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Struggling With Theory

A Beginning Scholar's Experience With Mazzoni's Arena Models

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As a beginning researcher, I had struggled to find an appropriate theory to ground my dissertation research, and I faced a second struggle as I began my first major research project as a new assistant professor. Eventually, I selected Mazzoni's arena model of policy innovation, a theory derived from the political science literature. By using it, I learned how a good theory helps a researcher focus a study, plan data collection, and develop an approach to data analysis. Since Mazzoni's theory did not fully explain the phenomenon I was studying, I was also able to suggest some ways in which it needed to be revised.

Fowler, F. C. (1994). Education reform comes to Ohio: An application of Mazzoni's arena models. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 16,* 335–350.

Overview of the Study

In 1990, after successfully defending my dissertation at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, I began to work as an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. At that time, I was familiar with Tennessee and Tennessee politics, but Ohio was new territory for me. My introduction to Ohio and its education politics came during my first weeks in the state. Both my students and my colleagues talked—or, more accurately, complained—a great deal about Senate Bill (S.B.) 140, the Omnibus Education Reform Act passed

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by the Ohio General Assembly in 1989. By and large, the state's educators were extremely angry with this law, which contained a hodgepodge of reforms, including three forms of school choice and mandatory phonics instruction. Most of them claimed that it had been "railroaded" through the state legislature without any meaningful input from educators or their organizations. In my classes, the students (who were almost all practicing Ohio teachers and administrators) often referred to S.B. 140 with considerable cynicism, calling it a classic example of the arrogance of contemporary politicians, who do not believe that educators know anything important about children or schools despite their years of professional practice. One student shared with me an amateur video that someone had shot at a regional meeting of the Buckeye Association of School Administrators, Ohio superintendents' organization. In it, superintendent after superintendent lambasted S.B. 140 and the legislative body that had enacted it. Angry comments and bitter laughter punctuated many of the speeches.

Later during that first year, some of my students and I attended a briefing session about the law, given by a high-ranking Ohio Department of Education official. In the course of the meeting, he informed his audience that "the train is leaving the station; you can get on board or be left behind." After this meeting, I stood with a group of Miami University graduate students as they angrily dissected this official's statements. Because I was greatly intrigued by this conflict-filled situation and the theoretical questions it raised, I launched a study of the passage of S.B. 140 in January 1991. My overall purpose in this study was to assess the extent to which the educational community was correct in believing that the law had been rammed through the legislature with little or no input from educators.

Earlier, during the fall of 1990, I had come across Tim Mazzoni's two "arena models" of policy innovation in education. In his first model—a conference proposal that I reviewed for the Politics of Education Association—he recounted how he had developed a model for major policy changes, hypothesizing that they usually result from a shift from the "subsystem arena," which is made up of education interest groups and politicians with a special concern for education, to the "macro arena," in which the general public exerts pressure on politicians to develop new policy.

After applying this first model to his study of the passage of a Minnesota law that enacted interdistrict open enrollment, however, Mazzoni (1991) found that the changes in Minnesota's education policy had resulted largely from the pressure exerted by high-ranking political figures, or the "leadership arena." For several reasons, which I will detail below, this second theoretical stance seemed ideally suited for my study. Using Mazzoni's concept of decision-making arenas and the shift from his first to second model, I developed two

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research questions: (1) To what extent did the Ohio events surrounding the passage of S.B. 140 conform to Mazzoni's first arena model? (2) To what extent did the Ohio events conform to Mazzoni's second arena model?

I chose the qualitative case study as my research method, drawing heavily on the work of Yin (1984), who defined a case study as an investigation of a contemporary social phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple data sources. I investigated the passage of S.B. 140 by the Ohio General Assembly, situating it within the social and political context of Ohio in the late 1980s. I gathered several types of data. First, I obtained a copy of the legislation. Next, I photocopied all the newspaper articles on S.B 140 that had been published by the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and the *Columbus Dispatch* in January 1988 (when Governor Richard Celeste had called for school reform in his State of the State Address) and from December 1988 to July 1989 (when S.B. 140 was under consideration by the legislature and was eventually passed). I also photocopied relevant articles from the publications of Ohio's major education interest groups, such as the two teachers' unions and the Ohio School Boards Association, during the same time periods. In addition, I obtained the three separate legislative commission reports that had been published during the period under study, as well as reports of briefing sessions about the law by the Ohio Department of Education. After I had thoroughly analyzed the documentary data, I conducted 20 in-depth, semistructured interviews with the policy actors who had been involved in the passage of the law. They included leaders of the major education interest groups in the state, such as the Ohio Education Association, the Ohio Federation of Teachers, and the Buckeye Association of School Administrators; two people who had served on legislative commissions; several members of the state legislature; and a member of Governor Celeste's staff.

My major conclusion was that Mazzoni's (1991) first arena model, which hypothesized that education policy innovations are made in response to pressure from the general public, or macro arena, did not fit the Ohio data at all. In fact, I found that Ohio's macro arena had remained inert throughout 1988 and 1989 in spite of the governor's energetic attempts to stir it to action. Mazzoni's second arena model, however, which attributed key roles in policy innovation to high-ranking leaders, came close to describing what had happened in Ohio. Summing up my findings, I wrote in my article,

> When the policy process shifted away from the subsystem arena, it moved largely to the leadership arena. Ohio's innovative education reform was defined, initiated, formulated, and pushed through the legislature by various high-ranking state and national leaders. The players in the subsystem and macro arenas were reduced to reactive positions from which they provided relatively minor input. (Fowler, 1994, p. 347)

In other words, my study revealed that the state's educators were largely correct in believing that S.B. 140 had been "rammed through" the legislature.

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I also found, however, that there were some weaknesses in Mazzoni's (1991) theoretical framework. I felt that he had overestimated the independence of the commissions that legislatures often appoint before developing new legislation. I also thought that he had defined the leadership arena too narrowly; my study suggested that the top business leaders in the state as well as the top political leaders could participate in it. Finally, Mazzoni had not mentioned the importance of the national political climate in shaping what happened in Minnesota, perhaps because Minnesota has pioneered the development of numerous innovative educational policies and therefore has helped mold the national political climate rather than being shaped by it. In Ohio, however, the national education reform movement had clearly led the state's politicians to put education reform on their agenda; in fact, the three forms of school choice included in S.B. 140 had been directly copied from Minnesota's law.

In 1992, I presented a preliminary version of my study (Fowler, 1992b) at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, and in 1994, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* published an article based on it, titled "Education Reform Comes to Ohio: An Application of Mazzoni's Arena Models." This was the same journal that had published Mazzoni's article on his arena models in 1991.

In the intervening years since I first used Mazzoni's arena models, I have used his theoretical framework for two other studies, both quite recent (Fowler, 2002, 2005). In addition, Feir (1995) used Mazzoni's framework in his investigation of state education policy innovation. Finally, in 2004, a doctoral student who was using Mazzoni's arena models as the theoretical framework for her dissertation study of the passage of a piece of higher education legislation contacted me, seeking advice about her interview protocol.

Mazzoni's arena models are used rarely, for two reasons. First, the politics of the education field has shifted strongly toward research on policy rather than on the political process that produces it and, second, the field tends to be rather atheoretical, a weakness that those of us who work in the politics of education deplore. The theory itself is highly regarded and was part of the reason why Division L of the American Educational Research Association accorded Mazzoni a lifetime achievement award when he retired in 2001.

Description of the Theoretical Framework

To understand Mazzoni's (1991) arena models of policy innovation, one must first understand some fundamental facts about the American political system at both the federal and the state level. The founding fathers of the United States were quite skeptical about the intellectual maturity of the general public, seeing it as being susceptible to rapidly changing political fads and as more likely to

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be swayed by emotion than by reason. They were also suspicious of centralized power, which, because of their experience of living in a British colony, they perceived as corrupt and tyrannical. As a result, they designed a form of government that is very conservative in the sense of being very resistant to policy change. American institutions such as the U.S. Electoral College, the bicameral legislature, the separation of powers, judicial review, the executive veto, and other such "checks and balances" were adopted primarily to achieve this effect. And when the states developed their own constitutions and governance structures, with few exceptions they followed the federal model of separated powers with numerous checks and balances. The founding fathers were quite successful in their endeavor; the American political system is, to this day, extremely resistant to change, especially when compared with the more widely used parliamentary system of government (Fowler, 2004). As a result, most change in American politics is gradual, or incremental. This means that American politicians typically use the strategy of passing a limited and weak version of the policy that they really want and then spending years (or even decades) gradually amending it to bring it closer to their ideal. This type of slow tinkering with policy is called incrementalism.

Occasionally, however, American governments do adopt policies that represent an abrupt change from the past. An example would be the New Deal administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, which passed numerous laws setting up radically new policies, such as public works programs and Social Security. Because such changes—known among political scientists as policy innovations—are rare, they hold a special interest for those who study politics. Mazzoni's (1991) arena models were designed to explain how policy innovations came about in education during the 1980s, a period of extensive education reform, which started out as incremental change but became more radical with the passage of time. Drawing on the political science literature, he hypothesized that policy decisions are made primarily in two different arenas: (1) a subsystem arena, which consists of the education committees of both houses in a legislature, the state department of education, and the representatives of the major education interest groups and (2) a macro arena, which is made up of the general public, top political leaders, and the mass media. He theorized that incremental changes occur when political decision making remains within the subsystem arena but that for a policy innovation to occur the conflict over the issue must expand to the macro arena (Mazzoni, 1991). In other words, he believed that popular pressure is instrumental in bringing about policy innovations in education.

Mazzoni (1991) tested his model by applying it to a real-life case—the 5-year struggle to pass an interdistrict open enrollment policy in Minnesota. His analysis of the events in Minnesota revealed that in that state the political elites had been considerably more active in pressing for the adoption of

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a school choice law than had been the general public, or the macro arena. In fact, he wrote, "There was no public clamor in Minnesota for educational choice nor any parent movement having that as an objective" (p. 120); indeed, surveys conducted in the state indicated that a "clear majority" of Minnesota's citizens opposed school choice. Nonetheless, the legislature passed a law that put such a policy on the books. As a result of his findings, Mazzoni revised his model, adding two more arenas: (3) a leadership arena and (4) a commission arena. The leadership arena included "top-level government officials and . . . the private groups or individuals—if any—who control them" (p. 125). The commission arena is a decision-making site created by the government when it sets up a commission, task force, or study group. In Minnesota, Mazzoni found that the Governor's Discussion Group included representatives of numerous constituencies and that it had ultimately recommended the adoption of a school choice policy. In his final version of the theory, Mazzoni argued that for an innovative educational policy to be adopted, the central policy debate had to shift out of the subsystem arena but the shift could be to any of the other three arenas, or to a combination of them. He concluded by saying,

> Though the revised model corrects the most obvious shortcomings in the initial model, there is much work still to be done. Other likely arenas—for example, state courts, education agencies, interest group coalitions, and private elite networks—need empirical investigation and comparative analysis for their innovative potential. (p. 132)

Origins of the Framework and Why I Chose It

In this section, I will explain where Mazzoni's arena models originated, how I first encountered his framework, and my reasons for deciding to use his models.

ORIGINS OF MAZZONI'S MODELS

As a professor of educational administration with a specialty in the politics of education, Mazzoni was well read in political science and related fields. The reference section in his 1991 article lists no fewer than 43 books or articles from the political science literature; in addition, he lists 24 books or articles from the politics of education literature, 3 from organizational theory, and 2 from sociology. Mazzoni was not just a prolific reader, however; in spite of the demands that his position as department chair at the University of Minnesota placed on him, he maintained an active research agenda, publishing numerous articles on educational politics and policy making in Minnesota. Therefore, his

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arena models grew out of years of reading, observation, and reflection on how changes in education policy come about. A closer analysis of the works that he specifically cites in the section of his article that describes the arena models suggests that his political science reading was especially critical in shaping his theory: All but 3 of those 17 sources are from the political science realm.

The term *arena models*, however, appears to have been borrowed from a sociological piece, Hilgartner and Bosk's (1988) "The Rise and Fall of Social Problems: A Public Arena Model," published just 3 years before Mazzoni's own article. In this work, the authors present a model of how publicly recognized social problems first attract attention, grow in perceived importance, and eventually are displaced in public consciousness by other problems. In elaborating their theory, they describe how social problems compete for attention and resources in "arenas" such as the mass media. Hilgartner and Bosk define *arena* differently than Mazzoni (1991), who specifies that by an arena he means "a middle-range term, referring to the political interactions characterizing particular decision sites through which power is exercised to initiate, formulate, and enact public policy" (p. 116). Mazzoni seems to have developed his understanding of the term from political scientists such as Allison (1971), who refers to the "apparatus of government" as "a complex arena" (p. 144), and from Schattschneider, who refers to "the arena of conflict where political alternatives are determined" (cited in Cobb & Elder, 1983, p. 5).

As I read through other sources cited by Mazzoni (1991), I was able to find additional clear influences on his thinking. For example, Allison (1971) organized his book about decision making during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 around three "conceptual frameworks" or "lenses," which he calls "models." Bardach (1972) used the term *subsystem*; Cobb and Elder's (1983) description of the "expansion" of a political issue resembles Mazzoni's description of what happens when a shift from the subsystem arena to the macro arena occurs. The closest parallel, though, comes from Cobb, Ross, and Ross's (1976) models of agenda building. (In political science, "agenda building" is the process by which specific social issues attract the attention of the government and are placed on the list, or "agenda," of issues that the government seeks to address through its policy making [Fowler, 2004].) Cobb et al. proposed three models of agenda building. Under the "outside initiative" model, groups or individuals who do not work in the government succeed in calling enough attention to a problem to cause the government to place it on its agenda for action. This model seems to involve what Mazzoni calls the macro arena. Alternatively, an issue may be identified within the government itself, but politicians and government workers mobilize the general public to become interested in it and push for action. This model is reminiscent of Mazzoni's shift from the subsystem arena to the macro arena. Cobb et al.'s final model is one in which an issue is identified within the government but

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politicians and government workers never bring it before the general public; instead, they seek to resolve it without public involvement. This model resembles Mazzoni's description of incremental policy making within the subsystem arena.

One question that particularly interested me as I reviewed Mazzoni's sources was "Why did Mazzoni initially develop a model that did not accommodate the possibility of policy innovations imposed by a leadership elite?" Having cut my own political teeth in a Southern county where an entrenched "good old boys'" network constantly tried to impose its will on everyone else, I found this hard to understand. One possible explanation, of course, is that Mazzoni is an idealist who believes that in a democracy all decisions are made democratically. Another is that Minnesota politics is more open and democratic than policy making in some other states. In fact, this is probably true since Minnesota's political culture resembles that of New England, which is known for the town meeting and unusually "clean" politics. In contrast, Southern politics is characterized by the heavy influence of elites (Fowler, 2004). My review of Mazzoni's sources, however, suggested another reason. Many of the books that he drew on were written during the 1960s or 1970s, when some of the major policy innovations in American life were brought about by the civil rights movement. As a result, the authors he used had firmly in their minds the spectacle of huge masses of citizens mobilizing to march, demonstrate, conduct sit-ins, and in other ways pressure the government to break with the racially discriminatory past. In other words, they had in mind the mobilization of a vast macro arena to bring about civil rights reforms. Therefore, they may have tended to overestimate the extent to which the general public mobilizes around innovative policy issues, and this overestimation may have affected Mazzoni's perspective as he developed his arena models.

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH MAZZONI'S ARENA MODELS

During my first 2 years as an assistant professor at Miami University, I was the program chair of the Politics of Education Association, then a special-interest group of the American Educational Research Association. Therefore, early in the fall of 1990, I received about 25 conference proposals, which I scanned for appropriateness and then sent out for review. One of these was a paper proposed by Mazzoni, then a professor of educational leadership at the University of Minnesota and a well-known scholar in the politics of education. As I read the summary of his research on the adoption of school choice policies in Minnesota and his description of his arena models of policy innovation, I became very excited. His work fit in well with the intellectual journey on which I had recently embarked, and because S.B. 140 had included three forms

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of school choice patterned on the Minnesota legislation, which Mazzoni had studied, I believed that I had found a conceptual framework that I could use to study the passage of S.B. 140 in Ohio.

WHY I CHOSE MAZZONI'S THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I encountered Mazzoni's (1991) theoretical framework at a time when I was wrestling with some of the great theoretical issues in my field. My dissertation had been a historical policy analysis of government aid to private schools in France between 1959 and 1984. At that time, the dean of my college insisted that dissertations presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the PhD be based on an established social theory (EdD dissertations, in contrast, could be atheoretical). Because I was in the PhD program, one of my key challenges during the early development of my dissertation study had been finding an appropriate political science theory to use. I can still remember the sense of relief that I felt when, after months of scanning various political science works, I read two books by Robert Dahl: *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy* (1982) and *A Preface to Economic Democracy* (1985). Based on what I already knew about the development and implementation of the French policy, I could see how Dahl's pluralist theory could illuminate my research and facilitate my interpretation of the French data. What I did not know at the time was that pluralist theory—which posits that in democratic societies policies grow out of compromises between competing political pressure groups—is controversial and that many political scientists have seriously challenged its validity. The theory worked reasonably well for my dissertation; I even titled my study *One Approach to a Pluralist Dilemma: Private School Aid Policy in France, 1959–1985* (Fowler 1990). Even before I reached my defense, however, I was aware of some of its shortcomings. In particular, because France has a much stronger central government than does the United States, its politics is not as pluralistic as American politics. So I realized that some of the events that had occurred in France could not be fully explained by pluralist theory. My awareness of its shortcomings was painfully intensified by several critical comments made during my dissertation defense by the sole political science professor on my committee. After recovering from my anger at him, I faced the fact that before I attempted to write any articles based on my dissertation, I needed to resolve some of the theoretical issues raised by pluralism.

Moreover, while doing my dissertation research, I had also become familiar with another social theory that is prevalent in contemporary political science. This was rational choice theory, which I encountered while doing my literature review. This review covered most of the literature on the debate over school choice in the United States, and I found that many American proponents of school choice based their position on rational choice theory. Basically, rational

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choice theorists believe that most social and political phenomena can be understood as activities that play out in competitive markets. If individuals in those markets simply make decisions based on their own self-interest, an "invisible hand" will guide society to the best outcome possible. Thus, in advocating school choice, these proponents argued that parents should be able to choose their children's schools because education is just another market commodity like food or automobiles. If people were allowed to choose schools based on their own self-interest, the result would be greatly improved education. For philosophical and religious reasons, I strongly disagree. When reading such arguments, I often became so angry that I just skimmed over the articles that contained them so that I could go on to more congenial reading. Finally, realizing what I was doing and how unscholarly it was, I forced myself to go back and read every word of the articles based on rational choice theory! I emerged from this experience convinced that rational choice theory was far more problematic than pluralist theory, but I wanted to have a stronger reason than my emotional reaction for rejecting it, especially since it was—and still is—one of the dominant theories in political science. In short, I realized more than ever that I needed to have a well-thought-out theory to base my own work on.

My theoretical struggles were complicated after I accepted my position at Miami University in February 1990. At that time, I began to read the works of two of my future colleagues, Henry Giroux (1981) and Peter McLaren (1980), who wrote within the tradition of critical theory, a form of Marxism. I found their work and the Marxist frameworks they used intriguing. Their descriptions of social injustice in capitalist societies were insightful and contained a great deal of truth. I also thought that Giroux and McLaren were right to emphasize the importance of thinking through the influence of the structure of the economic system on social and cultural phenomena. Critical theory and other forms of Marxism, however, also posed some serious theoretical problems for me. I was prepared to believe that the economy was important but not that it determined everything else in society, as most Marxists believe. I did not believe that the historical evidence supported this position. In addition, I was troubled by the fact that Giroux, McLaren, and other Marxists diagnosed the ills of American society brilliantly but offered few concrete ideas about how to bring about positive changes. Moreover, they seemed rather naively ignorant of practical politics, and therefore, I did not see how they could bring about reforms even if they had concrete ideas about what reforms were needed. Thus, though interested in their work, I was not convinced that Marxism offered an adequate explanation of political phenomena.

By the fall of 1990, then, I was struggling with some major theoretical questions. With the old adage of "publish or perish" in mind, I wanted to base some articles on my dissertation, and I knew that I needed a more solid theoretical grounding to do so. At that point, I was also preparing to teach my

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first politics of education class, and Miami University students were relatively sophisticated theoretically. It was imperative, therefore, that I decide which of the grand social theories available in academia was the truest and learn more about it so that I could use it to shape my own work.

Therefore, during my first year as assistant professor, I launched a program of intense reading. First, I explored a more recent work by Dahl (1989) and also discovered an important book by another pluralist, Charles Lindblom (1977). Much to my gratification, I learned that they had revised their original theory to respond to the criticism that they tended to overlook the disproportionate power of business in the politics of capitalist countries. Their revised theory, which they called "neopluralism," recognized that business groups essentially trump all other groups in capitalist democracies and therefore have a greater influence on policy than any others. Since this revamped version of the theory seemed to address many of the weaknesses of pluralism that had concerned me, I based an article on it, using neopluralistic theory and the French experience with school choice to argue that, contrary to the claims of the rational choice theorists, school choice could only succeed in the United States if it was carefully regulated (Fowler, 1992a).

Meanwhile, as I prepared to teach the politics of education for the first time, I encountered two more social theories. The first was a political theory called "elite theory," originally developed by two Europeans of the late 19th and early 20th centuries—the Italian political scientist Gaetano Mosca (1939) and the German sociologist Robert Michels (1966). They argued that in any group or society a small elite rises to the top and rules, making most of the important decisions. Searching for contemporary American representatives of this perspective, I found the works of Thomas Dye (1976, 1990) and G. William Domhoff (1983, 1990). They argued that a small number of wealthy Americans who control several interlocking institutions run the country. Finally, I encountered the theories of the German sociologist Max Weber (1964). While recognizing the importance of the economy and economic leaders, especially in capitalist countries, Weber also insisted that other forces, such as the government, the military, and widely believed ideologies, significantly influence what happens in society. I found the most convincing modern presentation of Weber's ideas in Michael Mann's *The Sources of Social Power* (1986). In this book, the author draws on the sweep of Western history from prehistoric times to 1760 to build his argument:

> A general account of societies, their structure, and their history can best be given in terms of the interrelations of what I will call the four sources of social power: ideological, economic, military, and political relationships. These are overlapping networks of social interaction, not dimensions, levels, or factors of a single social totality. . . . They are also organizations, institutional means of attaining human goals. (p. 2)

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Looking back after 15 years, then, I can see why Mazzoni's (1991) theoretical framework appealed to me. It was not a grand social theory; that is, it did not seek to explain everything in society, as rational choice theory, Marxism, or Weberian theory do. It was a middle-range political theory that was even more limited than pluralism or elite theory because it sought only to explain how policy innovations come about in education. It was, however, potentially compatible with pluralism, neopluralism, elite theory, Weberian theory, or even Marxism. In fact, it actually provided a way for me to begin to test all of these theories against the concrete data of a particular case, for one of Mazzoni's models hypothesized that the macro arena (read "political pressure groups") was instrumental in bringing about policy innovation, whereas the other attributed the major role to leaders (read "elites"), who might even be business leaders, as the Marxists and Weberians would predict. I shaped my article as a test of Mazzoni's arena models, but it was also a personal test of the various theories with which I was then grappling.

Having described the theoretical struggles of my early academic career in some depth, it seems only fair to tell the rest of the story. My study of the passage of S.B. 140 indicated that elite figures were far more instrumental in the passage of the bill than were pressure groups, and I found that this elite group included both political and business leaders. This study, in conjunction with other studies and much additional reading, led me to conclude that the most accurate grand social theory is Weberian theory. I also concluded that elites do run all societies but that societies vary in the degree to which these elites can be both influenced and replaced through democratic processes. One of the problems faced by every democratic society is how best to devise structures that make it possible for the macro arena to challenge policy elites when truly fundamental change is needed.

Effects of the Framework on My Study

Using Mazzoni's (1991) models as my theoretical framework shaped my study in four ways. It helped me focus my research, develop my research questions, plan my data collection, and structure my data analysis. I will discuss each of these effects in turn.

FOCUSING THE STUDY

Unless a scholar is doing a qualitative project based in grounded theory, he or she is well advised to use a theoretical framework not only because it situates the author within a scholarly conversation but also because it helps focus the study. I well remember how I felt about my dissertation project before

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I had identified pluralism as a suitable theory for framing it. Over a period of 4 years, I had gathered a huge amount of data: I had several books, numerous articles, copies of the French legislation and the accompanying rules and regulations, and hundreds of pages of parliamentary debate, arranged in folders and stacked all over my spare bedroom. Frankly, I felt overwhelmed and did not know where to begin to narrow the subject down so that I could reduce this project to a manageable size. As soon as I read Dahl's two books (1982, 1985) and began to apply pluralistic theory to my data, an amazing thing happened. The theory acted as a giant sieve; most of my data simply fell through it like sand, leaving behind a number of solid rocks that I could analyze from the perspective of pluralism. Clearly, I could ignore the sand and focus my attention on the rocks as I continued collecting data and framed my research questions.

This was one of the reasons why I was so determined to find a suitable theoretical framework for my study of the passage of S.B. 140. It was the first study that I undertook after obtaining my PhD, and I knew that having a theoretical framework would enable me to narrow the subject and focus on only those aspects of it that were truly relevant to my theory. I must confess, however, that I did not completely let the framework do its task of sifting my data. In one of my interviews, a female respondent made some insightful comments about the fact that most of the educational practitioners on the commission on which she had served were women and suggested that because they were women they were silenced and marginalized by the male business leaders who served with them. These comments had nothing to do with Mazzoni's (1991) arena models, but I believed that they made an interesting contribution to what might be called the micropolitics of commissions. Therefore, my initial conference paper about my study (Fowler, 1992b) and the first draft of the manuscript that I submitted to *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* (Fowler, 1994) included a page or two that presented these comments and discussed them. Not surprisingly, one of the blind reviewers of the article pointed out that that section was superfluous; and the editor asked me to omit it in my revised version. In other words, the theoretical framework so clearly focused my study that even other people could easily distinguish relevant from irrelevant material! I should point out, however, what this means. A theoretical framework both illuminates and conceals. This is why it can be helpful to apply more than one framework to a set of data.

DEVELOPING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Another advantage of using a theoretical model is that it facilitates the development of research questions. Those questions should always be firmly grounded in the framework, and any questions that might be interesting but do not relate to the framework should be eliminated. In the case of my study

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of the passage of S.B. 140, I conceptualized my project as a test or application of Mazzoni's (1991) arena models. Therefore, my two questions were rather obvious. I asked to what extent each of the two models accurately described what had happened in Ohio. With these two questions and the qualifying words "to what extent," I could only reach three possible conclusions. The Ohio data would either conform to the first or the second arena model or would not conform to either. Thus, I would either accept one of the models or reject Mazzoni's framework as not fitting the Ohio data at all. Reaching the latter conclusion would imply that the framework had extremely serious weaknesses as a model of policy innovation.

In retrospect, I probably should have used more than two research questions, basing the additional questions on each of the arenas. This is, in fact, the approach that I used in my two more recent, and as yet unpublished, studies using the theoretical framework. Such questions would have focused my attention more clearly on what was happening in each arena and might have led to a more sophisticated analysis of my data. I was a novice, however, and my two questions functioned adequately.

PLANNING DATA COLLECTION

My theoretical framework was enormously helpful in planning data collection. It provided me with four distinct areas to explore: (1) the activities of the legislative subsystem, (2) the commissions (if any), (3) the macro arena, and (4) the leaders. Therefore, in identifying the data I would need, I simply asked myself who would be active in each arena and where they would have left usable documents to attest to their activity. This strategy permitted me to rather quickly find obvious documents such as the legislation, the legislative history, and the publications of the interest groups that had been involved. Once I had used these sources to develop a time line, I knew which of the state's newspapers I most needed to consult and the relevant time frame within which I had to search for articles. This was crucially important because in the early 1990s it was much more difficult to search newspapers than it is today! The Internet, search engines, and tools such as LexisNexis either did not yet exist or were not widely accessible. As a result, I had to visually scan microfilms of all the issues of the two newspapers that were published during the relevant time periods. This effort, however, was well worth the time and eyestrain involved. The newspaper coverage was not only helpful in permitting me to identify what the top leaders had done and what had happened (or, rather, not happened) in the macro arena, but it also alerted me to the fact that there had been a commission arena, something I had not realized until then. Indeed, three commissions, each representing a different faction of the legislature, had met, and each had produced a report. I therefore proceeded to procure copies of the commission reports.

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The second stage of my data collection consisted of 20 semistructured interviews. Using my documentary data, I identified a number of people I might interview, including members of the legislature, people who had served on commissions, leaders in education interest groups, and members of the governor's staff. I also used my theoretical framework in planning my interviews, for I deliberately chose to interview members of the subsystem arena first. My rationale was that they would be more accessible to me, who as a professor of education in a public university was relatively close to them in background and interests. I also believed that their recommendations could help me select the best people to interview from the other arenas and help me obtain access to them. As it turned out, my rationale was correct; my first set of interviewees identified several key people from the other arenas whose names had not emerged in the documentary data—such as the chief of staff for the Republican caucus in the legislature—and helped me set up interviews with them.

GUIDING DATA ANALYSIS

Finally, the theoretical framework guided my data analysis. In planning the data analysis, I relied heavily on Miles and Huberman's (1984) *Qualitative Data Analysis*. One of their suggested techniques was to compare and contrast data from different "sites." Mazzoni's (1991) arena models provided me with four obvious sites: (1) the subsystem arena, (2) the macro arena, (3) the leadership arena, and (4) the commission arena. Therefore, in analyzing the data, I identified who the major players had been in each arena and listed them. I also identified all the events that had happened in each arena as well as which stages of the policy process had occurred there. Two themes cut across all four arenas. The first was the great lack of confidence in professional educators manifested by political leaders from both parties. They saw professional educators, from the classroom up to the superintendent's office, as bumblers who were out of touch with the real world. Not surprisingly, the other theme was that the educators felt betrayed. It seemed to them that the rules had changed in the middle of the game and that they had suddenly become the state government's whipping boys. These themes illuminated the arena shift, suggesting why it had occurred. In the final stage of analysis, I asked myself the key questions: Did an arena shift occur? If so, what was the nature of the shift? My finding, of course, was that the policy process had indeed shifted away from the subsystem arena. It had not, however, shifted to the macro arena but to the leadership arena.

Other Theoretical Frameworks Considered

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the various theories that I encountered and struggled with during my years as an advanced doctoral student and

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a beginning assistant professor. As I searched for a theoretical framework for my study of the passage of S.B. 140, I considered and rejected three of them. My reasons for rejecting them were both intellectual and pragmatic.

First, I considered using Dahl's (1982, 1985) theory of pluralism, a framework that is widely used among political scientists who study the policy process and one with which I had grown very familiar during the writing of my dissertation. My experience conducting my dissertation research and the biting comments of the political science professor on my committee, however, led me to hold grave reservations about using it. These reservations were intensified because I already knew enough about how S.B. 140 had been passed to suspect that pluralist theory would not work well for my case study. As I understood the situation, the basic belief that lay behind the complaints of my students and colleagues about the way the law had been passed was precisely their conviction that some sort of pluralistic process that gave considerable weight to the views of educators' organizations should have been followed. Obviously, it had not been. Therefore, I doubted that pluralist theory would illuminate what had actually happened in Ohio.

Two other theories that had some appeal to me were elite theory and Marxism. Unlike pluralist theory, both of these theories included a definite role for leaders, especially business leaders. I could not, however, visualize how I could conduct a qualitative case study using either of these theories. I suspected that if a highly elite group, such as a few prominent CEOs, had been behind the passage of S.B. 140, they probably had kept a low profile. Therefore, it might not be easy to identify them; even if I were able to learn their names, I feared it would be difficult to obtain access to them for interviews. Moreover, phrasing an interview protocol in such a way that it got at the deeper issues behind elite and Marxist theory also seemed problematic. I could not imagine asking people lower down in the political hierarchy than the elite or capitalist leaders questions like "What capitalists (or corporate leaders or political elites) were active behind the scenes in pushing for S.B. 140?" In my opinion, it is no accident that people who do scholarship in these traditions rarely do qualitative case studies. Elite theorists usually do documentary or computer research to identify top leaders in various institutions and trace their interconnections, whereas Marxists typically study broad social trends, such as privatization or the de-skilling of teachers as revealed in curriculum materials.

To be frank, another issue was completely pragmatic. I was a beginning assistant professor who knew that she would go up for a third-year review in 2 years and a tenure and promotion review in 5 years. Both reviews would involve external reviewers from my field. As I perused the top-tier journals in which I hoped to publish, such as *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*,

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Education Policy, and *Educational Administration Quarterly*, I became aware that none of their articles were based on either elite theory or Marxist theory. In fact, with the exception of Laurence Iannaccone and Frank Lutz's (1970) dissatisfaction theory, I know of no scholars in my field who have ever used elite theory, and at the time, only one person seemed to be working in critical theory. Actually, much of what is published in my field—both then and now—is atheoretical, although various versions of systems theory are frequently used. Therefore, I feared that these journals would not publish articles based on those two theoretical traditions and decided that Mazzoni's middle-range theory of arena models, which could easily be seen as compatible with systems theory, was more likely to be publishable. On the other hand, my perusal of possible publishing outlets suggested that those journals most likely to publish a study based on elite or Marxist theory probably would not be interested in a piece about the passage of a law—in general, they are interested in broader, more general analyses.

Using Multiple Frameworks

It is not uncommon for qualitative studies to be based on more than one theoretical framework, as researchers often find that no single framework adequately explains all their data. My study of the passage of S.B. 140, however, was, for the most part, based just on Mazzoni's (1991) arena models. I employed multiple frameworks only in the sense that I used both versions of his arena model. I chose to do so because I was interested in testing both models and also because doing so permitted me to highlight my central finding: the extremely important role played by government and business leaders in the passage of Ohio's S.B. 140. I should also point out that in conducting my data analysis, I employed a framework called the "stage model of the policy process." This is a schematic, six-stage heuristic framework that is commonly used in political science texts and courses (see Figure 3.1).

I applied it to all four policy arenas because it simplified my determination of which political processes had played out in each. As a heuristic model, it merely describes political phenomena; it does not seek to explain them.

Refining the Framework

As a beginning scholar, I did not fully understand how theoretical frameworks are used in qualitative research. Since I was a neophyte and Mazzoni

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Figure 3.1 The Stage Model of the Policy Process

was approaching the end of a distinguished career, I accepted his models as being indisputably valid and authoritative, even though in his own article he had written, as I quoted above, "Though the revised model corrects the most obvious shortcomings in the initial model, there is much work still to be done" (Mazzoni, 1991, p. 132). Many years later, I am not sure what I thought that statement meant, or even if I noticed it at the time. Regardless of what Mazzoni himself had said, I approached my data analysis with the implicit assumption that one of Mazzoni's models had to fit the Ohio data, or there would be something seriously wrong with my study. I did not approach the data with the idea that my study might contribute to the refinement and further development of Mazzoni's arena models.

As a result, when I wrote the first draft of the article (Fowler, 1994) that I submitted to *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, I exaggerated the extent to which Mazzoni's (1991) second model fit my findings. Although there were obvious discrepancies between my findings and the second model, I did not acknowledge this in the article. Instead, I claimed that my study confirmed the accuracy of Mazzoni's second model. Much to my surprise, one of the blind reviewers pointed out several of these discrepancies and suggested that instead of asserting that my study supported Mazzoni's second model unequivocally, I should raise some questions about his model and suggest possible revisions of it. With a reviewer and an editor's recommendations to give me courage, I did indeed critique the second model and suggest ways in which it might be refined. Later, I learned through one of Mazzoni's former doctoral students that he had actually appreciated my critique!

As a more mature scholar, I now realize that theory develops through just such thoughtful critique and refinement as I carried out in the revision of

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my article. No single researcher can apply a given theory to every conceivable case. The development of useful theoretical frameworks depends on numerous researchers using them in various contexts and suggesting further elaboration or refinement. If enough scholars contribute to this process, a sophisticated body of theory can be developed, laying a solid foundation for the growth of a field of knowledge.

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