Studying values in public policy: comparing five approaches

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Abstract
An aura of vagueness sticks to the term values when used in public policy research. This paper surveys five recent empirical approaches to integrate values more in our analysis of public policy. We discuss how these approaches tackle the dilemmas generally associated with studying values, offering an orientation in the variety of possibilities to advance public policy research within this reviving subdiscipline.
Introduction

‘In the swamp are the problems of the greatest human concern’
Schön 1983, p. 42

If scholars of public policy want to take policy making and its implementation as a value laden process – a reasonably undeniable statement – the scientific toolbox to analyze this process could use some improvement. Most studies in the field of public policy tend to avoid the concept of values or treat values as a façade of interests, as Bozeman (2007) and Stewart (2009) regret. Particularly compared to economical approaches, the integration of values could be a major forte of public policy research.

What to expect of current approaches that try to do so? Alas, there is no certain method to identify values held by decision-makers, as Wildavsky writes (1987, p. 91).

Value research poses a dilemma for scientists. Thacher (1999) says it concisely: ‘The norms of science demand a disinterested value-neutrality, but adhering to that norm means abandoning much hope of relevance’ (p. 73). Still various attempts have recently been made to improve the analytical tools to study values, or to study them despite the fact that tools are poor. ‘The fact that public value or public interest are ideals is not a sufficient justification for ignoring them or assuming that they cannot be systematically studied’ (Bozeman 2007, p. 64).

This paper compares some attempts to study value in the field of public policy. First, we go more deeply into the barriers to study values scientifically. We single out four dilemmas. Second, we discuss five recent approaches. For each approach, we point out how these four dilemmas relate. Goal of this paper is to see how recently proposed and applied ways of studying values cope with the classical tension between scientific rigor and practical relevance.

Writing about values feels a sin

Audiences are so-easily blurred when writing about values, so variously if at all defined. Agle and Caldwell (1999) speak of ‘values literature confusion.’ Value may refer to so many things. It may refer to the monetary price of an artifact. We use the term values for what makes them priceless instead. We desire them and find them incommensurable,
which money is essentially not. Bozeman (2007) terms it ‘intrinsic.’ Examples of values he uses are independence, honesty and transparency. Similarly, Thacher and Rein (2004) define values as ‘the ultimate ends of public policy’ which are ‘not just means to some other objective’ (p. 460). They mention safety, equality, prosperity, freedom and self-governance as examples.

Various dichotomies and typologies usually further help to pinpoint conceptual differences between the remaining set of values. Just a few examples are the following distinctions: procedural or substantive values (Scott 2000), private or public values (Jacobs 1965), hard or soft values (Steenhuisen et al. 2009) Western or Confucian values (De Jong 2010), political or policy values (Stewart 2009). The richness of possible typologies is not the problem.

The ‘sin’ of analyzing values lies in the source of uncertainty we call upon us. Definitions remain either too ambiguous or much too narrow. Typologies remain arbitrary, incomplete and too freely applicable. The uncertainty values bring along has multiple, irreparable causes, posing sincere difficulties for knowing what values actually are. From literature on values in public policy, we pick out four major dilemmas. They are not exclusive to values but particularly tenacious when studying them:

- **Values are always contested.** Values are always contested (De Bruijn and Dicke 2006). Because they are emotion-laden concepts (Wagenaar 2002), people have different and contradictory perceptions of what specific values actually are, for example ‘freedom,’ and what they mean in multiple practical contexts. What might be called the ‘pluralist dilemma’ for value research is: how to acknowledge this, often latent, variety in perceptions at the root of the concept when defining and measuring values?

- **Values are always incomplete explanations.** What do values do? Intention is easily mistaken for effect as researchers allocate values to a decision-making process for their explanatory power in hindsight. But taking the inevitably uncertain causal relation between possessing values and realizing them too serious, we end up with poor, valueless explanations as well (Wildavsky 1987, p. 92). The ‘causal dilemma’ for value research is: how to distinct between the result of value-based intentions and unintended consequences when explaining social outcomes?
Values are always prey to framing. We can not study values without stepping into the possible misuse of values in decision making processes, either as a cover up for wrong-doing or as a camouflaged vehicle for selfish gain. Framing is famous (Lakoff 2004). Those who frame values for political problems can have a definitive impact on the chosen policy. At the same time, not framing values, leaving values ambiguous instead, offers much room as well for influential people to exploit their influence, by freely interpreting values in opportunistic ways (Weick 2001, p. 47). The ‘framing dilemma’ is: how to sanitize value research from insincere framing?

Values are always relative. Most good-hearted citizens subscribe to safety, legitimacy, equality, sustainability and what not. No interesting debate about that. The true face of values only appears when they conflict, which is generally considered unavoidable, if not essential to public policy (cf. Wagenaar 2002, Viscusi 1992, Rein 1976). To analyze the relative nature or the importance of values, we therefore need to focus on how values are prioritized.

The concept of value trade-offs, however, contains a contradiction in terms. Various scholars pinpointed the impracticability and even argued for the theoretical impossibility to balance values in conflict, because, according to the definition of values as ultimate ends, see above, there can be no overarching scale to make values commensurate (cf. Lindblom 1959, Chang 1997, Thacher 2001). So, paradoxically, value trade-offs are considered a philosophical impossibility as well as an inevitable daily practice (cf. Tetlock 2000, Steenhuisen 2009). The ‘commensurability dilemma’ for value research is: how to find and conceptualize the relative nature of values?

Obiter dictum, this last dilemma on the unknowable prioritization between values is famously well-phrased by Oscar Wilde. It goes: ‘A cynic knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. A sentimentalist knows the value of everything but the price of nothing.’ In other words, nobody knows the price of their values.

In this paper we consider it a worthwhile sin to discuss value research. We want to know how previously used approaches have coped with the dilemmas explained above. But first, we shortly explain how we arrived at the five approaches for this provisionary comparison.
Five approaches
We took a handful of recent approaches empirically studying public policy related values. The goal of this paper is merely explorative. So, we did not systematically select the approaches from a larger list. Instead, we took five approaches close to our own scientific interest but still highly diverse in the way they studied values. These approaches concerned a normative model, a value-critical perspective, a value-based heuristic, a value measurement instrument and a semi-ethnographic approach to values. Each approach is shortly introduced. We highlight the diverse reasons for scholars to study values. We describe the steps in the approaches and the intended result. Further, we focus on the unique aspects of each approach with regard to the uncertainty dilemmas above.

Value mapping: a normative model
Bozeman (2007) developed a Public Value Mapping model. This model offers a set of criteria and mechanisms to study the emerging social outcomes within a certain public policy field, for example genetically modified food. Similar to the market failure model the mapping approach aims to identify and explain public value failure, either prospectively or by means of an assessment.

Bozeman’s main interest to study values is to counterbalance the hollow but so influential rhetoric of economic individualism in our conception of the role of the State. He aims to reinforce a rich discussion about what governments should do more than ensuring markets and being efficient themselves. To address this question, in Bozeman’s view, current debates lack analytical and communicative diagnostics to talk about what public values actually are and whether society currently succeeds in realizing them. Public value mapping research sets out to develop such diagnostics in order to give more systematic attention to public values when studying public policy.

The act of mapping refers to the modeling of causal links between value statements and social outcomes in a certain policy domain. In this causal model, the uncertainty of the ‘pluralist dilemma’ is addressed in two ways. First, measurable public values are looked for to represent the desired outcomes. Second, value statements are collected from a large variety of organizations and individuals. These value statements
can be diverse and contradicting. This mapping model is considered most compelling exactly when opinions are polarized.

So, the causal dilemma is of central concern to this model also. A provisional set of public values criteria – e.g. imperfect public information, time horizon, ability to articulate and aggregate interests, sustainability and distribution of benefits – serves as a framework to indentify general failure mechanisms.

The public value mapping model is more of a framework. It allows for various methods, typically a combination of multiple methods and techniques within an in-depth case-study research. This may involve qualitative data and quantitative data sets, for example on historical performance. The general purpose of this framework makes it not very apt to discuss the more detailed methodological challenges like the ‘framing dilemma’ and the ‘commensurability dilemma.’

| The pluralist dilemma                  | • finding metrics for social outcomes  |
|                                       | • assembling value statements        |
| The causal dilemma                    | • mapping value statements with social outcomes |
| The framing dilemma                   | -                                   |
| The commensurability dilemma          | -                                   |

**Value interpretation: a critical perspective**

Thacher (1999, 2001) studied practitioners advancing social values within a case study on police-community partnerships by means of a value-critical qualitative analysis. Research goal was to understand and improve the ability of practitioners to engage in multiple and competing values: how their *coping strategies* (my term) affect the realization of values. His main interest in value research is to face the trouble social science has to be relevant.

Rein (1976, p. 73) argued for this ‘value critical position’ for researchers to take. This position means to treat values ‘not merely as the accepted aims of policy but as a subject for debate and analysis’ (*ibid.*) and to investigate values ‘in relation to others by looking at the consequences of pursuing these aims and by considering the latent goal conflicts among them’ (*ibid.*).
With regard to the pluralist dilemma, Thacher explicitly accounts for the sacrifice he needs to make. Value research requires a leap out of the scientific rigor, he explains. And a value critical perspective ultimately makes an appeal to the judgment of researchers to verify and to communicate what values are concerned in the object of study.

This critical perspective consists of two parts: thick description and interpretation. First, Thacher uses in-depth interviews, on-site observations and relevant documents to arrive at thick description of practice. Second, he starts an active interpretation process that cannot escape being subjective, but can be explicit, iterative and systematic. In this second step, the analysis loses robustness but gains relevance, Thacher says.

In other words, ‘the research itself identifies values’ (Thacher 1999, p. 75) explains. ‘It does not so much discover or introduce them as it clarifies them by attending closely and with a passion for systematic thinking to the value concerns in which practitioners themselves engage’ (ibid.). ‘By working backwards from the sometimes vague and conflicting ideas that practitioners advance,’ this approach aims to ‘identify and clarify their core values without abandoning any anchor in their own perspective’ (ibid.). Imposing this new order on the ambiguity of value perceptions is a necessary sacrifice for social research to be relevant, Thacher argues.

His approach seems to be hardly attentive to the possibility that practitioners might be well skilled in framing their (professional) values in ways that advance their personal interests, for example protecting departments against efficiency cuts these days. Or, the fact that practitioners have vague and conflicting aims is interpreted as an inability to articulate them instead of a more or less self-interested reluctance of practitioners to state what they actually value. In principal, Thacher’s value-critical posture has potential to deal with this framing dilemma with, for example, apt questioning, pressing respondents to be concrete, securing anonymity and verifying interviews with archival data.

Next, Thacher’s approach explicitly uses values as dependent variables to assure practical relevance. This implies that the causal dilemma is stepped aside as values are not studied as variables with an effect on the policy process.
Finally, the prioritization of values seems central to Thacher’s approach, as he describes coping strategies dealing with value conflicts. But his analysis does not directly assess the relative importance of values. Instead, he focuses on how certain outcomes are realized or not. In this sense, his analysis might seem detached from the values practitioners themselves have.

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**Value-based analysis: a heuristic**

Stewart (2009) advances the use of values as an analytical tool, or heuristic, in order to better understand public policy. Her take on values differs from the approaches of Bozeman and Thacher. The latter two take values as an end-point of their analysis. Stewart takes values as starting point. She starts with values as a lens. Using this lens elucidates the nature of values in relation to the public policy processes. Then, values are thus both part of the lens as part of the object of study. Stewart’s main interest in studying values is the many value-related aspects of public policy that other heuristics neglect to highlight, such as value dynamics, contestation of values and values choices.

Stewart’s observation is that for some reason – interpreted by me as the uncertainty underlying the four dilemmas, described above – explaining policy by the use of values is an uphill battle. It so naturally fits our framing when someone construes policy developments by pointing at plausible interests of the main actors involved. Explaining the same policy making by means of values as motivators immediately sounds so preachy in tone and tends to appear more wishful than realistic.

Interesting about the way Stewart parries the four uncertainty dilemmas is that she generally does not treat them as dilemmatic but as essential drivers for the analytical process. The pluralist dilemma implies that her lens is not pre-defined. The lens does not even become definitive after the study is completed.
This pluralism of the studied value is particularly evident in studies comparing policies across countries. It is exactly this type of studies that she indicates as a forte of her approach. When there is no common concept underlying terms such as fairness or efficiency, Stewart favors a focus on trade-offs within and between different values. This heuristic particularly allows seeing the contestation of values and value balancing. And this is illuminating, in her view, both in making the contours of values more sharp as in connecting the contestation about values to policy change.

The pluralist dilemma is not solved but made insightful, starting with an open definition. In doing so, value analysis may advance in attempts to characterize or measure values, but eventually ‘the very act of trying to clarify them seems to cause them to change their contours’ (ibid., p. 9). Although the pluralist dilemma essentially blurs the value lens, Stewart’s analysis purposefully dives into this dilemma, sharpening the lens as the application produces more and more heuristics.

A main result of this analysis, thus, is the improvement of the heuristics used. Stewart’s (2009) case studies, for example, produced some first heuristic elements such as value pairs, value conflicts, value brokers and value dynamics. Another aspect of Stewart’s approach related with the pluralist dilemma is an active enticement for researchers to reflect on their own values and how they relate to the object of study.

The possibly manipulative language of values is not extensively discussed, but essentially part of the lens too, just as it is part of public policy making. It does not distort the lens but draws attention to how values impact policy practices. For example, a labor union of a railways company may lobby for ‘assured employment’ of operational staff. It may do so indirectly by advocating for ‘passenger security.’ A strong coalition of politicians may be incited to lay down certain policy criteria for passenger security that, eventually, force the company’s management not to cut on operational personnel. This illustrates how some value may only be espoused for its leverage in the interactions between politics and public policy making. Still, a risk is that this framing dilemma blurs the value lens, as researchers think they study rail policy through the lens of ‘passenger security’ while a lobby group puts the analysis on a completely wrong track.

The causal dilemma seems not applicable, for this method does not aim to test causal relation between values and policy. Stewart’s perspective does not start from the
deeply-rooted values of individuals involved in public policy, but from the enactment of values in public policy making in response to value-conflict.

Finally, the contradiction between essentially incommensurable values and compromise-based policy is explicitly discussed by Stewart. Again it is not seen as a dilemma for value analysis, but as a central phenomenon that we see more sharply when we use a value-perspective.

| The pluralist dilemma | • part of the lens  
|                       | • an open definition  
|                       | • focus on trade-offs |
| The causal dilemma    | - |
| The framing dilemma   | - |
| The commensurability dilemma | • part of the lens |

**Value verification: a measuring instrument**

Van der Wal (2008) studied differences in value systems between business and government. It is classic to speak of private values as opposed to public values (Jacobs 1992, Bozeman 2007). But comparative empirical studies are scarce to verify whether these different value systems do exist, and if so, in what way they actually differ. Van der Wal’s main driver to study values is the sloppy way people generally attribute values to either the public or the private domain – and how these sloppy assumptions aim to fuel fierce debates. Scientific knowledge might temper the wickedness or improve the precision of these debates about public and private values.

In this variant of value research, the values people possess are the principal unit of observation. This research requires developing a measure instrument. On the basis of expert interviews and scientific literature, concerning ethics and the public-private divide, Van der Wal (2008, p. 41) first sketches a panorama with hundreds of value statements. Then, a clustering system and a search protocol for selection eventually results in a list of twenty values, among which responsiveness, reliability, lawfulness and effectiveness. So, Van der Wal arrives at a relevant range of values for his study on the basis of careful and systematic selection. This range of values is input for a questionnaire to measure values
by ranking and rating. Finally, face-to-face interviews are used to contextualize and triangulate the previous quantitative value measurement.

The pluralist dilemma is central to Van der Wal’s approach. In contrast to Stewart’s heuristic, he precisely and uniformly defines values in order to acquire a baseline of quantitative data on them. For example, collegiality, as a value, is defined in the questionnaire as ‘act loyally and show solidarity towards colleagues’ (ibid., p. 198) and social justice is defined as ‘act out of commitment to a just society’ (ibid., p. 198).

With regard to the framing dilemma, Van der Wal (2008, p.19) considers that values are frequently used as a strategic smokescreen to sidestep painful issues. Yet, this dilemma does not receive special attention in his methodology. As his measuring instrument is based on a critical mass of value statements from scientific literature, one might imagine that the values of scientists have biased his instrument. For example, forms of consistency and justification – scientific values par excellence – might be overrepresented because of how scientific literature may implicitly frame their importance for public policy.

The social desirability of answering questionnaires about values is more explicitly addressed. Van der Wal’s main measure against this inevitable tendency of respondents is contextualization. He complements the stated preferences in the ranking and rating with qualitative data in which respondents explain revealed preferences in the ‘most recent important decision within their organization’ (p. 205). A question however is whether the contextualization of value preferences, embedding them in a lifelike organizational context, reveals or activates smokescreens and social desirability. Van der Wal’s respondents were all top managers who could exclusively describe a decision of their preference. A sign that this risk did not overshadow the results of his interviews was that most interviewees were willing and able to identify contradictions and painful trade-offs in the realization of values.

The causal dilemma is not particularly problematic to value verification. Values, as quoted above, are already defined as the way people act. Conclusions are drawn about the values people have, assuming that the values people have shape their actions. The qualitative interviews validated this assumption.
The relative and contingent nature of a value’s importance is not considered problematic by Van der Wal. The straightforward aim of his measuring instrument is to capture the value’s relative importance in relation to other values as well as in relation to decision making. The result is a hierarchy of values constructed by multiple complementary methods, qualitative and quantitative. Within the quantitative part, Van der Wal argues for a combination of rating and ranking values, since each method has its own strengths and weaknesses to make value conflicts transparent.

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<td>The framing dilemma</td>
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<td>The commensurability dilemma</td>
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**Value tracing: a semi-ethnographic approach**

In my own dissertation research (Steenhuisen 2009) I studied the realization of articulated values. Realization and articulation of value belongs to a cycle: certain public values first get articulated by governments in the surrounding of utility companies; then, these companies act upon these values when making plans and protocols; next, operational departments use these plans in daily operations; finally, internal and external oversight reacts on the delivered result, if necessary, by re-planning or by re-defining values again. Few studies aim for such a cross-section of infrastructure operations.

My main interest for studying values in my research is the opportunity it appeared to offer to explain individual behavior in the context of organizational behavior. The semi-ethnographic aspect about this approach is that the researcher immerses itself within an organization where the daily work life of his respondents takes place. Considerably open interviews, daylong on-site observations and working myself in the organizations helped me to learn about the values underlying the behavior of my respondents.

A great many studies evaluate the effects of liberalization on public values in utility industries. Most studies treat the industries as black-boxes. Social outcomes are defined and measured. If these measures show a decrease, it is usually considered evident that values did not receive enough priority within the industry. My aim was to study how
this trade-off behavior actually comes about. I wanted to see how values were traded off against each other. Of course, you can not actually see values, but you can trace them in the behavior of individuals in response to value conflict.

In broad outline, the method is to track the realization of values, traversing utility companies from the strategic top to operations. I started with the objectives of governmental oversight bodies in the surrounding of these companies and I followed their operationalization seeping through the organization. Our first respondents involved externally oriented managers near the strategic top. They could roughly agree with these values, but translated them in their own way in instructions and protocols. I followed this planning logic with its many steps of operationalization and translation up to lower planning levels and eventually to the operational process. Afterwards, I ascended the hierarchical structure again where middle managers monitor operations. At each ‘level’ in the resulting cross-section of the company, respondents freely talked about there daily work with regard to (i) the most important values for them to realize, (ii) how they realized them in daily practice and (iii) whether they met any complications realizing them.

The pluralist dilemma fully forced itself on me. The values I tracked appeared in many different qualities and circumstances among the many interviews and observations. Where some respondents equated the values they pursued with the norms they worked towards, their colleagues believed the same norms to undermine the intended value. Reliability, for example, could be strictly operationalized in the planning phase in contrast to unstructured and deviant heuristics on the level of operators. Some of these operationalizations might be regarded as goal displacement, others as desirable adjustments – which of the two also depends on the conflict situation at hand.

A common assumption is that values become more and more concrete as they descend the organization up to daily operations. Indeed, plans become more and more precise, but from an ethnographic perspective operators appear to speak and think in much more abstract qualifications than their managers do. This is because my research focused on value conflict. On a daily basis, operators had much more conflict to digest than their managers, but their highly detailed and formal protocols would more often be a burden and a distraction than a help when interpreting the appropriate value trade-offs.
My approach to the pluralist dilemma basically equals Stewart’s open definition. Strictly defining values, for example like governmental oversight bodies do, would disable me to oversee the contested and multi-faceted nature of the intended values. Moreover, it would draw the research away from what respondents value themselves.

The framing dilemma is tempered by multiple angles of observation. This is slightly different from Van der Wal’s multiple method approach. In my case, the respondents, being the potential framer, are studied qualitatively from multiple angles: they say what they value; they explain what they usually do; I see what they do; they explain what they do while doing it; and, finally, all this is complemented with what other respondents say about this. These many angles make it easier for the researcher to interpret or correct for framing. Most framing is quite obvious, such as ‘I never encounter any (value) conflict in my department.’ This smokescreen easily turns from a research problem to a striking illustration of how this respondent actually deals with value trade-offs when his subordinates tell completely different stories about the daily conflicts they deal with. Traversing the organization resulted in many complementary and contradictory stories like that, linking many different perspectives on the same trade-offs on a case-by-case basis.

The causal dilemma is the main idea behind the cross-section to see how the values of planners, operators and managers step-by-step result in the delivery of those values. To check whether these values are delivered I abundantly observed in operations but additionally compared my findings with basic performance information. This comparison highlights a peculiarity of organizational behavior: Thousands of people work together with strongly deviating ways of speaking and thinking about the values they share, but nevertheless the organization daily produces relatively stable outcomes. This may seem logical: When there is high input variance (multiple desires of customers, changing physical conditions, many unplanned conflict situations) but a stable output variance, there must be high process-variance. Possibly the variety of value perspectives help shaping this process-variance.

The focus on value brings sensitivity in treating the causal dilemma. In the case I would study more concrete issues like ‘objectives’ or ‘goals,’ this already frames behavior in terms of a pre-given intention. When studying values it is much less clear
where these fit in the causal chain. It actually raises the question whether values trigger an act, rationalize an act afterwards or emerge within an act. This causal indistinctiveness of values appeared helpful to understand how respondents prioritize values in daily work.

Finally, the commensurability dilemma was the main starting point of my research approach. This theoretical dilemma also emerged as a research problem: Respondents had major difficulties to talk about the daily trade-offs they made themselves. Two techniques were crucial to make trade-off behavior transparent. First, tracing values through the organization established many insights how actions and consequences link up, and also how unintended trade-offs take shape. Second, psychological literature helped to describe strategies people use, more and less consciously, to trade-off values without assessing the relative importance of values.

Strikingly, the actual concept of trade-offs appeared rather under-developed within the organizational settings of these industries. Outside operations, values were generally treated as non-fungible. Industries tend to manage their systems without paying much attention to the relative nature of values, by treating competing objectives sequentially, identifying and appraising trade-offs retrospectively through regret when their neglect becomes most evident. By focusing on the commensurability dilemma this study showed how hard it is for organizations to treat values as relative, and how enlightening research from a value-perspective can be.

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**Conclusion**

Value research in the field of public policy is underdeveloped and a bit underappreciated because of its lack of scientific rigor. This paper discusses five empirical approaches to study values and for each we discussed how varied they cope with similar research problems. The phenomenon of values brings much uncertainty forcing scientists into
trade-offs between rigor and relevance. Ignoring the uncertainty in what values actually are and what they do results in weak links with social outcomes. Recognizing this uncertainty makes it hard to arrive at hard scientific data.

The discussed approaches face these trade-offs in varied ways. Some scholars urge to define values strictly. Others are comfortable without. Some approaches aim for social outcomes, others for the values people working with public policy possess. Values can be taken as dependent or as independent variables, as ends or as causes of public policy, and preferably both.

Striking commonalities of the five approaches are, first, the outspoken role of a researcher’s own judgment. Next, few scholars seem to worry much about being mislead by interests opportunistically framed as values, or about remaining ignorant to the relative nature of values. None of the scholars seem particularly attentive to the degree in which they tackled this dilemma.

More general, these five approaches to study values seem to share a pragmatic way of dealing with the dilemmas value research poses. The often-mentioned way ahead is an incremental development of analytical notions and to gain analytical rigor by exploring and iteration.

This overview is sketchy and somewhat open-ended, but what it does point out is the inventive variety of ways to approach the uncertainty concerning value research. Our discussion showed many possibilities to integrate values in the study of public policy and the enormous area still unexplored.

**Literature**


Lindblom 1959


