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#### **Approaches to Public Policy. Policy Cycles and Policy Subsystems**

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Howlett, M., & Ramesh, M. (2002). Approaches to Public Policy. In M. Howlett, & M. Ramesh (Eds.), *Studying Public Policy. Policy Cycles and Policy Subsystems*. 2nd edition (pp. 20-49). Don Mills, Ont. : Oxford University Press.

**Abstract :**

The authors outline two main theoretical approaches to public policies studied in social sciences: deductive theories and inductive theories. Various strategies can be used to study public policies and several factors need to be considered, such as the analytical level (macro-, meso- or microsociological), method (deductive or inductive) and analysis subject (individual, collective or institutional).

**Deductive Theories**

Deductive theories are divided into three approaches, depending on the subject selected for the analysis. The **individual** approach is called rational choice theory, with individuals being economic players who act rationally in keeping with their own interests. As for the **collective** approach, the class analysis concept is borrowed from Marxism, whereby public policies are perceived as reflecting the interests of the dominant class. Finally,, or actor-centred institutionalism, with all analysis being related to the "transaction" between individuals and their institutions; in other words, they influence each other.

**Inductive Theories**

Unlike deductive theories, inductive theories are based on a bottom-up approach that is constantly being adapted. The **individual** approach is called sociological individualism, or more specifically welfare economics, and it is based on the idea that individuals make social rather than individual decisions. Since resources are not always divided up equally, cost-benefit analysis applies in this area so that a way may be found to do more at less cost. At the **collective** level, the pluralist approach is adopted, despite hardly applicable to public policy making; for instance, it is hard to define the government's role in policy making. Lastly, the **structural** approach is based on socio-historical neo-institutionalism, or statism, and it emphasizes social structures and political institutions. More precisely, this perspective argues that the State is granted monopoly of power, placing the emphasis on institutional bureaucratic aspects such as status, infrastructures, routine procedures, standards, all of which restrict public initiative.

The authors conclude that the approaches applied to public policy making vary and are sometimes contradictory. They outline three main points:

- 1) Some approaches tend to use their hypotheses as empirical evidence.
- 2) There are limits to the synthesis that can be performed with a macrosociological approach.
- 3) Some social sciences disciplines are inclined to view individuals as being on an unlimited quest for resources in a world of limited resources, whereas others opt for a view where the behaviour of individuals is explained by their own experience as well as that of others.

**Key Words :**

Inductive Theories, Deductive Theories, Theoretical Approaches, Public Policies, Macrosociological Analysis

