

Social Construction and Policy Design: A Review of Past Applications

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One of the leading theories for understanding the policy process is the theory of social construction and policy design developed by Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram. The theory incorporates the social construction and power of target populations to understand the development and implications of policy design. In order to better understand its empirical breadth, depth, and general utility, our analysis reviews all past publications of the theory, focusing specifically on empirical applications (N = 111), from 1993 to 2013. Based on this review, we find: a recent increase in the number of applications of this theory; that these applications appear across a wide range of outlets, relate to numerous policy domains, and are conducted by a diverse group of domestic and international scholars; that the target population proposition has been applied with greater frequency than the theory's feed-forward proposition; and that scholars have a notable interest in understanding causal mechanisms leading to changes in the positioning of target populations among advantaged, contender, dependent, and deviant target population categories. Following a descriptive review of past publications, we offer specific suggestions for theoretical development and future research.

KEY WORDS: public policy, policy process, meta-analysis, literature review, social construction, policy design, feedback

Introduction

In 1999, Paul Sabatier edited a volume entitled *Theories of the Policy Process* (Sabatier, 1999a). Within this now near canonical tome are emergent theories of the policy process from the previous 15 years deemed by Sabatier to sufficiently adhere to scientific standards at the time. Through this effort, he charted a path forward for future policy process scholarship. Explicitly omitted from the edited volume was the work of what Sabatier termed constructivists. At the time, constructivists were a minority of policy process scholars (e.g., Fischer & Forrester, 1993) that focused on the socially constructed nature of policy as well as reality, in which perceptions and intersubjective meaning-making processes were considered central to understanding and explaining the policy process. Among his criticisms, Sabatier described constructivist methods as “nonfalsifiable” and their ideas as “free-floating and unconnected to specific individuals, institutions, or socio-economic conditions”

(Sabatier, 1999b, p. 11). Of course Sabatier was challenged for his decision to exclude this body of work, especially by European scholars (e.g., Parsons, 2000; Radaelli, 2000), but was unyielding in his position to exclude constructivist approaches in the edited volume.

One of the most notable constructivist approaches included in Sabatier's "omitted frameworks" list was the theory of social construction and policy design that was first articulated by Schneider and Ingram in 1993 (Sabatier, 1999b, p. 11). However, by the second edition of *Theories of the Policy Process*, Sabatier (2007a) changed his mind. For this second edition, he invited Ingram, Schneider, and Peter deLeon to write a chapter on the theory of social construction and policy design. In fact, he lauded Ingram, Schneider, and deLeon's (2007) application of social construction in the second edition's introductory chapter, stating that "their particular constructionist framework rose to the standard of science through clarity, hypothesis-testing, and the acknowledgement of uncertainty" (Sabatier, 2007b, p. 11).

Schneider and Ingram's theory includes social construction within their approach to understanding the policy process. While Schneider and Ingram understand social construction to mean the "varying ways in which realities are shaped" (1997, p. 73), they clearly do not embrace the more common relativistic conception of social construction advocated by those more closely aligned to constructivism that Sabatier (1999b) was so skeptical of (e.g., Fischer & Forrester, 1993; but also see Dryzek, 2005). Rather, Schneider and Ingram's brand of social construction relies on a variant of bounded relativity where meaning varies by context but does so in a systematic and generalizable fashion. In specifying the generalizable constructs of their theory, Schneider and Ingram (1993, 1997) seek to illuminate how policy designs shape the social construction of a policy's targeted population, the role of power in this relationship, and how policy design "feeds forward" to shape politics and democracy.

While important criticisms of the theory have emerged, such as the lack of inclusion of institutions (Lieberman, 1995), or a clear causal driver guiding the construction of target populations (deLeon, 2005), Schneider and Ingram have personally responded to these criticisms (Ingram & Schneider, 1995; Schneider & Ingram, 2005a, 2005b). They have done so in a manner that persuades scholars to continue this research agenda. Indeed, applications of the theory are ubiquitous, with hundreds of citations. In further testament to their contributions, Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram were presented with the prestigious "Aaron Wildavsky Enduring Contribution Award" in 2009 by the Policy Section of the American Political Science Association for their book *Policy Design for Democracy* (1997), which comprehensively lays out the theory and its testable propositions.

Ultimately, while it is easy to gauge the importance of the theory by its proliferation and recognition, we as of yet lack a holistic and reflective understanding of what scholars applying it have produced. Thus, similar to recent reviews of past applications of two popular policy process frameworks, the institutional analysis and development (IAD) (Ostrom, 2007) and the advocacy coalition framework (ACF) (Weible, Sabatier, & McQueen, 2009), the purpose of this article is to identify

how the theory of social construction and policy design is being applied through an in-depth examination of existing applications.

Our paper proceeds as follows: First, we present an overview of the theory of social construction and policy design, including its foundation, assumptions, and core propositions. Next, we explain our methodology for identifying and coding publications in which the theory is used. The complete list of publications includes both applied and theoretical articles and books, though our analysis is focused on applications. This is followed by a descriptive summary of our coding results. Finally, we conclude with a discussion regarding lessons learned and how this type of research contributes to the larger policy process literature.

Social Construction and Policy Design

The theory of social construction and policy design was developed to better understand why public policies sometimes fail to meet their purposes of solving public problems, supporting democratic institutions, or producing greater equality of citizenship (Ingram et al., 2007, p. 93). To that end, the theory focuses on the socially constructed values applied to target populations and knowledge, and the consequent impact these values have on people and democracy. A distinct facet of this theory, separating it from other policy process theories (e.g., ACF and IAD), is that it explicitly embraces a normative dimension. It seeks to explain “. . . why some groups are advantaged more than others independently of traditional notions of political power and how policy designs can reinforce or alter such advantages” (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 334). In a sense, the theory is a direct response to the questions of who gets what, when, and how (Lasswell & Kaplan, 1950)? Central to the theory is the assertion that in order to address these classic questions, we must also understand why some groups get benefits and others get burdens.

In the article “Social Construction of Target Populations” (1993), Schneider and Ingram establish the rationale and basic concepts of the theory. The theory’s core rationale is based upon past work on social constructions of knowledge in terms of positive or negative connotations (Edelman, 1964, 1988) and policy designs (Dryzek, 1990). Socially constructed knowledge, in this sense, is associated with certain types of policy designs, and these policy designs subsequently institute and reinforce socially constructed knowledge.

The theory is founded upon eight assumptions. These eight assumptions can be divided into three categories: (i) the model of the individual, (ii) power, and (iii) the political environment. Assumptions about the model of the individual include: (i) actors cannot process all of the information relevant to make a decision, and therefore rely on mental heuristics to decide what information to retain (Jones, 2001; Simon, 1996); (ii) mental heuristics filter information in a biased manner (North, 1990), thereby resulting in a tendency for individuals to confirm new information that is consistent with preexisting beliefs and reject information that is not (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Munro & Ditto, 1997; Munro et al., 2002); (iii) people use social constructions in a subjective manner that is evaluative (Edelman, 1988); and (iv) that

social reality is boundedly relative where individuals perceive generalizable patterns of social constructions within objective conditions (Collins, 1989; Edelman, 1988).

The second set of assumptions relate to power: (v) power is not equally distributed among individuals within a political environment (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Lasswell & Kaplan, 1950; Lukes, 1974). Harkening back to classic schemes for categorizing power (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 1974), the theory generally conceives of power as having three dimensions (Lukes, 1974), or “faces” (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). The first dimension is primarily concerned with observable behavior, influence, and conflict. The second is broader, concerning itself with not only what can be observed, but also with what is not present, such as, the ability to keep policies *off* the agenda. Finally, and similarly to the Marxian conception of false consciousness, the third dimension of power is broader as it concerns itself with ideology and the potential for entities to influence the very rationale for the creation of preferences.

The theory of social construction and policy design includes all three faces of power (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, 1997). Clarifying how power may be operationalized, Schneider and Ingram (e.g., Ingram et al., 2007; Schneider & Ingram, 1993) suggest that the first face, the capability to influence, is the most straightforward in that it can be assessed in terms of political resources such as votes, wealth, skill, and the potential to mobilize people. The operationalization of the second face should look to public opinion and other concepts that relate to the control of information associated with particular policies. In comparison, the third face is methodologically evasive due to inherent difficulties with identifying what to measure and how to best operationalize identified concepts. Consequently, the studies examining the third face of power are likely better suited for in-depth case study approaches.

Finally, the third set of assumptions relate to the political environment, and include: (vi) policy creates future politics that feeds forward to create new policy and politics (Lowi, 1964; Schattschneider, 1960); (vii) policies send messages to citizens that affect their orientations and participation patterns (Ingram & Schneider, 1991); and (viii) policies are created in an environment of political uncertainty (Kingdon, 1984). Assumptions relating to the model of the individual, power, and the political environment are summarized below in Table 1.

Together, the assumptions belonging to these three categories—the model of the individual, power, and the political environment—interact to inform two core propositions within the theory. The first of these propositions relates to target populations, or the recipients of policy benefits and/or burdens.

Target Population Proposition

Policy designs structure opportunities and send varying messages to differently constructed target groups about how government behaves and how they are likely to be treated by government. . . . The allocation of benefits and burdens to target groups in public policy depends upon their extent of political power and their positive or negative social construction on the deserving and undeserving axis.” (Ingram et al., 2007, pp. 98, 101)

Table 1. Assumptions of the Theory of Social Construction and Policy Design**Model of the Individual**

1. Actors cannot process all of the information relevant to make a decision, and therefore rely on mental heuristics to decide what information to retain.
2. Mental heuristics filter information in a biased manner, thereby resulting in a tendency for individuals to confirm new information that is consistent with preexisting beliefs and reject information that is not.
3. People use social constructions in a subjective manner that is evaluative.
4. Social reality is boundedly relative where individuals perceive generalizable patterns of social constructions within objective conditions.

Power

5. Power is not equally distributed among individuals within a political environment.

Political Environment

6. Policy creates future politics that feeds forward to create new policy and politics.
7. Policies send messages to citizens that affect their orientations and participation patterns.
8. Policies are created in an environment of political uncertainty.

As indicated in this proposition, a given target population is classified along two dimensions—social construction¹ and power. On the social construction dimension, individuals are perceived as being on a gradient of undeserving to deserving. Similarly, on the power dimension, individuals are viewed on a gradient of powerful to lacking power. To demonstrate this visually, Schneider and Ingram created a 2×2 matrix with social construction on one continuous axis and power on another continuous axis. The four quadrants in the 2×2 matrix correspond to four categories of target populations: advantaged, contenders, dependents, and deviants.

Those who are *advantaged* have a relatively high amount of power and are positively constructed. They are expected to receive a disproportionate share of benefits and few burdens. *Contenders* have a relatively high amount of power, but are negatively constructed, and are expected to receive *sub-rosa* benefits and few burdens that are highly visible but easily undermined. The *dependents* have a relatively low amount of power but are positively constructed and are expected to receive rhetorical and underfunded benefits and few but often hidden burdens. Finally, *deviants* have a relatively low amount of power and are negatively constructed and are expected to receive limited to no benefits and a disproportionate share of burdens (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

In linking this conceptualization of target populations to the second core proposition of the theory, Schneider and Ingram emphasize that the policy treatment of target groups based on their social construction and power is not just relevant at a given point in time. Rather, the way target populations are treated through policies has “feed-forward” effects.

Feed-Forward Proposition

The treatment of target groups through policy design has enduring effects on the political orientation and participation patterns of target populations. (Ingram et al., 2007, p. 98)

A more complete understanding of this proposition requires greater discussion of Schneider and Ingram's treatment of policy design. Schneider and Ingram define policy design as the content of public policy as found in the text of policies, the practices through which policies are conveyed, and the subsequent consequences associated with those practices (Schneider & Ingram, 1997). Within this theory, there are nine observable design elements: (i) target populations, (ii) definition of goals or problems to be solved, (iii) rules, (iv) rationales, (v) assumptions (Schneider & Ingram, 1997), (vi) benefits and burdens, (vii) tools, (viii) implementation structure, and (ix) social constructions (Schneider & Sidney, 2009). According to the theory, these elements have underlying patterns of logic that cause tangible consequences along instrumental or interpretive dimensions that may lead to the distribution of benefits to some and burdens to others.

Schneider and Ingram's proposition that policy creates politics through feed-forward effects builds on the work of Schattschneider (1960), Lowi (1964, 1972), and Bobrow and Dryzek (1987) and is similar to the work of Pierson (1993, 2004). The feed-forward effect works by policy designs of the past and in the present "... shaping institutions and the broader culture through both the instrumental (resource) effects of policy and the rhetorical/symbolic (interpretive) effects" (Ingram et al., 2007, p. 97). In turn, this shaping leads to variable opportunity structures as well as targeted messaging from government that all interact to continually shape the social construction of the target population (Ingram et al., 2007). The net result is a powerful influence on the behavior and understanding of self by target populations.

It is important to note the cyclical dynamic among policy design, target populations, and feed-forward effects. Either policy design is a function of social construction and power creating a proposition of target populations, or social construction and power is a function of policy design creating a proposition of feed-forward impacts. An analytical pursuit of either of the theory's core propositions depends if an observer is trying to explain the creation of a policy design that targets a population, or the feed-forward impacts of a policy design.

Having summarized the core assumptions and two propositions within the theory of social construction and policy design, we can now begin to assess how and to what end the theory has been applied. That is, we can begin to ask holistic questions about the theory such as: Is the theory becoming more or less prevalent, who is applying it, what methods are being used, what propositions (target populations or feed-forward) are receiving the most attention, what policy domains is it being used to explain, at what level of government is it being studied at, who are the target populations being identified and how are they categorized, and finally, how do target populations change with respect to power and social construction over time? In using these questions to guide our analysis, we can map the development of policy design and social construction theory while noting gaps in the application of the theory that may require more scholarly attention and clarification. Applying a coding scheme rooted in our summary of the theory, our next

sections provide a review of past applications of the theory conducted between 1993 and 2013.

Methods

As a first step of our review, a list of all references to Schneider and Ingram 1993 and 1997 was compiled. Only peer-reviewed publications either in the form of journal articles, books, or edited book chapters were included. This meant that conference papers, reviews and responses (e.g., deLeon, 2005; Lieberman, 1995), non-English publications, dissertations, online publications, and reproductions of articles and book chapters elsewhere were excluded from the population. The theoretical works by Schneider and/or Ingram, including the 1993 article and the 1997 book, as well as chapters in handbooks (e.g., Ingram & Schneider, 2007), books (e.g., Ingram et al., 2007), and theoretical articles (e.g., Schneider & Sidney, 2009) were not included in the analysis. While these articles and books were used to inform the coding framework and theoretical discussion above, the rationale for their exclusion in the analysis is that the purpose is to conduct a review of the applications of the theory and not to analyze the theory through the work of its creators.

The complete list of publications was compiled using Google Scholar searches of references to both Schneider and Ingram 1993 or 1997 occurring between 1993 and April 2013. Our initial compilation included 562 original publications. These publications were then reviewed in order to determine if they sought to apply the theory or develop it theoretically. Publications that only cited Schneider and Ingram 1993 or 1997, or did not explicitly apply or discuss either proposition about target populations or feed-forward impacts were not included in the analysis. After this vetting process was completed, there were 123 publications that were identified as either applications (111) or theory building (12). These publications are the source of the data for our analysis and can be found in the Supporting Information Appendix.

A codebook was developed to guide the coding of each of these documents by members of the research team. The codebook included 22 codes of which 10 were identifying codes (author, title, year of publication, etc.), and 12 were about the content of the publication. To determine intercoder reliability, a random sample of 75 publications was taken from the population of 123 and coded by an additional coder (Lacy & Riffe, 1996). The overall intercoder percentage agreement, not including the identifying codes, was 81 percent, an acceptable level of percentage agreement based on a random sample (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2005). The range for each individual code was between 73 percent and 93 percent. As all of the codes were above the threshold of 70 percent, all were included. The two codes that were below 80 percent agreement between the intercoders were *level of government* (75 percent) and whether the publication was applying the *proposition of target populations* or *feed-forward proposition* (73 percent). In light of these two codes being less than 80 percent, reported results should be interpreted with caution given their less than optimal reliability. The remaining codes were above the 80 percent threshold (Lacy & Riffe, 1996; Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Campanella Bracken, 2002; Riffe et al., 2005).

Analysis of Past Applications

Publications and Authors

The theory of social construction and policy design is being published by a wide range of authors in various leading peer-reviewed outlets. We identified over 80 different journals that published this theory including core journals in political science (e.g., *American Political Science Review*), public policy (e.g., *Policy Studies Journal*), public administration (e.g., *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*), and prominent interdisciplinary venues (e.g., *Social Science Quarterly*). In addition to peer-reviewed journals, we identified 25 different books or book chapters including the 11 chapters from *Deserving and Entitled* (2005a). Other books include Bushouse's (2009) examination of preschool education, Miller's (2012) exploration of how narratives are used to govern, Sidney's (2003) examination of urban housing policy, and Reese's (2011) research about activism and social welfare.

Social construction and policy design publications are written by a diverse group of scholars. We identified 99 different first authors among the 123 publications. Demonstrating an international interest in the theory, we found authors to be affiliated with universities in 12 different countries, including the United States. The non-U.S. list includes: Australia (e.g., Neff, 2012), Canada (e.g., Mondou & Montpetit, 2010), Denmark (e.g., Jørgensen & Thomsen, 2012), France (e.g., Montpetit, Rothmayr, & Varone, 2005), Ireland (e.g., Hynes & Hayes, 2011), Mexico (e.g., Lage, 2012), the Netherlands (e.g., Hoppe, 2010), South Korea (e.g., Park & Wilding, 2013), Sweden (e.g., Upmark, Hagberg, & Alexanderson, 2011), Switzerland (e.g., Montpetit et al., 2005), and the UK (e.g., Toivonen, 2011, 2012). It is evident that this theory is being applied by a diverse crowd of authors in a wide range of publication outlets.

Publications by Year

The number of publications using the theory of social construction and policy design has seen a meteoric rise since 2008. The number of books and articles using the theory has doubled since 2008 with 65 publications and a crest of 17 publications in 2012. The number of publications in a given year ranges from zero in 1994 to a maximum of 17 in 2012.² One possible explanation for this growth can be attributed to two high-profile publications. The first of these is a chapter by Helen Ingram, Anne Schneider, and Peter deLeon entitled "Social Construction and Policy Design" that appeared in the 2007 edition of *Theories of the Policy Process*. Six years after its publication, the Sabatier edited volume (2007b) is one of the most cited books on the policy process (over 1,300 citations according to Google Scholar). It is likely that the inclusion of the theory increased its audience, visibility, as well as—arguably—the theory's perceived legitimacy in the field of public policy. The most recent publication that moves the theory forward by Schneider or Ingram is the 2009 Schneider and Sidney article "What is Next for Policy Design

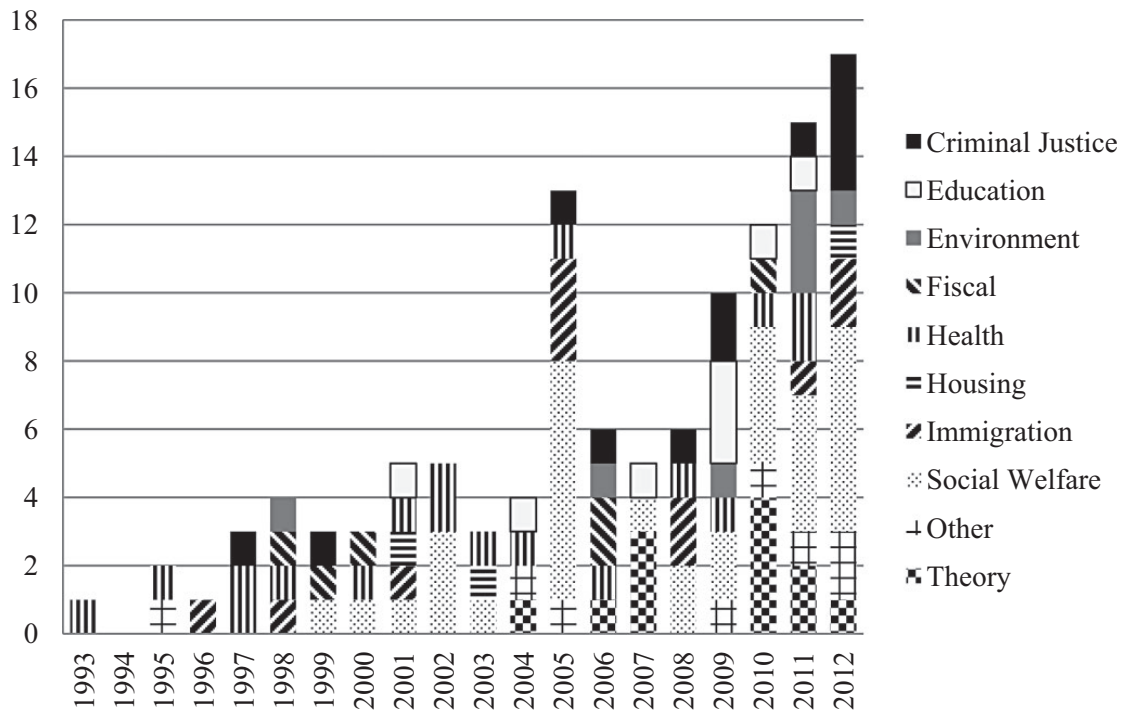


Figure 1. Number of Publications by Year of Publication and Policy Domain.

and Social Construction Theory” published in February 2009 in the *Policy Studies Journal*. This article was part of a special issue reviewing the leading theories of the policy process. Whatever the reason for the recent increase in publications, it is clear that over the past 5 years the theory has been becoming more popular. Figure 1 includes the distribution of publications by year and by policy domain. This demonstrates both the growing salience of the theory as well as the breadth of topics it is being used to study.

Policy Domain

Our analysis draws a basic distinction between strictly theoretical publications and applications of the theory. Publications that focus on building theoretical arguments about the theory include Moynihan and Herd’s (2010) examination of the impact bureaucratic red tape has on democratic values, Mettler and Soss’s (2004) discussion about feed-forward effects on target populations, and Campbell’s (2007, 2012) discussion of the impacts of feed-forward effects.³ Our coding scheme identified 12 theoretically focused publications in contrast to 111 applications of the theory. The theoretical publications appear as black in the bar chart presented in Figure 1. While a case is easily made that the studies falling into the application category further our understanding of the theory, we justify our demarcation based upon a desire to separate the purely theoretical publications from applications of the theory in the interest of delving deeper into what kinds of policy issues and concepts are being examined, and the methodologies applied. Using constant

comparative analysis,⁴ the 111 applications of the theory were subdivided based on the policy domain the research focuses on. Through this process, we identify eight specific policy domains and one “other” category (see Figure 1). The policy domain with the greatest frequency of applications is *social welfare* (32 percent). Examples include, Toivonen’s (2011, 2012) study of Japanese youth problems and Soss’s (2005) examination of how clients respond to the policy designs they encounter in social security disability insurance and Aid to Families with Dependent Children policies. The rest of the policy domains by the most to least frequent include: *health*, 16 percent (e.g., Knott & Weissert, 1995); *criminal justice*, 11 percent (e.g., Schneider, 1999); *immigration*, 10 percent (e.g., DiAlto, 2005); *education*, 7 percent (e.g., Itkonen, 2007); the *environment*, 6 percent (e.g., Weible, Siddiki, & Pierce, 2011); *fiscal policy*, 6 percent (e.g., Anglund, 1998); *housing*, 5 percent (e.g., Hunter & Nixon, 1999), and the catch-all category of *other* with 7 percent. The *other* category incorporates a host of miscellaneous policy domains including urban affairs (e.g., Lawrence, Stoker, & Wolman, 2010), civil rights (e.g., Wanzo, 2010), Native American relations (e.g., McCulloch & Wilkins, 1995), and morality policy (e.g., Doan, 2011).

The variety of policy domains to which the theory of social construction and policy design is being applied demonstrates the theory’s portability across contexts and also alludes to a practical dimension as findings contribute to understanding across a range of social problems.

Federal, State, Local, or International Policy

Unlike the broad range of policy domains examined, the type of policy by level of government analyzed in the 111 applications is much more concentrated.⁵ Sixty-one percent of the applications focus on *federal* policies. Some of the examples include Anglund’s (1998) study of federal assistance to small businesses and Fording, Soss, and Schram (2011) who focus on Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. For publications that do not have a domestic focus we identified them as *international* policy (15 percent). These publications include a wide range of topics ranging from shark attacks in Australia (Neff, 2012) to assisted reproductive technology in France, the UK, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, and Canada (Montpetit et al., 2005).

Only 12 percent of the applications focus on *state* policy and 6 percent on *local*. *Multiple* levels of policy, such as state and federal or state and local government, represent 5 percent of the applications. Only one publication explicitly examines *regional* government policymaking. This demonstrates that the primary focus of scholarship using the theory of social construction and policy design is on the federal government at the detriment to state and local policymaking. This finding may be explained, in part, by Schneider and Ingram’s theoretical emphasis on systemic issues that challenge democratic policymaking. The system-wide framing of many of the research questions they raise may be interpreted by scholars to best be explored through analyses of federal policies. Still, there are many current

applications of the theory (Camou, 2005; Houston & Richardson, 2004) that demonstrate the value of applying the theory to analyze policies at different levels of government. Future research applying this theory should become more diversified in its applications with greater focus on how state and local governments deal with issues of social welfare, public health, and criminal justice.

Considering the diversity of researchers producing publications about or using the theory of social construction and policy design, the diversity of publication venues, and the recent increase in number of publications, in general, our analysis suggests that the theory has broad and growing appeal to public policy researchers.

Methodology

Each of the 111 applications was coded for the type of methodology used in the study. The results are presented in Figure 2. Thirty-five percent of the publications used *qualitative nonempirical methods*. These tend to be single in-depth case studies that do not use explicit methods such as interviews, content analysis of publications, surveys, or qualitative analysis of existing data. Examples of this descriptive, interpretive, or qualitative nonempirical approach include Benson-Smith (2005), Newton (2005), and Drew (2013).

A majority of the applications (65 percent) are empirical in that the authors explicitly collected and analyzed primary or secondary data in a clearly defined and replicable process. Among this total, there are 26 that are purely *quantitative* publications. For example, Fording et al. (2011) use event history analysis to study Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and Drass, Gregware, and Musheno (1997) use logistic regression to study how health cases are processed concerning AIDS patients. In addition to the pure quantitative applications, another 16 use *mixed methods*. For example, Short and Magana (2002) use a survey and content analysis to examine immigration and social welfare policy and Yates and Whitford (2009) use

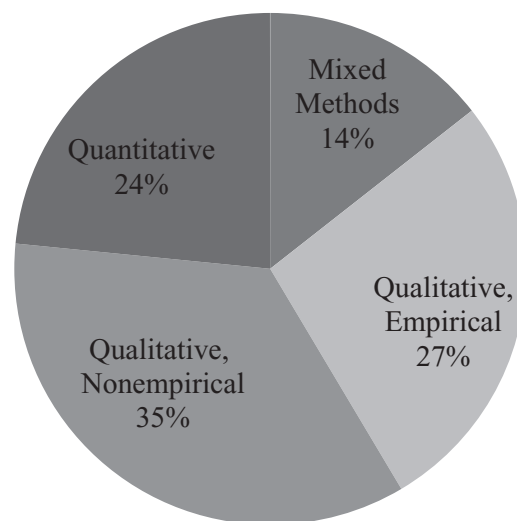


Figure 2. Type of Methodology Used across Applications.

mixed methods to study the correlation between arrest rates and presidential rhetoric. Combined, 38 percent of the publications include quantitative analysis. It is evident that quantitative and empirical analyses are widely used methods by those applying the theory of social construction and policy design. This evidence of widespread use of empirical and quantitative methods has made it easier for the theory to address the criticism by Sabatier (1997) that applications of the theory are not falsifiable.

The remaining coded publications are *qualitative and empirical* in that the authors explicitly used replicable primary or secondary data gathering techniques including but not limited to: interviews (Stein, 2001), participant observation (Ross, 2006), and content analysis (Hawkins & Linvill, 2010). Overall, policy design and social construction applications demonstrate a wide range of qualitative and quantitative methods being employed by scholars testing this theory, and a majority are using empirical methods.

Theories

The majority of the applications (62 percent), not including the theoretical publications, focuses only on the *proposition of target populations*. Examples of applications that only focus on target populations include Brucker (2009); Marschall, Rigby, and Jenkins (2011); and Abbie Erler (2012). In contrast, 19 percent of the applications exclusively focus on the proposition of *feed-forward effects*. There are several notable articles and books written about policy feed-forward effects that are both applied: Soss (1999, 2002), Mettler (2002), and Campbell (2003), and theoretical: Mettler and Soss (2004) and Campbell (2012). Finally, 19 percent of the publications apply both propositions (e.g., Benson-Smith, 2005; Boothe & Harrison, 2009).

Our analysis also shows that applications of the theory are frequently used (38 percent) in *conjunction with other theories*. These theories come from within public policy as well as a host of academic disciplines outside public policy including public administration, public management, political science, sociology, psychology, and a smattering of other fields. Inside of public policy, policy design and social construction theory has been applied with other public policy theories, including: framing (Itkonen, 2009; Reich & Barth, 2010), causal stories (Neff, 2012), policy sciences (Horejes, 2013), ACF (Weible et al., 2011), multiple streams (Jensen, 2005), policy entrepreneurs (Nicholson-Crotty & Meier, 2005), punctuated equilibrium theory (Schneider, 2006), policy tools (Guetzkow, 2010), path dependency (Soss, 2005), interest group theory (McCulloch & Wilkins, 1995), and grid-group cultural theory (Hoppe, 2010). Just as some of the previous analysis demonstrates the portability of the theory across substantive contexts, this section's findings are evidence of policy design and social construction's malleability in terms of incorporating other disciplines, theories, and propositions. It also demonstrates that the theory is clear and concise enough to facilitate meaningful comparisons with other theories.

Categories of Target Populations

One of the basic tenets of both propositions is the identification of a target population. In examining the 111 applications of the theory, 60 publications explicitly identify at least one target population within one of the ideal categories of *advantaged*, *contender*, *dependent*, or *deviant*. Across all of the publications, 141 target populations are identified and located within one of these categories. The results of the target population analysis are in Table 2.

Deviants are the most commonly identified target population representing 35 percent of all identified groups. *Deviants* lack power and are negatively socially constructed. This category includes two of the most commonly studied target populations: criminals with AIDS (Donovan, 1993, 1997; Hogan, 1997; Patterson & Keefe, 2008; Schroedel & Jordan, 1998) and criminals in general (Camou, 2005; Houston & Richardson, 2004; Nicholson-Crotty & Nicholson-Crotty, 2004; Owens & Smith, 2012; Schneider, 1999, 2006). In fact, 19 of the target populations identified in the deviant category are some type of criminal. Many of the remaining target populations identified as deviants are people living in poverty in specific contexts such as African-Americans (Sidney, 2005), African-Americans in Los Angeles (Garrow, 2012), or immigrants (e.g., Jørgensen, 2012; Jørgensen & Thomsen, 2012).

The next most frequent category of target populations identified is *dependents* (32 percent). *Dependents* also lack power like *deviants* but are positively socially constructed. Among the *dependents* are people living in poverty (Brucker, 2007; Camou, 2005; Chanley & Alozie, 2001; Drew, 2013; Garrow, 2012; Guetzkow, 2010; Hynes & Hayes, 2011; Soss, 2005) and those living with AIDS (Donovan, 1993, 1997, 2001; Hogan, 1997; Patterson & Keefe, 2008; Schroedel & Jordan, 1998). Others that occupy the dependent category include children (Bushouse, 2009), small businesses (Anglund, 1998, 2000), and middle class African-Americans (Sidney, 2003, 2005). Importantly, the *deviant* and *dependent* categories combine to represent 67 percent of all identified target populations. This demonstrates that those who apply this theory and explicitly identify a category for a target population tend to study those who have little power. This predisposition to study those without power fits well with the previously identified policy domain foci of *social welfare*, *criminal justice*, *immigration*, *civil rights*, and *housing* that all lend themselves to an examination of relatively powerless groups.

The next most frequent group—representing 18 percent of the target populations identified—is the *advantaged*. In general, those identified as *advantaged* are able to make meaningful decisions or exercise influence over others who possess decision-making authority and are positively socially constructed. Among the *advantaged*, the most frequently identified target populations are scientists (Donovan, 1993; Hogan, 1997; Ingram & Schneider, 2011; Patterson & Keefe, 2008), the elderly in different contexts (Campbell, 2003; Hudson, 2008, 2013; Hudson & Gonyea, 2012; Lockhart, Giles-Sims, & Klopfenstein, 2008), and various types of middle-class groups (Camou, 2005; Palley & Palley, 2000). Interestingly, some of the applications identifying *advantaged* populations identify groups that are not generally viewed by the public or preconceived by the researchers as having significant political power but are

Table 2. Target Populations by Advantaged, Contender, Dependent, and Deviant

Advantaged (Reference) (N = 26)	Contender (Reference) (N = 21)
AIDS—Veterans (Schroedel & Jordan, 1998)	Affluent people (Gollust & Lynch, 2011)
Birds, mammals, fish (Czech et al., 1998)	AIDS—Blood transfusion (Donovan, 1997)
Elderly—Post-WWII (X3) (Hudson, 2008, 2013; Hudson & Gonyea, 2012)	AIDS—Gay men since 1990s (X2) (Donovan, 1997; Schroedel & Jordan, 1998)
Elderly—Present (X2) (Campbell, 2003; Lockhart et al., 2008)	Elderly—Present (X3) (Hudson, 2008, 2013; Hudson & Gonyea, 2012)
Environmental organizations (Weible et al., 2011)	Elderly 1980s (Hudson, 2005)
Farm lobby (Peters, 2006)	Gaming industry (Weible et al., 2011)
Government workers (Schroedel & Jordan, 1998)	Immigrants—Japanese Pre-WWII (DiAlto, 2005)
Home owners/occupants (Hunter & Nixon, 1999)	Immigrants—Present Europe (Jørgensen & Thomsen, 2012)
Immigrants—Japanese present (DiAlto, 2005)	Local government (Weible et al., 2011)
Local government (Peters, 2006)	Medical staff and social workers (Hogan, 1997)
Middle class (Camou, 2005)	Mortgage banks (Hunter & Nixon, 1999)
Middle class—Prescription amphetamine (McKenma, 2011)	Pharmaceutical companies (Donovan, 1993)
Middle-class women 1990s (Palley & Palley, 2000)	Political activists (X4) (Crowley, Watson, & Waller, 2008; Hogan, 1997; Patterson & Keefe, 2008; Weible et al., 2011)
Mortgage banks (Drew, 2013)	Property developers (Weible et al., 2011)
Native American casino owners (Cornstassel, 2009)	Service providers of child welfare (Hynes & Hayes, 2011)
Prison administrators (Hogan, 1997)	—
Scientists (X4) (Donovan, 1993; Hogan, 1997; Ingram & Schneider, 2011; Patterson & Keefe, 2008)	—
Tahoe regional planning agency (Weible et al., 2011)	—
U.S. forest service (Weible et al., 2011)	—
White homeowners 1960s (Sidney, 2001)	—

Dependent (Reference) (N = 45)	Deviant (Reference) (N = 49)
AIDS—Blood transfusion (X2) (Donovan, 1993; Hogan, 1997)	African-American women (Benson-Smith, 2005)
AIDS—Children (X4) (Donovan, 1993, 1997, 2001; Hogan, 1997)	AIDS—Criminals (X6) (Donovan, 1993, 1997, 2001; Hogan, 1997; Patterson & Keefe, 2008; Schroedel & Jordan, 1998)
AIDS—Families (X2) (Patterson & Keefe, 2008; Schroedel & Jordan, 1998)	AIDS—Gay men (Donovan, 1993)
AIDS—Women (X3) (Donovan, 1993, 1997; Hogan, 1997)	AIDS—Gay men 1981 (Donovan, 1997)
Elderly—1970s (Hudson, 2005)	AIDS—Minorities (Donovan, 1997)
Elderly—Pre-WWII (X3) (Hudson, 2008, 2013; Hudson & Gonyea, 2012)	Chamber of commerce (Weible et al., 2011)
Elderly prior to 1965 (Campbell, 2003)	Criminals (X9) (Brucker, 2007; Camou, 2005; Houston & Richardson, 2004; McKenna, 2011; Nicholson-Crotty & Nicholson-Crotty, 2004; Owens & Smith, 2012; Schneider, 1999, 2006; Whitford & Yates, 2009)
Immigrants—Farmers (Newton, 2008)	Criminals—African-Americans (Miller, 2012)
Immigrants—Students (Reich & Barth, 2010)	Criminals—Chinese (Miller, 2012)
Immigrants—Women and children (Newton, 2008)	Criminals—Mexicans (Miller, 2012)
Middle-class African-Americans (X3) (Sidney, 2001, 2003, 2005)	Immigrants—1970s Europe (Jørgensen & Thomsen, 2012)
Middle-class women 1960s and 1970s (Palley & Palley, 2000)	Immigrants—Chinese (Nicholson-Crotty & Meier, 2005)
Nonsmokers good diet (Gollust & Lynch, 2011)	Immigrants—Illegal (X2) (Newton, 2008; Short & Magana, 2002)
Plants (Czech et al., 1998)	Immigrants—Illegal Scandinavia (Jørgensen, 2012)
Poverty—1960s and 70s (Guetzkow, 2010)	Immigrants—Japanese during WWII (DiAlto, 2005)
Poverty—Children (X2) (Hynes & Hayes, 2011; Whitford & Yates, 2009)	Immigrants—Poor and elderly (X2) (Yoo, 2001, 2008)
Poverty—Disabled (Brucker, 2007)	Native Americans—Militant (Comtassel, 2009)
Poverty—Families living in MI after 1990 (Josephson, 2000)	Obese children and their families (Hawkins & Linvill, 2010)
Poverty—Latino immigrants (Hussey & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2013)	Poverty—1980s and 90s (Guetzkow, 2010)
Poverty—Latinos Los Angeles (Garrow, 2012)	Poverty (X2)—African-Americans (Sidney, 2001, 2005)
Poverty—MI before 1990 (Josephson, 2000)	Poverty—African-Americans Los Angeles (Garrow, 2012)
Poverty—Prescription amphetamine (McKenna, 2011)	Poverty—Criminal African-American women (Jordan-Zachary, 2008)
Poverty—Single parents (Hynes & Hayes, 2011)	Poverty—Single parents (Crowley et al., 2008; Josephson, 2000)
Poverty—Victims abuse (Chanley & Alozie, 2001)	Poverty—Illegal immigrants (Hussey & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2013)
Poverty (X2) (Camou, 2005; Drew, 2013)	Poverty—Japanese youth (Toivonen, 2011, 2012)
Preschool-aged children (Bushouse, 2009)	Poverty—Men in MI after 1990 (Josephson, 2000)
Public housing tenants (Laffin, 2013)	Poverty—Tenants (Nguyen, Basolo, & Tiwari, 2013)
Small business (X2) (Anglund, 1998, 2000)	Public landlords (Hunter & Nixon, 1999)
Unrecognized Native Americans (Comtassel, 2009)	Reptiles, invertebrates (Czech et al., 1998)
Veterans—Revolutionary war (Jensen, 2005)	Smokers with poor diet (Gollust & Lynch, 2011)
Working class (Gollust & Lynch, 2011)	U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (Weible et al., 2011)

nonetheless considered *advantaged*. For example, government workers (Schroedel & Jordan, 1998) and prison administrators (Hogan, 1997) are not likely to be viewed as “powerful” groups; however, applications identifying the advantaged show that, within specific contexts, these groups can possess both considerable authority and power.

The least frequently studied target population group is *contenders* (15 percent). *Contenders* have power but are negatively socially constructed. Examples of contenders include: the elderly (Hudson, 2005, 2008, 2013; Hudson & Gonyea, 2012), gay men with AIDS (Donovan, 1997; Schroedel & Jordan, 1998), political activists (Czech, Kausman, & Borkhataria, 1998; Hogan, 1997; Patterson & Keefe, 2008; Weible et al., 2011), local government (Weible et al., 2011), and mortgage banks (Hunter & Nixon, 1999). Many of those identified as *contenders* are also identified as *deviants* or *dependents* in different contexts. For example, immigrants in Europe today are considered *contenders*, but immigrants in Europe during the 1970s (Jørgensen & Thomsen, 2012) and today in the United States (Jørgensen, 2012) are considered *deviants*. Banks that lend money for mortgages are identified as *contenders* (Hunter & Nixon, 1999) but also as *advantaged* (Drew, 2013). The general population of gay men with AIDS is identified as *contenders* (Donovan, 1997; Schroedel & Jordan, 1998), but prior to 1990 they were identified as *deviants* (Donovan, 1993). Another example is the elderly, which currently or since the 1980s (depending upon the study) are *contenders* (Hudson, 2005; Hudson & Gonyea, 2012) but after World War II were *advantaged* (Hudson & Gonyea, 2012). In at least some of these cases, this demonstrates that target populations are moving between ideal categories.

Examining Target Population Change

Target populations identified using the theory of social construction and policy design are not always static within the ideal types of advantaged, contender, dependent, and deviant. Over time, some populations have been shown both within and across different studies to move from one target population category to another (e.g., deviant to contender). These changes are reported with a relatively high rate of frequency as 43 percent of the applications discuss how a target population did or could potentially change either its power (high/low) or social construction (positive/negative). Some of the applications explicitly examine this issue by tracking the same target population over time. For example, one study tracks the development of the elderly in the United States prior to World War II (dependent), after World War II (advantaged), to the present day (contender) (Hudson & Gonyea, 2012). Hudson and Gonyea (2012) identify various causes of these changes including: the effects of previous assignments of Social Security benefits; effects of other social welfare and budgetary policies on social security spending; the mobilization and organization of the elderly into a powerful lobbying and voting group; and the changes in the target population in terms of size, resources, and behavior because of the inclusion of the Baby Boomer generation. Similarly, DiAlto (2005) observes the changes among Japanese immigrants, prior to (contender), during (deviant), and

after World War II (advantaged). DiAlto (2005) found that since World War II and relative to other immigrant groups, Japanese immigrants to the United States have more financial resources; however, DiAlto does not conclude that this increase explains the shift in social construction. Rather, DiAlto (2005) explains the shift in social construction as due in part to the persistent efforts of Japanese Americans to embrace American values and traditions coupled with efforts to highlight the contributions of Japanese-American soldiers during World War II.

Consistent across these studies is that the process of change is both internal and external to target populations, and generally takes multiple decades to occur. However, some studies point to a more expedited change in target population status. For example, homosexual men with AIDS have seen their categorization change from deviant during the 1980s and the early 1990s (Donovan, 1993) into a contender by the late 1990s (Donovan, 1997; Schroedel & Jordan, 1998). The rationales for such a change are the mobilization and organization of advocacy groups by gay men as well as learning by the general public and political officials about the causes of AIDS. As our aggregate data shows and these few examples illustrate, target populations are dynamic.

In 2005, Peter deLeon noted that while the theory had done an admirable job in identifying target groups and showing that movement from one quadrant to another was possible, the theory of policy design and social construction has failed to adequately explain *how* that movement is taking place. In other words, deLeon asks a simple but pointed question of policy design and social construction: What are the causal drivers of change? Recognizing that deLeon's question was on point, Schneider and Ingram (2005b) offered the following set of conjectures:

First, we posit that the political attractiveness of providing beneficial policy to advantaged groups may result in their being the beneficiaries of so many rewards from policy that their constructions shift from "deserving" to "greedy" or selfish, with a corresponding change in the kinds of policy designs they will receive. . . . A second model of change is far less predictable and posits that external dramatic events, opportunities, and skillful manipulation of entrepreneurs may alter constructions. . . . The third possibility is the path most damaging to democracy, where there are no self-correcting mechanisms. Instead, cycles of constructions and policies reinforce one another and continue unabated. (p. 444)

Distilling the Schneider and Ingram response, a shift in categorization of a target population should be the result of (i) changes in perception of a target population from being deserving to undeserving or vice versa, (ii) external dramatic events, (iii) opportunities, and/or (iv) skillful manipulation by entrepreneurs.

In order to examine this issue, the causal drivers of actual, perceived, or potential change among the four ideal types were coded using constant comparative analysis utilizing a variable oriented approach to identify familial types of causal drivers (Glaser, 1965; Miles & Huberman, 1994). From this approach, we identify two categories and nine general causal drivers among the applications. These are included in Table 3 along with example references.

Table 3. Explaining Changes in Power and/or Social Construction of Target Populations

Factors Leading to Change (Example Reference)
<p>External to target population</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Institutions (Horejes, 2013; Montpetit et al., 2005; Park & Wilding, 2013) 2. Policies from other policy subsystems (DiAlto, 2005; Hudson, 2013; Hudson & Gonyea, 2012; Jørgensen, 2012) 3. Feed-forward effects (Benson-Smith, 2005; Boothe & Harrison, 2009; Czech et al., 1998; DiAlto, 2005; Hudson & Gonyea, 2012; Knott & Weissert, 1995; Schneider, 2006) 4. External shocks (e.g., elections) (Abbie Erler, 2012; DiAlto, 2005; Guetzkow, 2010; Hudson, 2005; Jørgensen, 2012; Jørgensen & Thomsen, 2012; Sidney, 2001; Urias & Yeakey, 2009) 5. Public narratives by: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Policy elites (Josephson, 2000; Newton, 2008; Sidney, 2001; Toft, 2010; Yates & Whitford, 2009) b. Media (DiAlto, 2005; McAuliffe Straus, 2004; Schram, 2005) 6. Learning (Anglund, 1998; Donovan, 2001; Palley & Palley, 2000; Rollins, 2002; Schriner, 2005; Toivonen, 2011, 2012) <p>Internal to the target population</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Organization and mobilization of advocacy groups (Coutin, 1998; Czech et al., 1998; Donovan, 1993; Hogan, 1997; Huddleston, 2006; Hudson & Gonyea, 2012; McAuliffe Straus, 2004; McCulloch & Wilkins, 1995; Palley & Palley, 2000; Sidney, 2003; Wanzo, 2010; Weible et al., 2011) 2. Changes in group size, behavior, resources (either actual or perceived) (Anglund, 1998; Camou, 2005; DiAlto, 2005; Garrow, 2012; Hogan, 1997; Hudson, 2013; Hudson & Gonyea, 2012; Jensen, 2005; Palley & Palley, 2000; Sidney, 2001) 3. Development of a political, moral, and/or policy entrepreneur (Bushouse, 2009; Nicholson-Crotty & Meier, 2005; Sidney, 2001; Soss, 2002)

The two categories are changes: (i) *external to the target population*; and (ii) *internal to the target population*. Each of these categories has multiple causal drivers that may lead to changes in social construction and/or power of the target population.

The category *external to target population* includes six potential causal drivers that change the power and/or social construction of a target population. *Institutions* matter in the social construction and power of target populations. Comparing target populations between countries with different constitutional structures, two studies (Montpetit et al., 2005; Park & Wilding, 2013) find that alterations or differences in those structures are drivers of change, while a third (Horejes, 2013) found that different government institutions develop diverse social constructions of the same target population. *Policies from other policy subsystems* also influence the social construction or power of target populations (DiAlto, 2005; Hudson, 2013; Hudson & Gonyea, 2012; Jørgensen, 2012). For example, changes in fiscal and labor policy lead to changes in the position of immigrants (Jørgensen, 2012). Policy designs themselves contain within them features that produce a *feed-forward effect* that changes how a population is perceived (Benson-Smith, 2005; Boothe & Harrison, 2009; DiAlto, 2005; Schneider, 2006). For example, Schneider (2006) finds that social construction of criminals became more negative in the 1960s and 1970s and that this change coincides with a critical juncture of legislation that initiated long periods of path dependency. *External shocks* to the policy subsystem such as economic recessions (Abbie Erler, 2012; Hudson, 2005) and terrorist attacks (Jørgensen, 2012; Urias & Yeakey, 2009) also drive change. Elections as well have the potential to bring about changes in ideology among the policy elite (Guetzkow, 2010), which in turn drive change in the construction or power of target populations. *Narratives* used to describe the relevant populations change among politicians (Toft, 2010) or the media (DiAlto, 2005; McAuliffe Straus, 2004; Schram, 2005) also facilitate change. Finally, *learning* by policy elites and the general public about a problem or issue changes the social construction of a target population. For example, during the 1990s, people learned more about how AIDS was transferred from person to person and about who had AIDS. In part, this learning development is argued to have led to a more positive social construction for some groups with AIDS (Donovan, 2001; Rollins, 2002).

The second general category, *internal to the target population*, captures potential causal drivers that come from within a target population. The target population itself has agency over these causal drivers. *Organizing and mobilizing to advocate* for change can change a group's social construction or power (e.g., Hudson & Gonyea, 2012; Weible et al., 2011). Weible et al. (2011) found that organizations with a shared interest in the Lake Tahoe basin had increasingly favorable views of one another in collaborative versus adversarial environments. Changes in *group attributes such as size, resources, and behavior* also change their power or social construction (e.g., Anglund, 1998; Camou, 2005; Garrow, 2012). For example, Palley and Palley (2000) examine women in the 1960s and observe changes in their behavior including their increasing tendencies to enter the workforce, increased political activity, and becoming better educated, which all led to changes in their power and social construction. In turn, Palley and Palley (2000) argue, changes in power and social construction led

to changes in overall healthcare for women. Finally, a *political, moral, or policy entrepreneur* (e.g., Nicholson-Crotty & Meier, 2005) might also emerge from a group that weaves together various resources, or perhaps induces the population to change its behavior, or otherwise instigates change in the social construction or power of the targeted group. Sidney (2001) identifies various members of Congress as playing an important political role in middle-class African-Americans positively socially constructing them in order to change the federal regulation of housing. In sum, target populations have been shown to have the capacity to exercise agency and thus change their status in several ways, including through *organization and mobilization*, changing their *group attributes such as size or behavior*, and producing or recruiting an *entrepreneur*.

Using our two categories of general types of change, we are able to discern a total of nine potential casual drivers. While certainly some of these drivers could use further study or theoretical refinement or may belong to both categories, such as entrepreneurs, it is evident that extant research applying the theory of social construction and policy design has responded to deLeon's (2005) challenging question regarding the drivers of change for target group power or social construction. In short, the body of policy design and social construction studies examined shows many ways that change can occur, whether through agency, context, or an ambiguous problem definitional mixture of both.

Conclusion

This review of past publications attempts to cover the breadth of past and current scholarship on the theory of social construction and policy design. The data and analyses demonstrate that recent applications since 2008 have been increasing and scholars at universities throughout the United States and around the world are utilizing this theory. While the federal level of government is the dominant level of policymaking studied, there is diversification of policy domains with the most frequent domain of social welfare accounting for only a third of all applications. Furthermore, policy design and social construction applications show a range of methodologies being employed by scholars with a plurality using nonempirical qualitative methods but a majority using some type of empirical analysis. In short, the data show a vibrant theory broadly applied and disseminated among scholars offering a multitude of methodological skill sets, topics, and analytic styles.

Beyond the breadth of the theory, our analysis has also unearthed findings that may lead to future research questions and hypotheses. First, 141 different target populations are identified within one of the four ideal categories of advantaged, contender, dependent, or deviant. While some of these target populations have been retested both by parallel studies and within the studies themselves, most have not. Future research should retest the positioning of these target populations in the contexts specified by the corresponding study and test the target population in different contexts to assess external validity. In this manner, scholars will be able to accumulate knowledge about target populations in terms of both the validity of past findings across contexts and better document change in the power and social

construction of target populations. The applications examined clearly make a strong case that social construction and power are contextual; however by testing and retesting such contexts can be controlled for.

Second, nine causal drivers of target population change in two general categories have been identified. Scholars of the policy process will note that several of these identified causal drivers such as external shocks, organization and mobilization of advocacy, learning, and use of narratives are similar components of change found in other theories of the policy process. By focusing on any of these identified causal mechanisms or other complementary theories of the policy process, scholars may connect the role of target populations as an intermediate variable to policy change. By being explicit about the possible factors causing changes in social construction and power, these drivers can be tested by researchers to determine in what contexts they are significant and if they are dependent upon or interacting with each other.

Beyond examining the breadth of the theory and potential for future research, the analyses demonstrates that scholars applying the theory of social construction and policy design have responded to important criticisms leveled at the theory, most notably the criticism admonishing the theory for a lack of explicit explanations for change (deLeon, 2005) and a second criticism noting a general lack of the presence of empirical methods among applications (Sabatier, 1997). While some of the applications are not clear in their identification or operationalization of social construction, power, or even the target population, these studies were definitively in the minority. The majority of scholarship between 1993 and 2013 and in particular since 2008 applies empirical methods, utilizes clearly defined concepts, and many identify causal mechanisms driving changes in social construction or power that may lead to changes in policy design. Rising to meet its critics, the data suggest that the theory of social construction and policy design has clearly entrenched itself as a credible lens for understanding the policy process.

While this type of research removes much of the foundational purpose of the theory of social construction and policy design from the analysis as it did not investigate why public policies sometimes fail to meet their nominal purposes of supporting democratic institutions or producing greater equality (Ingram et al., 2007), we do believe it offers some added value to our understanding of the theory. Specifically, this review of all past applications provides a temporal and substantive baseline, providing salient information about who is conducting research, how they are doing it, and on what. By having an empirical understanding of the current state of the research, we can both improve the theory by filling theoretical and empirical gaps and, more importantly, make more informed decisions about where to apply the theory to the normative end to which the theory was created.

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Notes

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1. Importantly, and in direct contrast to other brands of social construction (e.g., Fischer & Forrester, 1993), the Schneider and Ingram (1993) treatment of social construction does not assume that reality is purely relative; rather, their understanding of social construction is a form of bounded relativity grounded in different interpretive meanings people deduce (i.e., social constructions) from various external stimuli (Schneider & Ingram, 2005b)—both from exogenous social constructions and more objective external stimuli such as gravity and the galactic speed limit of 299 792 458 meters per second. Social constructions are further understood as being evaluative (Schneider & Ingram, 1997), and therefore potentially operationalized in relation to a target population or system of knowledge as a continuous positive or negative variable.
2. In 2005, there were 13 publications due to the publication of the edited volume *Deserving and Entitled* by Schneider and Ingram (2005a), which included 11 applications of the theory.
3. In the texts, Mettler and Soss (2004) and Campbell (2007, 2012) actually refer to feedback effects; however, feedback and feed-forward are interchangeable (see Schneider & Sidney, 2009) within the lexicon of the theory, with feed-forward being the preferred term in more recent publications.
4. We applied a variable-oriented strategy of constant comparative analysis whereby we identified common themes in terms of policy domain across the 123 cases and downplayed specific case dynamics. We then used a familial approach to identify cases that had common policy domains that are often found within public policy research. For more on constant comparative analysis, see Glaser (1965) and Miles and Huberman (1994).
5. The 12 theoretical publications were not included in this data analysis.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web-site:

Appendix. List of All Publications Used as Data.