Building on the theory of policy domains, a policy field focuses on a substantive policy area, such as education, welfare, or housing. Specifying the relevant policy domain that bears on the research question is therefore the first step. As is the case here, one policy domain (welfare) may be prominent but it is likely that others are influential (workforce development and potentially housing, transportation, and child care).

Each area involves specific technical knowledge about the problem and the viability of solutions that could possibly solve it. In our example, the researcher must develop working knowledge of both welfare policy and workforce development policy. More

specific, it is important to understand (a) how the federal government defines welfare client participation rates when determining the performance (and, hence, funding) of counties and states; (b) the relationship between cash welfare and remedial training programs, both those targeted to welfare clients and other low-income individuals; and (c) other forms of work support, such as tax credits, food support, or medical assistance, that are offered as solutions to poverty. The technical knowledge about these issues helps to define the basic awareness among practitioners within the policy field. The ability of researchers to understand these types of technical, policy-specific questions also often influences their capacity to access and build trust with research sites and subjects (Feldman, Bell, & Berger, 2003). It might also inform the shaping of more specific research questions themselves.

Specify the laws and regulations, national programs, and funding streams in play in the policy domain. Identify where administrative authority lies. This step forces the researcher to become familiar with basic institutional contexts that affect the local field in question. More conceptually, this step recognizes that policy fields have both vertical and horizontal bounds. As policy domains and societal sector theories suggest, there are particular vertical relationships that shape the contours of an organization's work. Three are highlighted here. First are the legal and regulatory relationships created by national or local governments in our federalist system. Often, legislation and regulation define the nature of the public problem and create the context within which local policy field actors must operate. In the mid-1990s, national welfare reform shifted the definition of the problem from poverty amelioration to reduction of dependency on public support, and federal law mandated that states report annual participation data focused on trimming cash assistance roles. Public organizations became less involved in administering welfare policy, and private organizations, both nonprofit and for-profit, provided more services. The Workforce Investment Act also changed administrative relations by introducing new relationships among service delivery agencies and focusing on performance accountability. It created new regulatory pressures for managers to document program performance at the state, regional, and agency levels and those pressures were passed along to nonprofit service providers who had to keep careful documentation of results defined by federal mandates or risk losing contracts. This trajectory was further emphasized by TANF in 1996 and subsequent reauthorizations.

Beyond legislative or regulatory parameters, there are other vertical relationships that shape a policy field. Governments increasingly employ a range of instruments or tools to implement public policy, from grants to tax credits, economic regulation to subsidized loans (Peters & Pierre, 1998; Salamon, 2002b). Contracting, for example, focuses on compliance with formal agreements as is the case with our example: Nonprofit employment service providers in Midwest County are likely to have contracts with both the county (through welfare reform) and the city (through the Workforce Investment Act) to provide job-related services to welfare clients.

Understanding the specific rules and requirements of these two types of contracts is essential. Yet, in some places, the workforce development system also uses vouchers to provide subsidy directly to clients, which allows them to choose their own employment training providers. The utilization of vouchers in some places significantly alters dynamics within the welfare-to-work policy field because nonprofit providers must compete with private contractors to catch the attention of clients and draw them to their site. Thus, the nature of the policy tool in use is significant in understanding the dynamics within the local policy field.

The third dimension of vertical relationships we highlight is administrative authority. Scholars of intergovernmental relations argue that units of government at various levels—federal, state, county, and city—play distinct but often overlapping roles (Cho & Wright, 2004; Chubb, 1985; Elazar, 1965). Yet, in a particular policy domain, there is an awareness of a historical concentration of administrative authority. In income support, the federal government historically provided funding and policy parameters in the administration of the Aid to Families With Dependent Children program to assure equity across the states. With welfare reform in the mid-1990s, more administrative authority was passed to states and, in some places like Midwest State, county governments (Nathan & Gais, 1998). Within workforce development, however, a different configuration of administrative authority emerges. This infrastructure is built on the service-delivery area (SDA) structure of the Job Training Partnership Act, an earlier federal program focused on workforce development services. After the Workforce Investment Act, the name was changed from SDA to workforce investment board (WIB). WIBs are governed by public–private boards that decide how public workforce development dollars are invested. The distinct governance authority of the counties and service delivery areas are an element of this policy field that local program operators must negotiate daily. For nonprofit organizations, managing the different relationships, distinct values, precise reference points, and languages of these different authoritative entities consumes considerable organizational resources. The structure and dynamics of the field itself help to provide some insight into our research question of interest, namely, why did some organizations receive public contracts to work with low-income families after welfare reform, whereas others did not?

To help analyze the complexity of administrative authority and vertical relationships, we have found it useful to employ mapping tools (Bryson, Ackermann, Eden, & Finn, 2004). Such maps are word-and-arrow diagrams that causally link ideas and actions or show influence and resource flows. As Bryson and colleagues (2004) argue, causal mapping is useful when there are relationships among interconnected values, goals, and issues, for they help to articulate specific strategies and action. For policy field analysis, we use similar types of maps to create visual displays of the flows of influence from key policy domains and vertical relationships within a policy field. Figure 1 is a simplified visual. When fully developed to incorporate the specific agencies that receive funding from the various county and city administrative entities in Midwest County, our map becomes quite complex. Yet, it is through the process

Figure 1
Sample Policy Fields Analysis
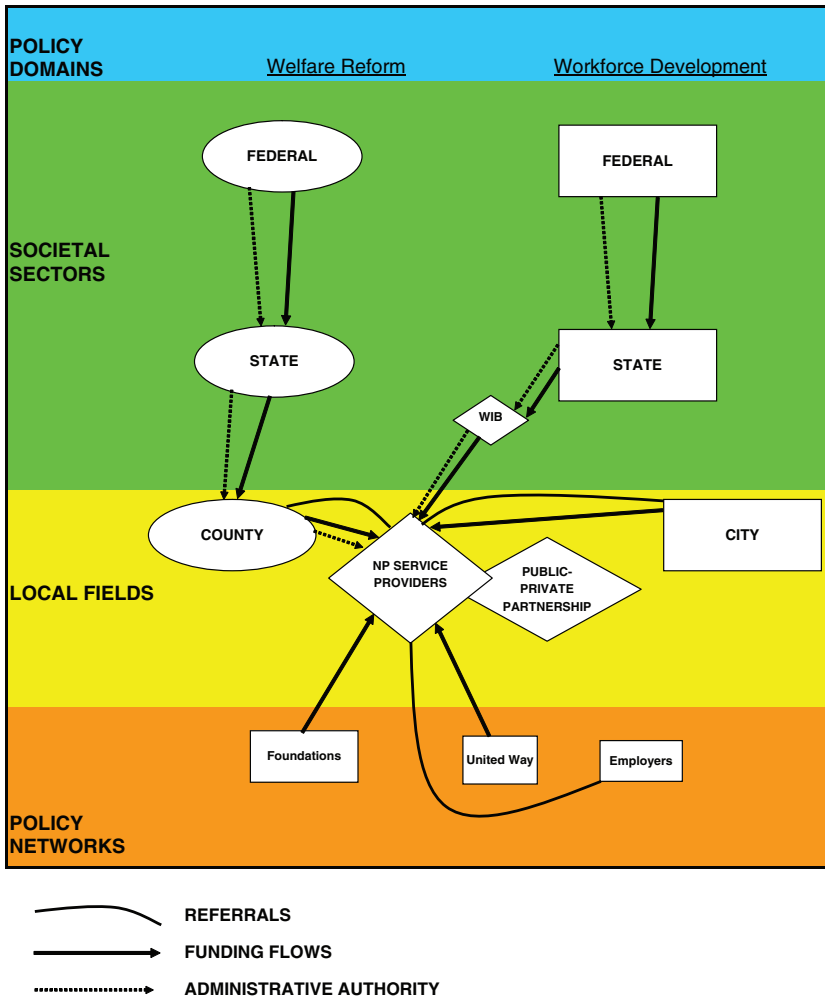
Note: NP = nonprofit; WIB = workforce investment board.

of mapping that a researcher begins to understand how major laws, regulations, and funding streams shape local policy fields. For example, using different types of lines (dashed, dotted, solid), researchers can separate out vertical relationships that represent

legal or regulatory mandates from funding relationships or service delivery and referral systems. The mapping then helps to differentiate administrative authority from other types of power within a particular policy field.

Within the state and local context, determine which organizations have an interest in this problem and which have power to influence decisions. Practitioners and theorists agree that, locally, there is a set of organizations that make up a recognized area of institutional life. This step in the research establishes the relevant pool of organizations that are potentially interested in any particular policy issue in a given locale (Hjern & Porter, 1981). Oftentimes, there is a local social order that develops among these groups and helps actors strategize about how to act in relation to each other (Fligstein, 2001). Ideas "travel" among them as they try to develop solutions to common problems (Scott et al., 2006). This process creates socially constructed bounds of the local policy field; some organizations are recognized by all as being within the local field, participating in the debates or emerging issues, whereas others do not appear in this local social order.

Analytically, we must again draw on the concept of societal sectors to incorporate these important horizontal relationships of both the task and institutional environments into our policy field framework.

In Figure 2, our researcher has noted from her initial inquiries that there are numerous organizations with service-related relationships in Midwest County including human service coalitions, for-profit employers, the local United Way, and foundations. Using an analytical tool such as Figure 2 helps to ensure that the researcher is thorough in identifying the organizational pool within the policy field. In some situations, for example, professional associations or accrediting bodies might be part of the institutional environment and have some degree of normative and coercive authority over the field actors. Without using an analytical tool that points to the institutional environment, these actors might not immediately come to mind. Likewise, one might not initially consider issues of competition among field actors; using a tool that emphasizes the task environment ensures consideration of both collaboration and competition. Once organizations with an interest in this area are identified, dimensions of power and authority can be added and points of conflicting and converging interests can be identified (see Bryson, 2004; Huxham & Vangen, 2005, for examples of further analytical tools to identify and represent power).

Specify linkages and ties among these organizations. Network theory and the use of social network analysis (Provan et al., 2005) can further sharpen the borders of the local field by asking the following set of questions:

- Which organizations are most and least central in the policy field under consideration? Centrality within a network is often associated with power because of the ability of centrally located network members to control flows of resources, such as money, information, and legitimacy.

Figure 2
A Categorizing Scheme for Identifying Relevant Actors in a Local Policy Field

	Task Environment	Institutional Environment

Vertical Relationships	County funders
	
	Workforce Investment Board
	
	United Way
		Federal agencies/authorities
		
		Statehuman service and
		    workforce development
		    agencies
		
		City and County government

Horizontal Relationships	Coalitions who share information Nonprofit competitors for funds, collaborators in service provision Involved local foundation Employer-based partnerships	City and County government Foundations and United Way

- Which network members have links outside the network that can be used? With this information, researchers can construct a map that includes indirect as well as direct ties to establish how field actors influence and are influenced by others. Mapping would visually display the ties as well as their direction of influence.
- What types of ties must be considered? Examples include formal and informal ties (those based on positional or legislative authority and those based on social relationships) or ties based on contracting relationships that have developed into more complex linkages (Isett, 2006). For policy fields, the kinds of ties often include mandated relationships, legislative or judicial authority, funding obligations, service delivery, and those that confer legitimacy and prestige.

Using the initial map created in Figure 1, enhanced by the identification of the organizational pool in Figure 2, researchers can finish mapping these relationships to establish the general boundaries of a local policy field. Even if the study does not collect specific data on network ties, the reasoning and set of questions implicit in social network analysis can be used to draw an initial map of ties. Researchers may begin with formal ties, because they will be indicated by earlier questions about policy domains and vertical relationships and can then hypothesize about other informal ties. Creating a network map, even if a rough approximation, can sharpen questions for further research in the field.

Analyze how the structure of the local field constrains and enables organizational and individual action. Finally, structuration theory suggests that resource deployment combines with social rules to determine the structures of social systems. *Resources* are defined as anything that serves as a source of power in social interactions and include human attributes, such as knowledge; concrete objects, such as raw materials or written information; and organizations, institutions, and networks that are actually bundles of resources. The form of a policy field, then, is directly shaped by the particular resources found in a particular place. For example, localities vary in the extent to which they have high concentrations of nonprofit organizations (Gronbjerg & Paarlberg, 2001) or philanthropic institutions and private business corporations that invest in a particular location (Foundation Center, 2006; Pratt & Spencer, 2000). Communities also vary in the extent to which multiple networks exist (Hjern & Porter, 1981; Provan et al., 2005). High concentrations of private funders or well-networked nonprofits are, in the terms of structuration, important resources.

Giddens's (1984) theory also suggests that rules or schema are essential in understanding and structuring the social system. *Rules* include both those that are formal and explicit, such as federal mandates in a policy domain, and the tacit norms or shared beliefs. Rather than being formally written or stated, they are informal and implicit. They are the knowledge that people develop and share during routine actions within a network or an organization. Citing Geertz, Fligstein (2001) notes that local knowledge about people and organizations helps to define power within a place. Structuration theory suggests that such knowledge becomes a set of taken-for-granted rules that shapes communication and resource flows between organizations (Sandfort, 1999). Reputations and perceptions combine with more tangible resources, then, to become significant factors structuring the institutional context of a policy field.

Using structuration theory to help our researcher, it becomes clear that the composition of the network and the shared knowledge that exists within the policy field may directly influence her research question of interest, namely, why did some organizations financially benefit from the changing environment after welfare reform? The dense network within Midwest County, with its significant public and private resources, creates a distinct environment. It provides individuals within the context

a shared way to understand policy processes and change (Klijn, 1997), as they have others to consult, debate, and respond to in order to resolve the ambiguity inherent in much of policy formation and policy implementation (Granados & Knoke, 2005; Sandfort, 1999). Yet, some organizations are excluded from this field and do not, for example, receive requests-for-proposals when they are issued or learn about them from professional networks.

Structuration theory also directs the researcher's attention to how this field structure develops. Some people are able to seize opportunities and create new alliances and partnerships that are unexpected but shape the field's structure. In Fligstein's (2001) concept of social skill, individuals are able to analyze the context and persuade others to act, sometimes in ways that break with prevailing local knowledge. In a study of collaborative management within local economic development, Agranoff and McGuire (2003) found that collaboration effectiveness could be explained by both variation in environmental conditions, such as economic conditions, and the tools, actions, and perceptions of local managers. Policy field analysis explores the agency that individuals have in responding to the significant change in federal and state authority that was welfare reform. It explores how some organizational leaders seized the availability of new resources to improve programs or create new opportunities that might sustain them in an era, like the current one, where public resources to support low-income families are much more constrained.

Further Research Implications and Conclusion

Our thinking about policy fields has emerged from our concern that most research on nonprofit organizations does not fully consider how the policy environment shapes organizational operation and performance and shapes how actors act strategically to advance organizational interests. This oversight is particularly problematic in the era of third-party government when all types of private organizations are increasingly involved in shaping and implementing public policy and programs. As an analytical tool, the policy fields framework builds on multiple theories and crosses several levels of analysis: institutional, organizational, network, and individual. In this way, it can improve our understanding of third-party government and the complex web of accountabilities it creates for nonprofit organizations. This framework may alter the kinds of questions researchers ask, generate new types of hypotheses, and yield deeper findings than currently exist. Three different approaches to nonprofit research may benefit from use of this framework.

The first are studies focused on elements of organizational life that do not emphasize environmental issues. For example, our researcher is not interested in how human service organizations secure public funds but, instead, is interested in operational or structural change within organizations because of government contracts. It is clear that such a project could benefit from the layered specification of the institutional and task

environments that emerge from policy fields analysis. Such analysis—that uncovers the relationships represented in Figure 1—might well lead the researcher to consider more refined questions such as, Do specific contract requirements from the county and city differ and does this have distinct influence on organizational practices and policies? How are pressures from the state and federal governments, such as outcome measurement, passed on to nonprofit service providers? Have funding requirements from private sources, such as the United Way and local foundations, paralleled or contradicted county and city contract requirements related to organizational activities and programs? Such questions help to operationalize principles from open systems theory that emphasize the environment's role in shaping organizational operations and structure. In addition, background research on the field can ease access to research sites for any scholar as informants feel more comfortable when the researcher clearly understands the local institutional context, constraints, and opportunities they face (Sandfort, 2003a).

Second, this analysis can help researchers interested in better understanding the structure and processes within particular fields in particular locations. In our example, we have focused on the policy field analysis unique to Midwest County. The presence of strong county-units of government and dense philanthropic resources, for example, would alter the way power is exerted in the field, the flow of resources and ideas, and the opportunities for leadership. Research about local economic development, housing, and youth development emphasizes the particular ways in which power, resources, and leadership shape practices in these fields (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Goetz & Sidney, 1997; Scott et al., 2006).

Although the specifics might be particular, however, this type of application of the policy fields framework also offers a rich laboratory for exploring elements from the various theoretical schools that inform it. Such an analysis could, for example, apply the insights of policy domain scholars to tease apart the levels of analysis and phenomenal units, differentiating actors and events, and how they interact within the state and/or local policy field (Laumann & Knoke, 1987). Such an analysis could go further to more precisely articulate network multiplexity overlooked in larger scale analyses (Knoke & Kuklinski, 1982; Provan et al., 2005). In short, studies using the framework can more deeply engage one or more of these theoretical perspectives depending on the research objectives.

Policy fields analysis has a final application. The devolution of national responsibility to state and local levels is premised on the belief that local variation will improve public service results. However, there is limited empirical work on how variations in policy fields influence such results. Although we know that variation exists within factors, such as administrative authority, organizational density, private philanthropic resources, local organizational pools, and networks, we understand little about how variation across these factors affects outcomes, either for the service-providing organizations or citizens receiving services. The policy field framework makes this type of analysis more feasible by defining the elements in a field and analyzing their relationships to each other.

Each of these three approaches would likely employ multiple methods of data collection. To master the basic technical and substantive material, one may need to conduct significant archival or policy research. Surveys or interviews with policy and organizational actors would be needed to establish the terms of the field and, depending on the focus on individual agency and sense-making, ethnographic interviews and observation may well be warranted. As in any research effort, a policy field framework will require that investigators create a design and use methods relevant to their larger scholarly purpose.

We have developed this framework because of our strong belief that awareness of institutional and social contexts is necessary for informed, engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007). By working in a disciplined way through the steps discussed here, a researcher can arrive at an informed and theoretically justifiable decision based on a clear, replicable process. The policy field framework is a structured analytical approach to filtering elements of complex institutional structures while acknowledging the agency that individuals exercise to shape these structures. No single theoretical stream that we have described can fully account for this complexity, especially if the research is concerned with understanding both constraining and enabling factors in these environments for individual action. At this point, a new theory is not warranted. Rather, what is needed is a thoughtful application of existing theory that works across levels of analysis—first specifying and then analyzing relationships among institutional or macro-level factors, organizational/interorganizational or meso-level elements, and individual or micro-level characteristics. We have attempted such an application in order to contribute to a deeper understanding of the context of third-party government.

Notes

1. We acknowledge the similarity of the policy field concept to other terms found in much earlier public administration ("policy subsystem"; Milward & Walmsley, 1984) and sociology ("community network"; Galaskiewicz, 1979) scholarship.

2. DiMaggio and Powell do not limit their concept of organizational fields to a local, geographic area. Rather, we are using that concept and applying it at the local level.

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