Policy Learning: Applications in Social Policy

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Abstract

The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) has been widely used in the field of policy studies, however, continues to be revised and applied in different policy arenas. This study seeks to utilize the ACF in an area of social policy, specifically mental health, identifying how policy-oriented learning takes place within different counties. While findings are not conclusive, implications for future research within this policy area and with the ACF are discussed further.

Keywords: Advocacy Coalition Framework, mental health, policy-oriented learning

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Since the inception of the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) more than 30 years ago, it has become one of the most widely utilized methods for understanding the policy process. As of 2017, researchers have applied ACF in 161 cases (Pierce et al., 2017). The literature on the ACF is quite expansive, in regards to policy theory in part because it is a complex framework that allows for many aspects of the policy process to be understood through studying policy subsystems (Jenkins-Smith, et al. 2018). The majority of the ACF applications have been in environmental issue areas (Pierce et al., 2017), leaving significant gaps in the literature about how it is applied in different policy arenas. Further, as the theory relates to many aspects of policy, one that has been more elusive than most is policy learning (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). Dunlop and Radelli’s (2018) systematic analysis of policy learning arrived at the conclusion that this is an area that calls for increased research. The focus of this research is to expand the ACF further into social policy and identify how policy-oriented learning occurs. After providing an overview of the ACF, a review of current literature is provided to illustrate where the framework currently stands as a tool in understanding the policy process. The research proposed seeks to add to the growing body of literature surrounding the ACF in areas of social policy, with particular focus on policy learning.

**Theory and Past Applications**

The primary unit of analysis in the ACF is the policy subsystem, or the groups of people and organizations that operate to bring about policy goals within a specific policy arena. While other policy theories look at the policy change process from a macro level, the ACF posits that the change process can be understood by studying how the policy subsystem develops, how coalitions within the subsystem interact with each other and opposing coalitions, as well as how these interactions influence policy outcomes.

There are some key assumptions that underpin the use of policy subsystems. Policy subsystems are composed of many unique elements, both internal and external, that interact with each other, producing policy outcomes, where individuals or groups, determine who is involved in a specific policy arena, or subsystem (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). For example, some individuals appear to play an active role in a particular area (e.g., advocating), however, if there is not coordination with the primary subsystem, the ACF approach argues that said individuals are not necessarily considered a part of the subsystem (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). The ACF notes that while some policy subsystems operate independently, there is often crossover, particularly when common policy goals can be identified (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). These subsystems often act as some kind of expert or authority in the specific policy area, usually because of vested interest in outcomes (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). Finally, it is important to note that a policy subsystem has stages of change, having periods of equilibrium, or maintaining the status-quo, small, incremental changes, and periods of significant shifts (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). Another key factor that the ACF identifies is that policy subsystems need to have time to develop, in order to accurately identify the key components, researchers should allow a period of at least ten years (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018).

Within these policy subsystems are coalitions, which are formed by actors through identifying common beliefs (Baumgartner, Jones, & Mortensen, 2018; Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). Most policy theories recognize the individual or group affecting policy change as being “boundedly rational,” or incapable of taking in all relevant information (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018; Baumgartner, Jones, & Mortenson, 2018). The ACF posits that individuals’ process information through beliefs, identifying three specific tiers of beliefs (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). *Deep core beliefs* are defined as those beliefs that are inherent to human nature, not specific to any particular type of policy, and are very difficult to change (e.g., equality is fundamental) (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). *Policy core beliefs* are more susceptible to change, however, are also deeply rooted, and are the function of deep core beliefs (e.g., everyone should have equal access to mental health care) (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). The ACF hypothesizes that when coalitions can coalesce around policy core beliefs, the coalition has a greater chance of being successful in the long run (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). Empirical investigations have confirmed the importance of policy core beliefs in bringing coalitions together (e.g., Weible & Sabatier, 2005). *Secondary beliefs* are the most easily changed, as these beliefs have to do with specific policy tools and outcomes (e.g., insurance companies are responsible for providing specific mental health services) (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). In addition to beliefs as an integral part of the ACF, it is important to identify how these beliefs are subject to change.

**Use of Expert Information and Professional Forums**

The primary mechanism for a coalition developing and possibly changing beliefs, particularly secondary beliefs, according to the ACF is the use of science or expert information. Weiss (1977) argued that as an area of study develops new research protocols and expands its ability to gather and analyze new information, these results begin to change the previously held beliefs about what causes a problem and viable alternatives. The ACF hypothesizes that when generally accepted theory and quantitative data are available for the issue at hand, learning between coalitions is far more likely (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). Elliott and Schlaepfer (2001) found that when information was limited and qualitative in nature, learning did not happen between coalitions. However, despite having accepted scientific data, Kim (2003) found that two coalitions interpreted the information from very different approaches, in line with their respective cultural beliefs. The use of expert information is a significant tool utilized by coalitions in the ACF, however, this tool is best utilized in some form of a professional forum.

The ACF posits that when a professional forum exists so that opposing coalitions are forced to engage with each other, the resulting discourse has the potential to promote learning and possibly the changing of secondary beliefs (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). Leach, Weible, Vince, Siddiki, and Calanni (2013) found that when individuals were brought together for the sake of learning more about the issue, the majority of respondents in the study stated that their opinion had changed on the issue area. Though in contrary to what the ACF hypothesizes, researchers found that the more vague the information and decreased expertise, the actors increased their likelihood in opinion changing, due to the new information provided (Leach, et al., 2013). Coalitions may participate in the process and learn from expert information differently than originally hypothesized in the ACF. Jenkins-Smith, et al. (2018) calls for a reexamination of this hypothesis.

**Mapping coalitions and belief systems**

Despite a general understanding of the structure and importance of belief systems for ACF, empirical work has largely left the question of whether it is possible for coalitions to come together merely on an agreement of policy core beliefs unanswered. Henry (2011) explored this in depth through looking at coalition, or network, formation within the subsystem of regional planning in California. Through comprehensive statistical analysis, Henry (2011) identified that groups consolidate based on similar beliefs. Ainuson (2009) found similarly that different groups came together surrounding a policy core belief (e.g., who should have control over urban water development). However, Henry (2011) notes that external factors might impact the formation of said groups. ACF posits that often what drives the formation of coalitions is the ability to combine resources, both physical and relational (e.g., political capital) (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). Coalitions forming on both the basis of shared beliefs and the need to combine resources, potentially allows for more influence over the identified policy area.

It is worth noting that it can be difficult to identify coalitions within a subsystem, in part because within ACF, coalitions can exist as an analytical unit, as formal/informal coordination, or both. For example, in their work with Marine Protected Areas, Weible and Sabatier (2005) found that coalitions existed, though members of said coalitions did not necessarily view themselves as working in concert for desired policy outcomes. Coalitions were identified through the connection of policy core beliefs and a degree of coordination between the different interest groups (Weible & Sabatier, 2005). Therefore, when looking at the formation of coalitions, having similar policy beliefs does not necessarily mean that individuals will combine efforts, in support of a specific policy outcome. Ingold, Fischer, and Cairney (2017) found weak evidence of this when looking at emerging coalitions in the fracking policy. It was found that actors had difficulty identifying those who shared similar belief structures and therefore did not form relationships and coordinate efforts (Ingold, et al., 2018). This confirms the need for ACF’s recommendation of looking at developed subsystems and coalitions, particularly when attempting to understand how the coalitions are affecting policy change. Coalitions are the focal point of understanding the policy subsystem. It is through their interactions with each other that the possibility of policy change occurs.

**Paths to Policy Change**

Coalitions form with the desire to affect change in a specific policy area and engage in policy-oriented learning,one of the significant methods ACF identifies as a way to bring about change (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). *Policy-oriented learning* is defined as “enduring alternations of thought or behavioral intentions that result from experience and which are connected with the attainment or revision of the precepts of the belief system of individuals or collectives” (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier, 1993, p. 42). ACF hypothesizes several ways that policy-oriented learning takes place, including learning from other coalition members, reacting to external factors, and interacting or learning from experts from the field. This method of learning is also a potential factor in influencing policy core and secondary beliefs.

Policy-oriented learning has been studied in several policy areas with notable research comparing coalitions in similar policy arenas. Luxon (2017) identified two comparable coalitions focusing on similar policy outcomes, but in different subsystems. Luxon found that those coalitions that actively engaged in learning about the policy arena (e.g., shifts in power, changes to rules) were successful in achieving desired outcomes (2017). In regards to water development in Ghana, Ainuson (2009) found that opposing coalitions frequently consulted with each other and with mutually respected experts, creating a path for policy learning or change. In examining policy-oriented learning through the changing of beliefs, as predicted by Sabatier (1993), major changes in deep or policy core beliefs are rare. Sotirov and Memmler (2012) confirmed this in their review of natural resource policy studies, finding that the majority of policy change was in regards to the changing of secondary beliefs. This suggests that an important path to policy change is through the alteration of secondary beliefs.

In looking at other pathways in policy-oriented learning, Luxon (2017) demonstrated that when coalitions are aware of changing political climates, they are likely to take advantage and change strategy. However, Luxon found that policy-oriented learning and related policy change may not occur for several reasons (2017). When comparing two coalitions with similar goals in different policy arenas, Luxon (2017) found that one coalition was not “quick” or “agile” enough to adopt different strategies and was unable to engage in policy-oriented learning as a result. In contrast, a similar coalition with similar goals did achieve preferred outcomes through engagement and interaction with the policy arena, identifying who the new decision makers were and making revisions to their strategy (Luxon, 2017). This demonstrates that there is a need to both “learn quickly” and adapt to changing external circumstances, both of which may be possible factors in obtaining preferred policy outputs. As seen through the ACF and the literature, there are several pathways to policy change including policy-oriented learning (e.g., Sotirov & Memmler, 2012) and responding to disruptions outside of and within the policy subsystem (Luxon, 2017). However, Jenkins-Smith et al. (2018) suggest that future research needs to closely examine these pathways and identify a consistent, measurable approach, in order to strengthen this hypothesis within the ACF.

**Applications of the ACF to Social Policy**

To date, the majority of applications of ACF have looked at environmental policy arenas (e.g., Ainuson, 2009; Luxon, 2017; Weible & Sabatier, 2005) with little attention paid to how applicable ACF is in social policy arenas. Cohen, Tavrow, and McGrath (2018) utilized ACF to examine the successful passage and continued support for legislation mandating condom use on pornographic film sets, identifying active coalitions and the strategies used to promote policy change (e.g., use of framing, combining resources, ability to mobilize large groups of activists, etc.). While Cohen et al. (2018) do focus on the use of framing as an additional mechanism in the success of policy change, it is unclear if framing alone would have been just as effective in bringing about the desired policy change. In a similar manner, Steinman et al. (2017) found that when ACF was utilized to look at “breastfeeding-friendly” legislation, framing was identified as a significant tool in coalitions’ success. Both applications of ACF to social policy share some important characteristics. Both explored ACF in the context of social policy legislation that was immediately happening, rather than using the suggested ten-year guideline. Further, both include framing theory and approaches to supplement the ACF approach.

Some research has taken the long-term approach when looking at changes in public health policy. Breton, Richard, Gagnon, Jacques, and Bergeron (2008) suggested that through the utilization of the ACF, they were able to more accurately describe the complex dynamics leading up to the passing of Quebec’s Tobacco Act. While there have been some applications of the ACF in social and health policy, the lack of research in these policy arenas calls into question whether the framework has the same applicability as it does in environmental policy. Jenkins-Smith et al. (2018) call for increased coverage and applicability to other policy areas. In part, such extension may allow for the refinement of some of the aspects of the framework.

As indicated above, ACF has largely been applied to areas regarding environmental policy (e.g., Ainuson, 2009; Albright, 2011; Ingold, Fischer, & Cairney, 2017; Weible & Sabatier, 2005). This project proposes to investigate several ACF hypotheses for their applicability the social policy context.

**Policy-Oriented Learning**

Policy-oriented learning is identified as a significant pathway to policy change. According to Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993), policy-oriented learning occurs when existing beliefs are challenged and modified through the introduction of new information. Multiple propositions have been identified by ACF, however, the focus of this project is to identify if the quality of data is useful in informing the issue area, leading to policy-oriented learning:

*Learning Hypothesis 1: Problems for which accepted quantitative data and theory exist are more conducive to policy-oriented learning across belief systems than those in which data and theory are generally qualitative, quite subjective, or altogether lacking.* (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018)

In studying policy subsystems, identifying the individuals who are in pursuit of promoting their interests in the hopes of influencing policy outcomes is key (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). Coalitions are formed, in part, by the coordination of these individuals and are connected through common policy core beliefs (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). ACF has identified ideal situations for which policy-oriented learning occurs (Sabatier, 1993), which involves a degree of conflict in either policy core or secondary beliefs.

*Learning Hypothesis 2: Policy-oriented learning across belief systems is most likely when there is an intermediate level of informed conflict between the two coalitions, requiring that each has the technical resources to engage in such debate and the conflict is between secondary aspects of one belief system and core elements of the other, or, alternatively, between important secondary aspects of the two belief systems.* (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018)

As noted earlier, the Advocacy Coalition Framework posits that the key to changing beliefs is the introduction of new information, through the use of professional forums (Sabatier, 1993). Professional forums or expert based information are identified as the source where coalitions learn new information to utilize in gaining preferred policy outputs, either through integrating with another coalition or the changing of secondary beliefs (Sabatier, 1993).

*Learning Hypothesis 3: Policy-oriented learning across belief systems is most likely when there exists a forum that is prestigious enough to force professionals from different coalitions to participate and dominated by professional forums.*

**Policy Change**

Jenkins-Smith et al. (2018) identify various methods for policy change including both external and internal shocks to the policy subsystem. These “shocks” lead to changes in either the policy core or secondary beliefs of the coalitions (policy-oriented learning). These changes create the capacity for either major or minor policy change (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018). Sabatier (1993) notes that major change is far less likely usually involves a significant power shift, however, minor change is more common. Given these causal links between shocks, learning and policy change within the framework, this research investigates the following hypothesis in regards to social policy:

*Policy Change Hypothesis 1: Significant perturbations external to the subsystem, a significant perturbation internal to the subsystem, policy-oriented learning, a negotiated agreement, or some combination thereof is a necessary, but not sufficient, source of change in the policy core attributes of a government program.* (Jenkins-Smith, et al., 2018)

**The Policy Area: Mental Health Services**

I seek to operationalize several of ACF’s hypotheses regarding how coalitions form, in regards to shared beliefs, and affect change through policy-oriented learning in a social policy arena. The passage and implementation of the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA) in California, in 2004, provides an opportunity to test ACF’s propositions. This act imposes an additional 1% tax on millionaires, with the funds directed to counties to develop and implement mental health programs and resources (Feldman, 2009). The state specifies how counties can spend much of their MHSA funding, however, there is still some discretion left to the counties in deciding the unique needs of the county (Department of Health Care Services, 2017). This funding stream is expected to bring in $1.888 billion (Department of Health Care Services, 2017).

There are several different areas that make up the MHSA, with each area specific in what programs counties are to be developing and implementing with that funding. However, the area of innovation is in place to creativity and development of new ideas. According to the Mental Health Services Oversight and Accountability (MHSOAC), the innovation funding stream has the overarching goal of “increasing access to underserved groups, increase the quality of services, promote interagency collaboration, and increase access to services” (2018). While there are challenges in attempting to develop truly innovative projects (e.g., mandate that proposals have not been tried anywhere else), according to the MHSA Evaluation of Innovation Projects (2015), there are a select number of counties that have risen above this challenge, consistently implementing innovation projects. Each county has a process for selecting innovation projects and discretion over which proposals will be selected for implementation. These projects are intended to test whether a particular model will increase mental health outcomes, with the primary goal being learning, rather than on providing services (MHSOAC Innovation Evaluation Project, 2015). Due to the vague nature of this funding stream (e.g., no specific population or program is guaranteed to benefit from this funding), this stream is most likely one where policy-oriented learning occurs. A lingering question outside the scope of this particular project is why there is a large discrepancy among counties. Through the use of the ACF, this research will attempt to identify coalitions, belief systems, and instances of policy-oriented learning within these particular policy subsystems. This study will add to the sparse literature on the ACF in areas of social policy.

**Methods**

**Selection of Counties/Policy Subsystems**

Through the use of comparative case studies, relying on a combination of archival research and semi-structured interviews, this project aims to identify coalitions within each policy subsystem, areas of conflict, and if individuals of coalitions engage in policy-oriented learning. In these case studies, each county will represent a unique policy subsystem. In looking at data from the MHSOAC Innovation Evaluation Project Report (2015), some counties have successfully launched more innovation projects than other counties. I selected four counties based on comparable number of innovation projects successfully launched in the period 2010-2018, comparable populations (State of California, 2018), and similar median income of counties. Such selection allows for some control over potential conflating causal mechanisms and explanations.

**Data Collection**

Initially, a review of all innovation projects was conducted within each county. The state requires each county to develop and have available for viewing a “MHSA Three-Year Plan and Annual Updates” report. These reports were used in conjunction with the MHSA Evaluation of Innovation Projects (2015) to identify innovation projects proposed and funded by each county. Within these projects, it was noted who brought forth or who strongly advocated for the proposal (e.g., individual, community based organization, etc.), the population that primarily benefited from the specific innovation project, the data or justification utilized in the proposal, and the history of this issue area and advocate (e.g., have the individuals attempted proposals in the past, what changed in the approved proposal). Past proposals that have been modified may indicate an instance of policy-oriented learning.

County personnel and advocates were then contacted for interviews to compliment archival research and identify information not readily available for use by the public (see appendix for interview questions). A set of participants were selected, including MHSA coordinators, individuals responsible for innovation projects, individuals who participated in bringing innovation proposals forward, and other individuals with knowledge of the MHSA climate within the particular county. This allowed the mapping of coalitions and issue areas within each unique subsystem. Through triangulating outcomes, archival research, and responses from the interviewees, evidence was examined to identify the existence of advocacy coalitions, use of professional forums (e.g., meetings, work groups, etc.), how the use of data and theory differed, and changes in innovation projects. When possible, public meetings were attended by this researcher, for the purposes of observation and gaining a clearer understanding of how each county operated, seeking information that was not available through public documents or identified during interviews.

In order to identify advocacy coalitions, individuals and groups were coalesced together by the population being advocated for, as an indicator of their policy core beliefs, which is consistent with how the ACF interprets policy outputs, a translation of beliefs (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018). Primarily through the MHSOAC Innovation Evaluation Project Report (2015), other publically available MHSA documentation, and interviews, I coded innovation projects of the counties according to which populations the project primarily served/which groups were benefited and who the primary agency or coalition group was in bringing the project to fruition. In order to classify evidence of coordination (e.g., collaborations on proposals, vocal support during the review process, etc.), examination of documents was used to identify anyone who attempted to influence the innovation projects and/or proposals through the attendance of stakeholder meetings, submitting a proposal for review, or submitted comments relating to the final projects. These individuals and/or organizations were identified primarily through the use of interviews and reviewing MHSA documentation specific to each county (e.g., meeting minutes, public comments, who developed the proposal, etc.). It was assumed that individuals representing an agency were speaking on behalf of said agency and coded accordingly. Individuals with no agency or governmental affiliation were coded based upon the population or issue area their actions sought to advocate for. Once these coalitions were identified, evidence of shared secondary beliefs was examined (e.g., similar language on the preferred policy for how to address the issue).

In order to identify if there was a use of professional forums, it was identified how each county conducts the required MHSA advisory meetings. Minutes of these meetings were reviewed, noting who was in attendance (e.g., professionals from a variety of backgrounds, individuals with lived mental health experience), whether discussion occurred, and the level of conflict at these meetings (e.g., are differing opinions offered, encouraged, etc.). Because of the detailed nature of the innovation project proposals, some counties host working groups to facilitate the development of these proposals, at which time discussion may occur, offering opportunities for individuals with varying interests to interact with each other. It was analyzed how these work groups were conducted and to what extent utilized to identify if this was a sufficient condition to include as a professional forum (e.g., ideas exchanged between different individuals, questions asked about the needs of the county, who attended, and how many participants engaged in these meetings).

In order to identify how data and theory are utilized in informing policy and possibly policy change, I reviewed the justifications of the innovation proposals. I noted how the data was collected (e.g., professionally vs. anecdotally), if quantitative data was used to illustrate the policy issue, and how the participants in the subsystem viewed the data (e.g., questions of validity in justifying innovation proposals). It was also noted the timeline in how each county utilized the expert information. Different types of expert based information (e.g., local data, national data, professional groups, etc.) were grouped together to identify any trends or changes in sources and types over the time period.

Policy-oriented learning was identified through the examination of the original innovation proposals (when available). For example, I concluded that learning occurred if a group initially proposed one method and then later altered the proposal because of collaboration with other individuals or receiving evidence that prompted a refinement in the method of the innovation proposal. When an original proposal was unavailable, I used responses from interviewees to fill in this information gap was relied upon. Attempts were made to investigate previously approved innovation projects, looking for evidence of coordination and learning amongst groups of a coalition. While an innovation proposal may not have been approved for a variety of reasons, coalitions may have taken the issue outside of the innovation parameters to another funding stream within MHSA or another route altogether, indicating a possible instance of policy-oriented learning.

**Results**

Of the counties examined, public records provided details on what innovation projects had been implemented. No distinct patterns were found within the distribution of the projects, in terms of different demographic groups served by Innovation Projects (e.g., youth, homeless populations, veterans, etc.), with each county having a range of demographics served. In examining the minutes and agendas of meetings, it proved difficult to identify distinct coalitions, due to sparse documentation of the meetings (e.g., posted agendas and minutes were brief). Consequently, interviews allowed a more in-depth exploration of existing coalitions.

Interviews proved to be challenging to obtain. Due to the small sample size, results are aggregated and no specific county is identified, in order to protect confidentiality. In regards to Policy Change Hypothesis 1, there was some evidence of external disruptions influencing one policy subsystem, where several interviewees specifically mentioned that the results of the 2016 election identified an increased need to a particular population. However, interviews with other subsystem actors failed to corroborate the impact of the election as a driver. This difference indicates that different actors may be influenced by external shocks in different ways.

Various forms of data were found to be utilized in the presentation and justification of innovation proposals, however, research indicated mixed results regarding which was found to be more convincing within subsystems, providing inconclusive evidence for Learning Hypothesis 1, which states that quantitative evidence is more likely to lead to policy-oriented learning. Interviews found that some actors perceived certain types of data (e.g., quantitative, theory based, etc.) to be more convincing and promote discussion, however, actors within the same subsystem disagreed with this finding, stating that they had witnessed no difference in discussion or approval of proposals based on different forms of data. When examining data related to Learning Hypothesis 3, which identifies that the existence and use of professional forums creates increased opportunity for policy-oriented learning, there was evidence of forums utilized throughout several counties, however, the degree that these forums promoted discussion between actors and coalitions is inconclusive.

Overall, there was some evidence of individual advocates joining with other entities, or forming coalitions, with the goal of appearing stronger and combining resources. As a result, one particular coalition was able to achieve preferred policy outputs, benefiting a particular demographic. Individuals in this coalition cited the forums, or working meetings, as a key venue for advocating for preferred policy and identified several instances where they gained more supporters as a result. Within one county there was some evidence of conflict (one actor would often disagree with policy outputs), however, the majority of the evidence gathered through interviews indicates that of the policy subsystems examined there was no significant conflict between coalitions and actors, providing no evidence for Learning Hypothesis 2, which states that policy-oriented learning is more likely when an intermediate level of conflict is present.

**Discussion and Implications for Future Research**

This research sought to expand the use of the ACF to social policy, an area relatively unexplored by the theory. Some evidence was found to support the hypotheses posited. However, due to some significant limitations particularly in data collection, both expected and unexpected, results are not conclusive. One of these foreseen limitations was the lack of reliable information available on those projects that did not make it to the hearing process. Attempts to mitigate this issue were made during the interviews, however, most interview responses offered vague or superficial reasons as to why a proposal was not approved. Attending public meetings/forums where innovation proposals were discussed was another attempt to identify information not readily available. Through attendance of these forums/working groups, significant information surrounding current proposals as well as the nature of relationships between individuals was identified. This approach proved necessary for studying this particular policy arena, in order to gain critical information leading to quality data.

No recent research utilizing ACF explicitly discusses the manner of obtaining quality information from individuals within the subsystem, however, it is implied to some extent, due to researchers successfully interviewing key actors in contentious policy arenas, reporting no issues with validity (Ainuson, 2009; Weible & Sabatier, 2005). While an individual’s biases will undoubtedly play a role in revealing what information is shared and what is omitted, attempts to mitigate this issue included interviewing multiple individuals from the same county, with the goal to triangulate varying accounts where there was insufficient documentation. In some instances, it appeared that some interviewees were not as forthcoming, however, when reminded of confidentiality, some interviewees appeared to be slightly more open and forthcoming with responses. The issue of obtaining quality information from individuals should be further explored and elaborated upon in the ACF research, particularly when interviews are being utilized to ascertain behaviors of individuals not readily apparent in other forms of information. Jenkins et al. (2018) identifies the need for increased commonalities in the ACF research, in order to draw comparisons and increase the applicability across systems. This research corroborates this need.

In examining the ACF in the context of this particular policy area, it is possible that perhaps this is not an ideal context to apply ACF. Schattschneider (1975) argues the less public or visible nature of this policy arena, there are a reduced number of actors and subsequently conflict. While the ACF does account for increased support as a shock that may affect the subsystem, the literature does not indicate an accounting for the degree of salience a subsystem has a parameter. Former research has shown that all of the issue areas were in the public eye with a substantial amount of controversy and disagreement (e.g., Breton et al., 2008; Cohen et al., 2018; Steinman et al., 2017). Further research is needed to expand on this concept as this research indicates that this may be a significant factor in utilizing the ACF to examine policy subsystems. In this case study, it was found that no disagreement was readily apparent, rather coalitions are competing for scarce resources. The individuals and entities that achieved desired policy outputs did so through illuminating needs of certain groups of people. Due to the nature of how the MHSA advisory groups must be formed (i.e., individuals with lived mental health experience, representation from certain demographics, etc.) there is potential for this policy area to gain more visibility and attract more actors to the arena. If more individuals take an active interest, there is evidence in past ACF literature to suggest that the degree of conflict would most likely increase, possibly leading to more occurrences of policy-oriented learning amongst coalitions (Weible, 2008).

The original focus of studying the Advocacy Coalition Framework was to provide a falsifiable method to examine the policy process, more specifically as a replacement of the stages heuristic model with a empirically testable hypotheses (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). However, a significant portion of recent literature appears to approach with more of a historical analysis of policy change within subsystems (Albright, 2011; Breton et al., 2008; Ingold et al., 2017). While this approach is able to shed light on some of the mechanisms of policy change, it can be argued from Sabatier’s earliest work that this is in contrast of how he envisioned this framework being used. This research further highlights the need for further application of the ACF in areas of social policy as well as identifies some methodological issues which should be considered in future research.

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Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Process of innovation proposals
   1. Do you have innovation specific workshops or meetings to review the criteria and process for submission?
      1. Are these widely advertised in the community?
         1. If so, how?
   2. How many people/groups are typically in attendance at these meetings/workshops?
      1. Is there a variety of representation when reviewing the innovation proposals? (e.g., representation/consideration from/for marginalized groups including, LGBTQ, veterans, homeless, etc.)
      2. Does the variety of people reviewing, providing feedback, and approving innovation projects include family members, individuals with “lived mental health experience,” advocates, etc.?
         1. If not, who is typically represented at these meetings?
   3. Are there typically a wide variety of proposals (e.g., benefitting different populations)?
      1. In general, what kind of data/theory is utilized for justification of proposals?
      2. Have there been differences of opinion in what proposals are of greatest need?
   4. In regards to proposals that were not selected for innovation funding, do you have records of these?
      1. In your opinion, why did these proposals fail to make it to the project phase?
      2. What kind of data was utilized for justification of the proposal?
      3. Did these people/groups propose the same or similar project for innovation funding, during a different year?
         1. What changed about the proposal, if anything?
         2. Was different data (source and/or type) used as justification?
         3. Was the proposal successful?
            1. If yes, did something happen in your community to raise the issue area to higher level of need?
   5. In your opinion, who/what has been the driving force behind the successful projects?
   6. Did these successful projects receive further funding or have significant impacts on existing services?
2. Implementation and further funding
   1. Have you had any failed or abandoned innovation projects?
      1. If yes, can you explain the details as to why?
3. Other people of interest
   1. Is there anybody else of interest that you think might be able to shed additional light on this area of funding? They may or may not still be involved in the mental health field.