nd set out central propositions concerning the relationship between specific defi-itional forms and agenda access and policy formulation. The next several chap-ers illustrate these general observations via detailed policymaking histories en-ompassing a broad array of issues.

In Chapter 2, John Portz looks at competing definitions of plant closings and neir part in shaping the local community response. In Chapter 3, Frank aumgartner and Bryan Jones consider how problem definitions may change ver time with special reference to air transportation. In Chapter 4, Ellen Frankel aul traces the emergence of sexual harassment as a major political issue in the 990s and the related debate over its proper definition. In Chapter 5, Elaine Sharp rns to recurring national episodes of antidrug policymaking, which feature ele-ents of continuity as well as change in interpretations of the drug use problem. n Chapter 6, Gary Mucciaroni provides a comparative analysis of two policy ar-as, tax policy and agriculture, using a problem definition framework to explain ne divergent courses of action within each. In Chapter 7, Joseph Coughlin high-ghts the cultural conflict that underlies discussion of transportation policy, and e shows how different sides attempt to manipulate definitional issues to rengthen their positions. In Chapter 8, we conclude the series of case studies with focus on instrumental versus expressive approaches to AIDS policymaking.

Finally, in Chapter 9, Christopher Bosso weighs the special contribution to po-ical and policy analysis that is offered by a problem definition perspective. Ad-tionally, he relates the tenets of this perspective to other factors important in the orkings of government.

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1

Problem Definition: An Emerging Perspective

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In his classic work of political analysis, *The Semi-Sovereign People*, E. E. Schattschneider (1960) opened by describing a riot in New York City during the Second World War. In August 1943, a fight in a Harlem hotel lobby between a black soldier and a white policeman quickly escalated. Rumors about the conflict spread throughout the community and angry crowds gathered at the police station, in front of the hotel, and elsewhere. Violence soon erupted and hundreds subsequently were hurt. For Schattschneider, this incident illustrated how a conflict can quickly expand beyond those immediately involved and how the original contestants maintain little control over such a struggle once it develops.

Another riot nearly fifty years later, this one in Los Angeles, California, again illustrates the contagion of social conflict, as well as other political dynamics. On March 3, 1991, a black man, Rodney King, was stopped by city police after a high-speed chase. He did not respond to police commands to acquiesce and was beaten severely by four officers for "resisting arrest." Part of the incident was videotaped by a spectator, who gave a copy to a local television station. The tape was played repeatedly throughout the nation. On that basis, charges were brought against the four officers who beat King. A trial was set to be held in Simi Valley, a white community north of Los Angeles.

When the trial took place in the spring of 1992, it attained national visibility. The widespread presumption was that the videotape sealed the officers' guilt. However, on April 29, 1992, the jury returned with a verdict of not guilty. Shortly after the verdict was announced, violence broke out in the South-Central section of the city, a predominantly black area. By the time the National Guard was called in to quell the unrest some days later, the statistics were grim: 44 dead, 2,000 hurt, and property damage in excess of $1 billion (Mathews et al. 1992: 30).

Soon after the violence started, charges and countercharges began to fly. First, the primary figures in the conflict were blamed. For example, the attention of some commentators focused on the nonblack jury, who did not live near blacks, did not interact with them, and seemed to feel that blacks were violence prone. As one Los Angeles politician stated, this verdict was "a modern-day lynching" (Mathews et al. 1992: 33). King's lawyer said: "It may be that 12 white jurors aren't going to convict four white cops for beating a black man—it may be as simple as that" (Mathews et al. 1992: 34). Others focused on Police Chief Daryl Gates and the Los Angeles Police Department. The department's slow reaction to the riots was surprising to many, since Gates had long been criticized for overreacting to other incidents in minority areas. But the day the riot began, the police chief had attended a political fund-raiser and did not return to his office until the events in South-Central Los Angeles were well under way. Neither did lower-level police officials act to send force into the area. The *New York Times* called it a "new embarrassment for the department" (Mydans 1992: A25). Finally, some blamed the mayor, Tom Bradley. Following the verdict, Bradley had spoken out and called it "senseless"; he said that the police defendants "were not fit to wear a uniform" (Mathews et al. 1992: 33–34). These struck some as reckless and inflammatory remarks that encouraged people to engage in unlawful acts.

A second set of charges was made along ethnic lines. The blacks in the South-Central community were blamed for taking "justice into their own hands." Others criticized the Mexican-American community. Pat Buchanan, a presidential aspirant, attributed the outbreak to Mexicans "coming into this country illegally and helping to burn down one of the greatest cities in America" (Apple 1992: A20).

A third set of charges focused on law and order. A fine line distinguishes between people reacting to injustice and people behaving irresponsibly. As one noted sociologist commented: "If the violence in Los Angeles had been minimal, I think there would have been general sympathy for the rioters . . . . But as the rioting goes on and the looters come out of stores, people shift their anger toward the rioters" (Wilson 1992: 51). So it was that a U.S. Senate candidate from California blamed the riot on the "rotten" looters and arsonists (Apple 1992: A20). President Bush also pointed his finger at criminal elements in the area, stating that "federal assistance offers no reward for rioting. To the criminals who subjected this city to three days of rioting and hate, the message has got to be unequivocal. Lawlessness cannot be explained away" (*Providence Journal-Bulletin* 1992: A4).

A fourth set of accusations were partisan in orientation. Prior to the riot, President Bush had claimed that the failed programs of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society made social problems worse rather than better. In this vein, one week after the riot started, Marlin Fitzwater, White House press spokesperson, said, "We believe that many of the root problems that have resulted in inner-city difficulties were started in the 60's and 70's [Democratic programs] and that they [these programs] have failed." Further, he asserted that liberal Democrats in Congress were responsible for frustrating President Bush's efforts to enact policies that would have averted such rioting (Wines 1992: A26). The Democratic presidential candidate, Bill Clinton, sparred with the White House over the question of culpability. He linked the riots to Reagan and Bush's neglect of race relations, urban programs, and domestic social policy in general (Pear 1992: A24).

Still a fifth set of causes was proposed by Vice-President Dan Quayle. He argued that the "lawless social anarchy" occurring in Los Angeles had resulted from a more general "poverty of values."The riots were "directly related to the breakdown of family structure, personal responsibility and social order in too many areas of society." He maintained, further, that television had also contributed to the moral decay by making a heroine out of a women who gave birth out of wedlock. "It doesn't help matters when prime-time TV has Murphy Brown . . . mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone" (Jehl 1992: A1, A6).

The Los Angeles riots rank among the most disturbing outbreaks of social violence in recent U.S. history. Accordingly, the debate they sparked was well publicized. Only now, nearly two years later, is the controversy abating. However, this kind of disagreement over who or what is responsible for a problem in society is not at all uncommon with public issues. At the nexus of politics and policy development lies persistent conflict over where problems come from and, based on the answer to this question, what kinds of solutions should be attempted. In Los Angeles, for example, directing attention to racial and economic inequalities as underlying causes of the riots presumed a certain kind of response, one built around social justice measures, including expanded economic and educational opportunities for the disadvantaged. By contrast, a focus on the police's inability to control the disorder pointed toward improving police management, training, and hiring. In this way, every retrospective analysis in problem definition is also a look ahead and an implicit argument about what government should be doing next.

But problem definition is about much more than just finding someone or something to blame. Further disputes can surround a situation's perceived social significance, meaning, implications, and urgency. By dramatizing or downplaying the problem and by declaring what is at stake, these descriptions help to push an issue onto the front burners of policymaking or result in officials' stubborn inaction and neglect.

The name policy researchers have given to this process of characterizing

problems in the political arena is "problem definition." In part, government action is a result of institutional structure and formal and informal procedure. The partisan balance of power will also direct decisionmaking. But, according to the problem definition perspective, public policymaking must also be understood as a function of the perceived nature of the problems being dealt with, and the qualities that define this nature are never incontestable (even though they may sometimes be taken for granted).

The defining process occurs in a variety of ways, but always it has major import for an issue's political standing and for the design of public solutions. Cultural values, interest group advocacy, scientific information, and professional advice all help to shape the content of problem definition. Once crystallized, some definitions will remain long-term fixtures of the policymaking landscape; other definitions may undergo constant revision or be replaced altogether by competing formulations (for a case study of this in the legal realm, see Polisar and Wildavsky 1989).

This book examines this most central topic of public policy analysis. It seeks to document the importance of the problem definition phenomenon from both political and policymaking perspectives, to map out the rhetoric most frequently employed by problem definers, and to analyze the scenarios by which definitions are built or crumble. The contributors to this volume supply a rich collection of case studies for comparative analysis. Through this approach it will become plain that the process described is always pivotal to government problem-solving in general, although its specific expressions are multiform.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will present the concept of problem definition at greater length, first by bringing together the several major streams of literature from which it has emerged. We will discuss the "mechanics" of cognition and argument by which problems are defined with tremendous flexibility, as well as the role played by political stakeholders. Finally, we will profile the dimensions of definition that are most frequently invoked when social problems are put up for governmental consideration.

CONVERGING PERSPECTIVES ON PROBLEM DEFINITION

Contemporary policy analysis is multidisciplinary in its techniques and orientation, and perhaps nowhere more so than in the burgeoning study of problem definition. Thus, it is possible to locate within political science, sociology, and even literary theory a number of points of origin for the critical concepts relating to this subject. From such diverse intellectual sources, too often discussed without relation to each other, come insights that help to make sense of the fluidity of social problem selection and interpretation by public policymakers.

Social Conflict and Politics

Schattschneider (1960) was one of the very first scholars to underscore the importance of social conflict for political life. In his words, "At the nub of politics are, first, the way in which the public participates in the spread of conflict and, second, the processes by which the unstable relation of the public to the conflict is controlled" (p. 3). For Schattschneider, a conflict's outcome depended directly on the number of people who come to be involved in it. And it is always in the interest of the weaker side to seek to expand involvement by recruiting new participants to its support. Whoever can control this expansion, whether by accelerating or limiting it, gains the political upper hand.

Definition of issues or problems is crucial in the development of a conflict because, as Schattschneider pointed out, the outside audience does not enter the fray randomly or in equal proportion for the competing sides. Rather, the uninterested become engaged in response to the way participants portray their struggle. In short, "the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power" (Schattschneider 1960: 68). Applying these ideas, Baumgartner (1989: 75) identifies three levels of political conflict, which can be about (1) whether a problem exists, (2) what the best solution is, and (3) what the best means of implementation are.

In political conflict, then, issue definition and redefinition can serve as tools used by opposing sides to gain advantage. To restrict participation, issues may be defined in procedural or narrow technical terms (Nelkin 1975). To heighten participation, issues may be connected to sweeping social themes, such as justice, democracy, and liberty. Conflict is inherently spontaneous and confusing, but activists and organized interests attempt to direct its course by strategic maneuvers based on problem definition. This framework of analysis is applicable to political developments within a host of contexts, from national electoral campaigns to backroom legislative lobbying.

The Social Construction of Reality

Northcott (1992: 1–2; see also Berger and Luckmann 1967) concisely summarizes the sociological perspective that focuses on the "social construction of reality":

> individuals, groups and societies tend to place interpretations upon reality—interpretations which may or may not be true in an absolute sense. These definitions, explanations and assertions are constructed to help us make sense of those things and events that we experience and to help us decide how to respond to those experiences. In the face of uncertainty and ambiguity, these social constructions themselves are fre-

quently based on "fashionable" and therefore changeable assumptions and value judgments.

When applied to the study of social issues, this perspective emphasizes the distinction between "objective conditions" and the definition of some conditions as "problems." According to Seidman and Rappaport (1986: 1), "the definition of a social problem is time, place, and context bound." Spector and Kitsuse (1977), who helped establish the constructionist approach to social problem analysis, redirected attention away from the "putative" problems, probing instead the activities by which such problems are brought to light and presented as needing solution. They described the groups and individuals involved in this problem-naming process as "claims-makers" sustained by "interests or values, or a combination of them" (p. 88).

Claims-makers do more than just identify social problems. In Best's (1989: xx) phrase, they also "typify" them by characterizing the problem's nature. This can be done by advancing a particular orientation (moral, criminal, political, and so forth), or by seizing on so-called representative examples of the problem that accentuate certain features over others. For example, a major interest in the recent sociological literature has been the means by which problems in modern society become "medicalized," bringing to bear concepts of disease, treatment, and professional authority (see, for example, Conrad and Schneider 1980).

The social-constructionist approach has been employed in a large body of studies of different social problem areas. One collection (Best 1989) contains chapters on child abuse, missing children, AIDS, elder abuse, learning disabilities, infertility, the crack epidemic, popular music, smoking, drunk driving, wife abuse, urine testing, and Mexican immigration. Other recent book-length analyses concern population aging (Northcott 1992) and systems of psychiatric diagnosis (Kirk and Kutchins 1992). The direct relevance of this model to public policymaking lies both in the explanation offered for which issues come to be the subject of public discussion, and in the connection between the socially dominant understanding of a problem and the sorts of programmatic interventions deemed to be appropriate and reasonable. As Best (1989: xx) writes, "an orientation locates the problem's cause and recommends a solution."

Among analysts who portray problems and other cultural phenomena as socially constructed, there is some ambiguity as to the precise agency of meaning investment. Gamson (1990: 263–264) outlines two models often found in the literature. A "reflection theory" describes the construction as a direct representation of beliefs, values, and sentiments that are prevalent in the social 'psyche.' " A "hypodermic theory" locates responsibility with particular powerful political and cultural leaders who impose their stance on others, thereby achieving an ideological hegemony. Gamson also proposes

another alternative, in which a complex open contest takes place involving a wide range of players who are constrained by shifts in the site of decision-making as well as accidents of history.

Practitioners readily describe the social constructionist understanding of social problems as a work-in-progress (see, for example, Miller and Holstein 1993). Widely utilized, it has nonetheless drawn numerous criticisms, the most telling of which from a political vantage point may be an insufficient concern with the impact of institutional forces in the problem-naming process.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism may be described most generally as an intellectual style concerned with examining the unquestioned value assumptions embodied in culture and society. The primary method of analysis associated with postmodernism is "deconstruction," a way of revealing hidden differences and contradictions within a seemingly unified whole. The most extensive applications of postmodern thinking have occurred in the fields of literature and philosophy. Yet the school is now "sweeping the social sciences," too, including several areas relevant to government, such as public administration, planning and management, and organizational theory (Rosenau 1993: I).

Postmodernism advances several themes that stress the importance of studying how problems or issues come to be defined in the policy arena. For example, postmodernism rejects the notion of impartial rationality, a popular linear model used in past descriptions of public policymaking (Dye 1984). It disputes, further, that "policy is or can be objective or ideologically neutral" (Rosenau 1993: 3). Policy becomes, instead, a series of conclusions, choices, and rejections of alternatives that are assembled to compose a constructed totality. In politics as in literature, the use of rhetoric is key to the process by which these decisions are justified, promoted, and even placed beyond questioning. Especially relevant to government is "argument from authority," in which the speaker seeks to persuade by reference to a moral mandate (Hogan 1990: 41–47; see also Edelman 1988).

There are other, more sweeping historical and philosophical claims to postmodernism relating to "the cultural logic of capitalism" (Jameson 1991) and the utter indeterminacy of standards of truth. One need not, however, subscribe to such doctrines wholesale to recognize the connection between the theory's lesser claims and the notion of public policymaking as a representation of disputable definitions over the existence and character of social conditions. In this sense, students of problem definition and postmodernism are one in a belief that "policy proposals cry out to be deconstructed, torn apart from within" (Rosenau 1993: 2).

A "Political" Policy Analysis

There are two, quite different, senses in which problem definition has come to be important in the literature of policy analysis. The first usage, which is technical, comes out of the tradition of policy analysis as an applied profession. Under this approach, policy analysis consists of a set of logical steps for diagnosing problems and devising cost-effective solutions, typically in the service of some policymaking authority (Dery 1984: 14–15). Here, problem definition refers to formulating "an 'actionable' statement of issue dynamics from which expenditures can be made, personnel deployed, and procedures developed that will reduce or eliminate the undesirable state of affairs without undue harmful consequences to related activities" (Guess and Farnham 1989: 7).

Yet, as so many policy researchers have pointed out, problem definition can never be purely a technical exercise (see, for example, Dery 1984; Wildavsky 1979; Hogwood and Gunn 1984). Stakeholders have their own assumptions and interests that lead to particular favored definitions, not all of which are compatible (Guess and Farnham 1989: 18–20). And policy choices are always statements of values, even if some value positions are so dominant that their influence goes unexamined or so unrepresented that their neglect goes unnoticed. An explicitly political analysis of public policymaking attempts to relate governmental process and result to this contest of different perspectives.

Scholars in the social constructionist school long ago identified the need to view social problems in terms of a career wherein a problem first emerges, next gains attention and legitimacy, and then receives official programmatic response (see, for example, Blumer 1971; Spector and Kitsuse 1977). With several transition points presenting contingencies capable of blocking advancement, completion of this pathway is never assured. It is these very concerns that contemporary students of agenda-setting have moved to the center of policy analysis. Cobb and Elder (1983), for example, emphasize the expansion of participation and the characteristics of issues as key interrelated factors determining which problems will gain access to the agendas of society and of government. Also, they point out how opponents can keep issues off the agenda by effective argumentation in relation to these same characteristics. A related area of inquiry in the social-constructionist literature has to do with "rhetorical idioms" and "counterrhetorical strategies" (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993). However described, the result is a debate that must vie for attention against a backdrop of the limited processing capacities of government (see also Hilgartner and Bosk 1988).

The agenda-setting model does not cast problem definition as an abstract conflict of ideas separable from the operation of public institutions. Rather, as Petracca (1992: 1) puts it, "how an issue is defined or redefined, as the case may be, influences: (1) The type of politicking which will ensue around it; (2) Its chances of reaching the agenda of a particular political institution; and (3) The probability of a policy outcome favorable to advocates of the issue." More specifically, different public arenas—legislatures, courts, bureaucracies, the media—have different "selection principles" that are satisfied more or less well by different problem definitions (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). Baumgartner and Jones (1993) explain how a change in an issue's tone from positive to negative—for example, from images of progress to images of danger in nuclear power—can lead to destruction of a policy monopoly by a few groups or institutional structures that control decisionmaking, and its replacement by an unstable disequilibrium involving many policymaking jurisdictions. But the connection between problem definition and institutional process in this framework is interactive: "Where the rhetoric begins to change, venue changes become more likely. Where venue changes occur, rhetorical changes are facilitated" (Baumgartner and Jones 1993: 37).

The uses of language are crucial to the political analysis of public policymaking and problem definition. Language is essential to understanding, argument, and individual and group expression, which all figure into the definition of social problems for public attention. Language can be the vehicle for employing symbols that lend legitimacy to one definition and undermine the legitimacy of another—as when professional groups try to gain control over the way a problem is perceived by introducing symbols of their expertise and authority (Elder and Cobb 1983). Stone (1988) points out four prominent forms of language and symbolic representation in political discourse: (1) stories, which provide explanations; (2) synecdoches, in which parts of things are said to depict the whole; (3) metaphors, which claim likenesses between things; and (4) ambiguity, in which multiple meanings are evoked simultaneously.

If policymaking is a struggle over alternative realities, then language is the medium that reflects, advances, and interprets these alternatives (Edelman, 1988; Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993). Inside the realm of political institutions, language can also offer a powerful tool for structuring decisionmaking so as to favor one result and diminish the likelihood of another (Riker 1986). Always the question to ask is, who is speaking and to what end? A student of Canadian politics (Lee 1989: 12) describes the growing use of "camouflanguage" to present self-serving versions of events:

> As we approached the dying decade of the second millenium . . . a thing contained by a name was often less significant than the name itself. The trend was so ubiquitous it was seldom noticed. Civic leaders borrowed military terms when they wished to convey a sense of action; a committee became a task force, even though it was still a committee.

> The military borrowed medical terms to lend a sense of healing to an act of destruction; a bombing became a surgical strike, even though it was still a bombing. Medicine borrowed the language of accountants to apply a sense of fiscal prudence to acts of political revolt; extra billing became balanced billing, even though it was still a violation of medicare [Canada's national health insurance program].

MULTIPLICATION OF MEANINGS— DIVISION OF SUPPORT

Cognitive psychologists distinguish between general and phenomenal realities. The former refers to the actual bases of existence. The latter refers to "the constellation of thoughts, perceptions, and feelings" that makes up each person's "constructed reality" (Wegner and Vallacher 1977: 4). The physical environment, other people's behavior, even one's own qualities as an individual all enter into this construction and are taken as true. Applying this same insight politically, Hogwood and Gunn (1984: 109) state, "we each create our own 'reality,' and this is nowhere more true than in the way we identify problems or issues, and interpret and relate them to our mental map of some larger situation." To understand the process of problem definition in public policymaking, it is necessary to take into account both the specific component elements of political discussion and the methods by which these elements may be assembled.

The Complexity of Social Reality

A basic social science perspective on causality illuminates the intricate nature of social reality and how it may be cast in different lights. Figure 1.1 outlines three alternative models of directional action. The first model, multiple and simultaneous influence, represents a situation at a single point in time where several independent variables exercise shared impact on a given dependent variable. Model 2, sequential influence, depicts a longitudinal chain in which several independent variables working forward in time determine the dependent variable. In Model 3, component influence, two or more independent variables are nested in their relationship to the dependent variable. Still more complex causal pictures are possible through an infinite variety of combinations of these models.

The point is not that one or another of these depictions offers a preferable outline of experience, but that the world works in all of these ways all the time. No observer is able to capture the full picture. Combs (1981: 55) explains: "Reality is always more complex, inchoate, contradictory, and inexplicable than our images and metaphors of it." No two observers are likely

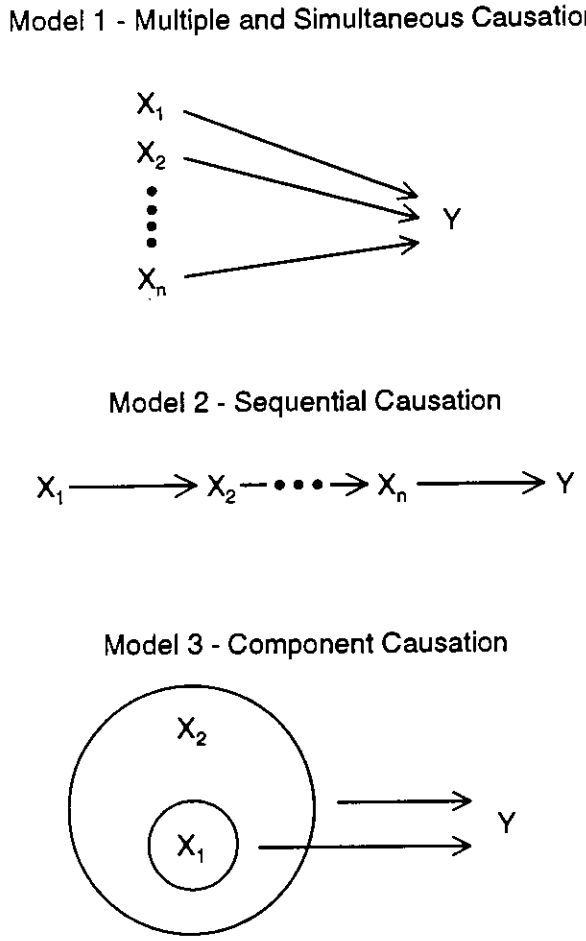

Figure 1.1. Three Social Science Causal Models
Source: Based on Watson and McGaw (1980), chapter 15.

even to see the partial picture in exactly the same way. This divergence is what underpins the political struggle over problem definition, with causal understandings inevitably predisposing certain kinds of policy solutions, foreclosing others, and directing the allocation of authority and resources to cope with a problem (Stone 1988: 160–165).

Emphasis. The choice of which cause to emphasize is a main determinant of differences in problem definition. In a picture of many possible influences, selecting certain factors to the exclusion of others is an act of explanation that aggressively promotes a particular version of reality. For example, mental illness is a longstanding social problem with clearly complex sources.

Researchers have identified numerous categories of causal factors, among them social stress, family interactions, genetics, and biology. Such influences often operate in conjunction and are difficult to disentangle. Yet mental health policymakers and advocates in different historical periods have tended to be selective in their focus, resulting in recurring shifts in the theory and practice of mental health care and the uses of public funding for this policy area (Rochefort 1988).

In the following passage, economist Ellwood (1989: 8) illustrates concretely the impossibility of reaching consensus on the *one* real cause of poverty in the case of a two-parent family:

> Suppose we find that a two-parent family with three children is poor even though the father is working full time. What is the cause of the family's poverty? One could say that the father's wages are too low, that the mother is not willing to work, that the family cannot find affordable day care, that the couple was irresponsible to have children when they could not support them, or that the father did not get enough education or has not worked hard enough to get a "good" job. Even if we talked to the family, it is possible that we would not be able to agree on just one "true" reason.

Level of Analysis. Often, selecting which independent variables to emphasize in a complicated, explanation-rich situation hinges on the observer's level of analysis. In terms of the model of component influence outlined in Figure 1.1, this might mean seeing the interior of the causal picture to the neglect of an enclosing structure. Where, on the continuum from microindividual behavior to macrosocial forces, does the problem-definer focus attention? The Los Angeles riot offers a perfect example of a complicated social event involving individual and group behavior within a context of specific short-term stimuli and more general long-term social and racial inequalities. At what level should we focus in understanding this situation? As we have seen, this question can be answered very differently, prompting a debate that is as much about social philosophy as the facts of the riot itself.

Similarly, child neglect can be approached on different levels—individual, social system, and the plane of fundamental beliefs and cultural agreements (Lally 1984). A narrow clinical view that tends to focus on family behavior alone gives limited preventive possibilities. This same behavior, however, can also be embedded as a component of larger processes that point to interventions aimed at business and technology, economics, and other social forces.

Measurement. Measurement is a process that always involves discretion and inconsistency. No two analysts will approach the task of gauging a social problem's magnitude, rate of change, or distribution in quite the same way. Whether a problem exists, how bad it is, who or what is responsible,

and what future trends will occur are all perceptions that can depend on the measuring approach applied. The use of "optimistic" versus "pessimistic" assumptions is one well-known tactic in attacking or defending a government program (Light 1985: 55). And deciding how to categorize the objects or events to be counted and why is another common point of contention in political life, especially between the parties and between incumbents and office seekers. Far from strict mathematics, political measurement is an activity of such flexibility that Stone (1988: 127) likens it to poetry rather than science. Consider the following examples of numerical controversies:

> Were the 1980s a period of growing social inequality in American society? The statistical evidence varies depending on baseline year selected; mean versus median family income; which forms of taxation are included in the analysis; and which public programs are classified as "social spending" (DeParle 1991; Gosselin 1992).

> How many times did George Bush as President, and Bill Clinton as Governor of Arkansas, raise taxes? The question surfaced forcefully in the 1992 campaign. At one point, the Bush camp claimed that its candidate had raised taxes but once, while his opponent was guilty of 128 counts. Yet the Clinton team's reexamination of the Bush record yielded a much higher total of 178 increases in taxes, fees, and related "revenue enhancements" (Kantor 1992).

> What is the U.S. poverty rate? The official counting method originally was devised in the early 1960s. Today, there is debate about the price of nonfood costs, about how to factor in the value of in-kind benefits (such as food stamps and medical insurance), and about the types of taxes to be subtracted from income, among other issues (Ruggles 1990). The 1992 *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992) reports the poverty level using 15 different definitions!

> What was the ratio of tax increases to spending cuts in the first Clinton budget? Republican opponents pushed the answer in one direction (inflating the tax increases); Democratic backers pulled the other way (exaggerating the spending cuts). Aiding these partisan foes and friends of the document was the intrinsic ambiguity of many governmental actions. One example: an increase in taxation of Social Security benefits by which the Treasury would recapture a portion of spending under the program (Greenhouse 1993).

Interconnections. Reactions to an issue can depend on its perceived relationship to other issues of importance to the observer. The standard political

ideologies like liberalism and conservatism provide one form of possible linkage across issues. Each of us also has his or her own internal attitudinal fields in which more idiosyncratic principles of association may be at work (Milburn 1991). In addition, media coverage can juxtapose contemporaneous subjects so that one thing tends to remind us of another.

An analysis of voter reaction to the free trade issue in Canada during the 1988 election shows the complexity and importance of such interconnections for problem definition (Lee 1989: 13–14). A longitudinal opinion survey assessed public response to the "Mulroney trade deal" and to the "Canada–U.S. trade agreement," using these different denotations with randomly selected portions of the sample group. Not only did support levels vary according to the designation used, but changing attitudes over time for the "Mulroney trade deal" hinged on shifts in the general popularity of the prime minister, while support for the "Canada–U.S. trade agreement" was unaffected by such shifts. Supposedly, all of those being polled were reacting to the same policy issue. Yet how the issue was named and what associations this name carried in the minds of the voters made a world of difference.

The Struggle for Problem Ownership

A basic concept for the study of problem definition is "problem ownership" (Gusfield 1981). One aspect of problem ownership is domination of the way that a social concern is thought of and acted upon in the public arena, that is, by serving as the recognized authority on essential questions of causes, consequences, and solutions. From an institutional angle, problem ownership can also refer to jurisdictional control over policy decisions and appropriations for a problem area.

For many types of social problems, one can identify a well-delineated, specialized "community of operatives" (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988) that advances the theories and data on which policies are based. When the paradigm of explanation shaping policy development goes without serious challenge, or when challengers are effectively kept on the sidelines in the decisionmaking process—these are signs of ownership in public policymaking. Such political property rights may be sought by professional, disciplinary, religious, economic, or ideological groups, depending on the issue. And the motivations for seeking ownership are equally varied (and potentially intertwined), from territorial protection and expansion, to the search for truth, to moral expression.

A policy area today that features an obvious unresolved struggle for problem ownership is homelessness (Rochefort and Cobb 1992). At least three different major points of view have surfaced—of homelessness as housing shortage, as economic dislocation, and as product of mental hospital deinstitutionalization. For each explanation, there are well-organized advocates

and providers, armed with study findings, who desire expanded public financing for services within their domain, be it affordable housing, economic development and job training, or expanded community mental health programs. Hard-pressed to decide which of these aspects of homelessness will receive their primary attention, policymakers have often adopted a holistic approach that spreads resources thinly among all the leading claimant groups, an inclusive but ultimately unfocused strategy that is yet to be demonstrated as effective.

THE RHETORIC OF PROBLEM DEFINITION AND ITS POLICYMAKING CONSEQUENCES

As political discourse, the function of problem definition is at once to explain, to describe, to recommend, and, above all, to persuade. It is a distinctive form of public rhetoric made up of a habitual vocabulary. Building on what has been demonstrated so far in this chapter about the malleability of social issues, we now proceed to set out several recurrent categories of problem definition claims, noting their relationship to agenda access and to program design (see, for example, Hogwood and Gunn 1984: 115–127; Peters 1993: 48–53; and Anderson 1990: 78–82 for related discussions).

Causality

The way a problem is defined invariably entails some statement about its origins. As already suggested, the question of culpability is the most prominent of all aspects of problem definition. One important distinction is whether attribution is made to individual versus impersonal causes. Much of the traditional debate between liberalism and conservatism can in fact be explained by the stress given these two competing perspectives. Consider, for example, the poverty problem. Those on the left highlight failures of the economic and cultural system, while those on the right commonly cite the lack of individual or group effort (Patterson 1981).

In the realm of technology, much attention has been given to the role of human versus equipment error in accounting for complex system failures, such as in nuclear power plants or airline disasters. The latter association is more likely to result in stronger standards and regulation because responsibility is not linked to idiosyncratic human performance and capability. Stone (1988; see also Stone 1989) proposes a framework for classifying causal statements in politics based on different types of actions (unguided versus purposeful) and their consequences (intended versus unintended). Within her approach, the clearest contrast in problem definition is found between causes considered to be intentional and accidental. Intentional causes

refer to some purposive human action undertaken to bring about a particular result. If the action is perceived to be in the public interest and effective, it is labeled a rational success; if the outcome is harmful, an investigation into the action often ensues, often in terms of "victims" and "conspiracies." Accidental causes have to do with "the realm of accident and fate," such as a natural disaster, and there is no one on whom to place responsibility.

Blaming is one of the great pastimes of politics. Generating blame, however, is a "strategic choice that has both potential benefits and costs" (Weaver 1988: 2). It may be a way to create momentum for a particular policy thrust or to rule out seeming alternatives; but those being blamed are bound to do all they can to deflect incrimination. Fault-finding lay at the heart of a flap involving former Secretary of Education Lauro Cavazos, the nation's first Hispanic-American cabinet member. It was Cavazos himself who started the controversy by blaming Hispanic parents for undervaluing education and calling on them for a greater "commitment." A firestorm of angry protests erupted as several Hispanic leaders pointed to other sources of the dropout problem. "Hispanic parents know that education is the only way out of poverty for their children," one activist contradicted Cavazos. "He is wrong to say that the families are at fault when society is at fault for not supporting families that are overwhelmed by economic problems" (Suro 1990a: B8). San Antonio Mayor Henry Cisneros added his voice to the expression of resentment, similarly redirecting the locus of responsibility for this issue: "First of all, what he said is not true. And second, it hurts parents who are struggling and want the best for their families but who confront the reality of unequally financed school systems, the reality of low paying jobs, and language barriers" (Suro 1990b: 13).

A decision about problem causality can be the linchpin to a whole set of interdependent propositions that construct an edifice of understanding about a particular issue. Reuter (1992; see also Sharp in this volume), for example, characterizes the drug policy debate in terms of "hawks," "doves," and "owls," who respectively view drug usage as a problem of criminality, ill-conceived prohibitive legislation, and disease. Each position carries its own assumptions about why people use drugs, what the core of drug policy should be, and the consequences of policy failure. The alternatives before government that emerge from this conflict of perspectives are as different as tougher police enforcement, legalization of psychoactive substances, and more prevention and treatment services.

Certain problems are defined very simply, specifying single causal agents; others include a variety of influences. Problem definitions of these two types may predispose the political system to different outcomes. Generally, narrowing the focus to just one or two causal factors is a signal that the problem definer is ready for action. More complex formulations, on the other hand, may represent a strategy to head off prompt response (Stone 1988: chapter 8). Yet, depending on the circumstances, multicausal explanations and the multipronged solutions they engender can also be among the most sophisticated policy endeavors and also those that have the greatest chance of building support, as in tackling huge social program issues, such as the bail-out of Social Security (Light 1985) or reform of the health care system (White House Domestic Policy Council 1993).

Current research also underscores the impact of the media on the public's adoption of causal stances toward social problems (Iyengar 1991). Television, which is the primary source of most people's news, tends to frame issues either episodically (as particular incidents and acts) or thematically (within a political and economic context). The former style of broadcasting predominates and it renders viewers "less likely to hold public officials accountable for the existence of some problem and also less likely to hold them responsible for alleviating it" (Iyengar 1991: 2–3).

Severity

A social problem may be represented along many dimensions beyond that of causality. One of these facets is severity, that is, how serious a problem and its consequences are taken to be. Is this an issue meriting space on a crowded public policy agenda? How strongly the severity label gets applied is a contentious matter, since this element of problem definition is pivotal to capturing the attention of public officials and the media.

Global warming is an illustration of an issue whose severity is debated, with disputants vehemently disagreeing over the facts concerning its "extent, timing and impact" (Stevens 1991: B12; see also Samuelson 1992). Environmentalists warn that the situation is already grave, a looming disaster. Opponents of this view, however, including the former Bush administration and many industry groups, tend to characterize the problem as far from catastrophic, and they resist any corrective steps that could harm the economy.

Severity may also be communicated by a label that officially certifies that some germinating concern, having crossed a threshold, now qualifies as the definitive recurrence of a familiar public woe. Political disagreements in these circumstances revolve around when the label should be applied and by whom. Exactly this kind of discourse was seen with regard to using the "recession" label to describe this nation's worsening economic difficulties at the beginning of the decade. Excerpting from the reported statements of various public officials and economic onlookers during this period, Table 1.1 presents the semantic chronology by which this term ultimately gained acceptance as appropriate.

On the other hand, it is possible for a problem to grow steadily worse while onlookers adamantly resist labelling it as a new phenomenon. This, at least, is what Senator Daniel Moynihan (1993) maintains has been happen-

Table 1.1 A Semantic Chronology: Defining the Recession of 1990–91

August 23, 1990	In a *New York Times*/CBS News Poll, six in ten Americans surveyed said the nation was in a recession. The *New York Times* reported that the accepted academic definition of a recession, two consecutive quarters of declining national output, had not occurred, but many economists dispute this definition as unable "to capture fully the varieties of hard times."
September 25, 1990	At a meeting in Washington, D.C., the Group of Seven industrial nations (the United States, West Germany, Japan, France, Britain, Canada, and Italy) released a communiqué this week criticizing talk of recession as too pessimistic. The previous week, in testimony before the Joint Economic Committee of Congress, Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan proposed revising the traditional definition of recession in favor of a more stringent one representing a "cumulative unwinding of economic activity."
November 11, 1990	Expressing his observation that economic troubles were hitting the investment community much harder than middle America, a Prudential Bache analyst stated, "To a large extent, this is a yuppie recession."
November 11, 1990	In a feature in the *New York Times*, economist Leonard Silk described as premature the popular anxiety "that the American economy might be headed not just for another brief recession . . . but for a real depression."
November 12, 1990	Based on rising unemployment claims, *Newsweek* magazine concluded that "a recession betwen 'mild' and 'average' is developing" and speculated on the chances that it might turn into a national economic "collapse."
November 28, 1990	In testimony before the House Banking Committee, Alan Greenspan described the economy as undergoing "a meaningful downturn." He objected to one Democratic representative's remark that this "was a nice way of saying we've entered a recession."
November 29, 1990	In a speech President Bush summarized his view of economic conditions in the country by saying, "We are in a period that concerns me of a sluggish economy. Some are saying 'recession,' and some are saying 'slowdown' and some are going 'downturn.' But the one positive thing is that most if not all people are suggesting that whatever it is, it won't be long-lasting."
November 30, 1990	The Commerce Department released the government's index of leading economic indicators for October. It showed a 1.2 percent drop, the fourth straight monthly drop in a row. An economist for the First Boston Corporation commented that "it reinforces the view that the economy has entered at least a mild recession."

Continued

Table 1.1 (*continued*)

December 5, 1990	A survey by the Federal Reserve showed a decline in business activity around the country. Without using the term "recession," the survey reported that "business conditions are somewhat mixed in different parts of the country but on balance display a weaker pattern."
December 16, 1990	In the midst of a slow Christmas shopping season and faced with other bad economic news, Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady said on *Meet the Press* that "I don't think it's the end of the world even if we have a recession. We'll pull back out of it again. No big deal."
December 29, 1991	The Dating Committee of the National Bureau of Economic Research, a prestigious committee of economists that is charged with determining the official onset of recessions, announced that the country was in a recession that probably began in August. The committee's standard policy is to make a ruling only after observing six or more months of poor economic performance. For the first time in its history the committee broke with this schedule because, in one commitee member's words, "if we had waited a few months to say something, when most people are convinced that we are in a recession now, then we might have been laughed at." The *New York Times* said, "It was as if the umpire had called a strike before the pitch crossed the plate."
January 2, 1991	In a television interview with journalist David Frost that had been taped on December 16, President Bush admitted the country was in a recession but claimed it was not a deep one and would end "not too many months from now."
January 13, 1991	An economist for the Bridgewater Group, a money management firm, told a *New York Times* reporter that he felt the economy was in a depression. Referring to a recent statement by the chairman of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation that the banking industry was not in a situation comparable to that of the Great Depression, the reporter wrote, "Sometimes, more can be learned about what is going on from what officials choose to deny than from what they affirm."

Sources: Douglas 1990; Gosselin 1990; Hershey 1990a and 1990b; Norris 1990 and 1991; Oreskes 1990; *Providence Journal-Bulletin* 1991; Rosenbaum 1990a and 1990b; Silk 1990; Thomas 1990; Uchitelle 1990a and 1990b.

ing in the U.S. with regard to social deviancy. In a much commented-upon essay in the *American Scholar*, Moynihan invokes the sociological theory that the level of deviancy a society will recognize remains relatively constant, irrespective of the actual frequency of that behavior. Examining trends in such areas as the rate of illegitimacy and violent crime, he concludes that we

are normalizing, or becoming accustomed to, hitherto unacceptable levels of harmful behavior without naming the trend as "social pathology" and following through with the attempts at remedial action this definition would imply.

Incidence

Moynihan's concern with tabulation brings us directly to "incidence" as a descriptive component in problem definition. According to survey researchers, perceptions of the frequency and prevalence of a hazardous or unjust situation are a potent trigger to it being considered a social problem (Stafford and Warr 1985). And notwithstanding the senator's analysis of social deviance, sometimes a key issue politically *is* a problem's change over time—is it declining, stable, or growing, and if it is growing, at what rate? Linear or even exponential projections are the most ominous, and when accepted as valid, tend to create the most pressure for quick public intervention.

Often, as we have already seen, the argument is simply over selecting the most accurate, nondistorting statistic to represent a problem. Take, for example, the number of Americans without health insurance (Steinmetz 1993). The figure most commonly cited is 37 million. Yet, health reform advocates tell us, this count is a mere snapshot in time that falls well below the total number of people who drift into and out of the uninsured pool over a period of time; the number also excludes the underinsured who have inadequate coverage. Those who feel that the 37 million statistic exaggerates the U.S. health care problem—defenders of the private health insurance industry, to name one group—call attention to the relatively brief time that many people remain uninsured.

Incidence patterns across society can also be portrayed in varying fashions. An issue's social-class dimension may be brought to light or downplayed. Nelson (1984: 15) showed that the disassociation of child abuse from class-based concerns "had long lasting effects on the shape of child abuse policy" by giving the issue a much more universal appeal. Alternatively, a social issue may be identified with a particular population cohort in order to elicit sympathy and support or target resources. For example, advocates have long endeavored to call attention to the persistent problems experienced by Americans who fought in Vietnam, a war whose divisiveness at home exacerbated the readjustment of returning veterans. (Interestingly, however, some recent research refutes stereotypes of the Vietnam-era vet as a troubled misfit, documenting that at least in terms of labor force status, these individuals generally have better jobs than their peers [Cohany 1987]). Current discussions of the AIDS issue that focus on the sharply rising rates of HIV infection among teenagers, and especially females among them, make use of

age and gender as the critical defining measures of incidence (*Newsweek* 1992).

Novelty

When an issue is described as novel, unprecedented, or trailblazing, it can have a couple of effects. One, of course, is to win attention. Then as time passes and the novelty wanes, the public and media become bored with an issue and are distracted from it (Downs 1973; Bosso 1989). But issues that have not been seen before are difficult to conceptualize and they lack familiar solutions. Thus a tension arises as the issue is publicized and onlookers expect resolution, yet no consensus exists within the political system on how to tackle the problem. For example, difficulties of this kind often occur with medical breakthroughs such as those in genetics research. Each new discovery brings with it a thicket of ethical and practical concerns requiring analysis.

Proximity

To characterize an issue as having proximity is to argue that it hits close to home or directly impinges on a person's interest. If the case can be made successfully, members of the audience will become concerned and may express their concern politically. For this reason, issue proponents constantly seek to expand their base by claims of personal relevancy. Viewed in this light, it was no surprise to hear the National Commission on Children, on the occasion of release of its new report on child poverty in America, describe this problem not only in terms of "personal tragedies" but also as "a staggering national tragedy." To quote panel chairman John D. Rockefeller IV: "The health and vitality of our economy and our democracy are increasingly in danger." Harvard Professor T. Berry Brazelton added, "We know these kids are going to cost us billions in the future. They're going to be the terrorists of the future" (*New York Times* 1990: A22).

Crisis

"Crisis" is undoubtedly one of the most-used terms in the political lexicon. It denotes a special condition of severity where corrective action is long overdue and dire circumstances exist. The dividing line between a mere problem and a full-blown crisis is indeed a hazy one, which advocates are prone to cross in their language when they see momentum for their cause waning. Within the social-constructionist school, crisis has been identified as a prevalent motif of the "rhetoric of calamity," used by claims-makers to elevate a concern when facing an environment overloaded with competing claims.

Sometimes the argument is made that other problems under discussion are mere symptoms or effects of the subsuming crisis condition (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993).

The national deficit is an example of an issue that has frequently been associated with the term crisis, although not all politicians or economists agree that the label is appropriate (Ortner 1990). In 1986, the death of two prominent athletes from a drug overdose coupled with the appearance of a new form of cocaine helped convert the drug problem into a concern of "crisis proportions." Yet, ironically, some evidence indicates that at the time drug usage was actually declining (Baumgartner 1989: 201–210).

No policy area has received more attention under President Clinton than health care reform. Moreover, a seemingly endless flow of special television news features and newspaper and magazine reports has done much to publicize the cost, access, and other health system worries. Yet just as the administration made ready in January 1994 to commence a major push behind its legislative package, the fundamental assumption that the United States suffers a health care crisis came under attack (Knox 1994). Reacting to recent improvement in the annual rate of medical inflation and seeking to undercut an issue on which they saw little partisan gain, Republicans argued that the Clinton team was guilty of overdramatizing the health care situation. Even a prominent Democrat, Senator Moynihan, stated publicly that he felt "we don't have a health care crisis in this country" (a comment he later recanted); Moynihan did, however, believe that we have a "welfare crisis," highlighting an issue long of special concern to him. President Clinton well recognized the rhetorical power of the "crisis" label and he was loathe to surrender it, making it a major point of his State of the Union speech to portray America's health care crisis indisputably as such and to ridicule the naysayers. In this as in other matters of problem definition, of course, perceptions count for all, and it greatly favored the president's position that 84 percent of the American public agreed there is "a crisis today in health care" (*American Health Line* 1994).

"Emergency" is a term often used synonymously with crisis. Discussing the homelessness problem, Lipsky and Smith (1989) have explained how defining the situation as an emergency has enabled quick responses but also tended to produce temporary band-aid solutions such as shelters instead of more comprehensive, long-term reforms.

Problem Populations

Not only are problems given descriptive definition, so too are the afflicted groups and individuals. This is especially true in social welfare policymaking, whose purpose is to transfer resources or deliver services to specified target populations. Political willingness to make these commitments is generally conditioned by societal perceptions of the people who are going to benefit. Further, the balance between assistance and coercion in policy design is struck by how positive or negative these perceptions are.

Several attitudinal axes structure aggregate impressions. Is the group worthy or unworthy (deserving or undeserving) of assistance? Underlying this question is the recurrent notion of culpability. Are members of the group seen as familiar or strange? Social deviants and other out-group members do not receive equivalent consideration to persons with whom the public readily identifies. Related to these issues is the distinction between sympathetic and threatening populations. Understandings of the nature of the difficulties presented by members of a problem population are also formative in policymaking. Is their problem conceived to be psychological or nonpsychological, permanent or reversible, self-limiting or all-encompassing in its effects on a person's social functioning? Rochefort (1986) utilized these attributions to account for varying forms of public intervention concerning groups like the elderly, working and welfare poor, and the mentally ill—including the use of institutions, rehabilitation programs, and financial entitlements—as well as shifts in these policy orientations over time. Examining public opinion data, Cook (1979) also demonstrated a link between the favorability of attitudes toward different groups and popular support for providing aid to them. She concludes simply that "all things being equal people we like and find attractive and pleasant seem to get more help" (p. 41).

Working along these same lines, Schneider and Ingram (1993: 335–336) specify four types of socially constructed target populations:

> Advantaged groups are perceived to be both powerful and positively constructed, such as the elderly and business. Contenders, such as unions and the rich, are powerful but negatively constructed, usually as undeserving. Dependents might include children or mothers and are considered to be politically weak, but they carry generally positive constructions. Deviants, such as criminals, are in the worst situation, since they are both weak and negatively constructed.

Which category a target population is perceived to fall into influences the level and nature of public interest in its plight, the tools government selects for intervening (subsidies, punishments, inducements, services, outreach), and the forms of rhetoric with which policy action is justified.

Instrumental versus Expressive Orientations

An interesting twist on the theme of problem definition concerns the ends-means orientation of those defining the problem. In some situations issue advocates premise their stance on an instrumental basis, which sets out a de-

liberate course of action carefully calculated to achieve a desired end. At other times, however, the means and not the ends of public action will be uppermost for issue definers. In effect, this amounts to viewing public policy in expressive terms and the very process of implementation as the embodiment or corruption of certain cherished values. Curious debates can ensue when issue opponents differ in their focus on ends and means, for the two sides lack a shared psychological orientation essential to meaningful argument.

A current example of such an instrumental/expressive conflict is the disagreement over the new birth control device Norplant. Norplant consists of a half dozen small capsules, implanted under the skin, that release small amounts of a contraceptive hormone for up to five years. A long-term continual method of preventing births, it has been recommended for use as part of several social policy initiatives, including welfare reform. In its simplest and most extreme form, the idea is to mandate the contraceptive for Aid to Families with Dependent Children recipients. Without doubting the potential efficacy of such an instrumental strategy, many opponents fault the method as unacceptable. As one bioethicist has stated: "There are all sorts of reasons why policies that might achieve a good goal—like the reduction of welfare costs and fewer poor babies—give too much authority to the government. I'm not saying the goal is bad, but the means to get there will come at a terrible price, a scary price" (Kantrowitz and Wingert 1993: 37).

Solutions

As indicated by the Norplant example, the definitional struggle in policymaking extends from aspects of the problem and those affected by and interested in it to include descriptive qualities of the solution. Until and unless general political agreement crystallizes on this matter, government remains without the wherewithal to act (see, for example, Kingdon 1984). Brewer and deLeon (1983: 18) term this the "estimation" stage of policy analysis, which "emphasizes empirical, scientific, and projective issues to help determine the likelihoods and consequences of candidate options . . . [and] assessments of the desirability of such outcomes."

Interestingly, some policy researchers, upsetting the notion of linear policy development, point out that sometimes it is solutions that determine problem definition. Wildavsky (1979), for example, has argued that public officials will not take a problem seriously unless there is a proposed course of action attached to it. In a sense, the solution begets the problem. Or, as he states, "A problem is linked to a solution; a problem is a problem only if something can be done about it" (p. 42). Wildavsky also predicted that if any proposed solution is carried out, it creates a whole set of new issues, ensuring that no public problem ever really dies. Too, in the process of implementation, previously accepted problem definitions may well come unraveled (Weiss 1989).

Solutions can also predispose the identification of causes, in the sense that political actors who favor particular policy strategies highlight those causal factors in social problems that can be targeted by their strategies. In effect, advocates are always searching for opportunities to argue the value of their programmatic ideas as new problems come into view. For this reason, political scientists sometimes go so far as to argue that "problems and solutions ought to be analyzed separately in order to understand governmental decision-making" (Baumgartner and Jones 1993: 5; see also Kingdon 1984; Peters 1993: 52–53).

Whatever the direction of influence in public policymaking among recognizing problems, finding causes, and choosing solutions—the pattern will depend on the issue and on the audience—an essential concern in problem definition is solution *availability*: Do key actors believe that means exist to accomplish what needs to be done? Or does it seem folly and a waste of resources to invest in a given course of action? For better or worse, the political realm is a magnet for nostrums that have neither been applied nor evaluated on a macrosocial scale. Therefore, it often becomes a guessing game for decisionmakers—an exercise in faith or skepticism—to choose between aggressive intervention or restraint.

Nuclear power plants to produce cheap and reliable electricity, health education programs to promote better living habits in the population at large, employment and training initiatives to counter chronic welfare dependency, recycling to resolve a growing trash disposal problem—each of these interventions matches a widely recognized social goal with a touted solution whose practical effectiveness is the subject of unabating controversy. Following the Los Angeles riots, myriad suggestions were aired for the kinds of aid necessary to prevent similar occurrences in Los Angeles and other American cities. Included were housing programs, employment training, free enterprise zones, and more. Experts were quite open, however, about how little really is known about solving the problem of America's urban underclass (Deparle 1992a,b). Similarly on the crime issue, one well-known writer (Silberman 1994: 1) has put it bluntly: "The problem of crime can be attacked, but it cannot be solved," this by way of criticizing official enthusiasm for quick fixes like the "three strikes and you're out" mandatory life sentencing proposal. Of course, to claim that no solution is available to deal with a problem can simply be a strategy of obstruction by political interests who perceive it is inaction that best suits their purposes.

A solution's *acceptability* does not refer to effectiveness of action but to whether that action conforms to standard codes of behavior. In many ways, this attribute offers another vantage point on the ends-means distinction already introduced. The heart of the matter is ethical: Are there established

social principles that forbid a certain remedial approach even as the problem at hand worsens and could feasibly be contained? War in the Middle East has once again raised the issue of chemical warfare. Experience shows these weapons to be a lethal component of a country's military arsenal, one capable of inspiring great terror among the enemy. But does a civilized nation unleash this kind of destructive power, no matter what the circumstances? The question of acceptability also frequently attends the development of new technologies. A recent example is the implantation of fetal tissue into the brains of sufferers of Parkinson's disease (Kolata 1990). Although the technique apparently holds great promise for combating this nervous condition, widespread opposition has arisen based on fear the surgery will encourage abortions.

Supposing a proposed policy intervention is agreed upon, available, and acceptable, one more potential barrier still remains, that of affordability. The issue is straightforward. Do political actors perceive that adequate resources exist to pay for what needs to be done? Especially in these days of government deficits, decisionmakers are cautious in making financial commitments. Meanwhile, demands are ongoing for expanding existing programs and for adding new ones. For example, the nation's high infant mortality is accepted as a serious social problem, and much is understood about the complex of prenatal services that could help the situation (Tolchin 1990). It remains controversial, however, just how these services will be provided and financed. Simply deciding on a proposal's anticipated costs, which is fundamental to any discussion of affordability, can be hard enough. Thus, in President Clinton's health reform plan, there are uncertainties about both the cost of the standard package of benefits and the possibility of savings in existing programs. Proponents and opponents may choose from a spectrum of financing estimates spanning several billion dollars to make their differing arguments (Freudenheim 1993; Wessel and Wartzman 1993).

Affordability debates invoke various kinds of standards depending on the rhetorical objectives of participants. Dollar comparisons with other operating or proposed programs, references to overall budgetary constraints, and estimates of the cost of action measured against the probable economic (and social) costs of failing to act are all common.

CONCLUSION

We began this chapter with a review of varied scholarly literatures that, despite differences in nomenclature, disciplinary styles, and research objectives, share an underlying interest in how public issues are identified and conceptualized. By focusing on areas of overlap and connection in these literatures, rather than the discrepancies, we have pulled together the fundamentals of an emerging problem definition approach to policy analysis, laying the groundwork for more refined policy case studies. The following several chapters supply such studies. Surveying a wide gamut of programmatic activities, they convey further and in very concrete terms just how often and how profoundly the governmental process revolves around definitional concerns, irrespective of the nature of the issue, level of government, or institutional arena.

Actions speak louder than words, it is commonly said. However, in the world of politics and policymaking, this is not necessarily so, and in any case the two are inextricable; actions and words influence and even stand for each other as embodiments of the ideas, arguments, convictions, demands, and perceived realities that direct the public enterprise. The study of problem definition offers a systematic way to unveil these interrelationships and their significance.

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