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COMMENDING AND  
EVALUATING PUBLIC  
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## CHAPTER 34

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# THE LOGIC OF APPROPRIATENESS

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THE logic of appropriateness is a perspective on how human action is to be interpreted. Action, policy making included, is seen as driven by rules of appropriate or exemplary behavior, organized into institutions. The appropriateness of rules includes both cognitive and normative components (March and Olsen 1995, 30–1). Rules are followed because they are seen as natural, rightful, expected, and legitimate. Actors seek to fulfill the obligations encapsulated in a role, an identity, a membership in a political community or group, and the ethos, practices, and expectations of its institutions. Embedded in a social collectivity, they do what they see as appropriate for themselves in a specific type of situation.

The present chapter focuses particularly on rules of appropriateness in the context of formally organized political institutions and democratic political orders. We ask how an understanding of the role of rule-driven behavior in life might illuminate thinking about political life, how the codification of experience into rules, institutional memories, and information processing is shaped in, and shapes a democratic political system. *First*, we sketch the basic ideas of rule-based action. *Second*, we describe some characteristics of contemporary democratic settings. *Third*, we attend to the relations between rules and action, the elements of slippage in executing rules. *Fourth*, we examine the dynamics of rules and standards of appropriateness. And, *fifth*, we discuss a possible reconciliation of different logics of action, as part of a future research agenda for students of democratic politics and policy making.

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## 1. THE BASIC IDEAS

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A vision of actors following internalized prescriptions of what is socially defined as normal, true, right, or good, without, or in spite of calculation of consequences and expected utility, is of ancient origin. The idea was, for example, dramatized by Sophocles more than 2,000 years ago in *Antigone's* confrontation with King Creon and by Martin Luther facing the Diet of Worms in 1521: "Here I stand, I can do no other." The tendency to develop rules, codes, and principles of conduct to justify and prescribe action in terms of something more than expected consequences seems to be fairly universal (Elias 1982/1939), and echoes of the ancient perspectives are found in many modern discussions of the importance of rules and identities in guiding human life.

The exact formulation of the ideas varies somewhat from one disciplinary domain to the other, but the core intuition is that humans maintain a repertoire of roles and identities, each providing rules of appropriate behavior in situations for which they are relevant. Following rules of a role or identity is a relatively complicated cognitive process involving thoughtful, reasoning behavior; but the processes of reasoning are not primarily connected to the anticipation of future consequences as they are in most contemporary conceptions of rationality. Actors use criteria of similarity and congruence, rather than likelihood and value. To act appropriately is to proceed according to the institutionalized practices of a collectivity, based on mutual, and often tacit understandings of what is true, reasonable, natural, right, and good. The term "logic of appropriateness" has overtones of morality, but rules of appropriateness underlie atrocities of action, such as ethnic cleansing and blood feuds, as well as moral heroism. The fact that a rule of action is defined as appropriate by an individual or a collectivity may reflect learning of some sort from history, but it does not guarantee technical efficiency or moral acceptability.

The matching of identities, situations, and behavioral rules may be based on experience, expert knowledge, or intuition, in which case it is often called "recognition" to emphasize the cognitive process of pairing problem-solving action correctly to a problem situation (March and Simon 1993, 10–13). The match may be based on role expectations (Sarbin and Allen 1968, 550). The match may also carry with it a connotation of essence, so that appropriate attitudes, behaviors, feelings, or preferences for a citizen, official, or expert are those that are essential to being a citizen, official, or expert—essential not in the instrumental sense of being necessary to perform a task or socially expected, nor in the sense of being an arbitrary definitional convention, but in the sense of that without which one cannot claim to be a proper citizen, official, or expert (MacIntyre 1988).

The simple behavioral proposition is that, most of the time humans take reasoned action by trying to answer three elementary questions: What kind of a situation is this? What kind of a person am I? What does a person such as I do in a situation such as this (March and Olsen 1989; March 1994)?

## 2. THE SETTING: INSTITUTIONS OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Democratic political life is ordered by institutions. The polity is a configuration of formally organized institutions that defines the setting within which governance and policy making take place. An institution is a relatively stable collection of rules and practices, embedded in structures of *resources* that make action possible—organizational, financial and staff capabilities, and structures of *meaning* that explain and justify behavior—roles, identities and belongings, common purposes, and causal and normative beliefs (March and Olsen 1989, 1995).

Institutions are organizational arrangements that link roles/identities, accounts of situations, resources, and prescriptive rules and practices. They create actors and meeting places and organize the relations and interactions among actors. They guide behavior and stabilize expectations. Specific institutional settings also provide vocabularies that frame thought and understandings and define what are legitimate arguments and standards of justification and criticism in different situations (Mills 1940). Institutions, furthermore, allocate resources and empower and constrain actors differently and make them more or less capable of acting according to prescribed rules. They affect whose justice and what rationality has primacy (MacIntyre 1988) and who becomes winners and losers. *Political* institutionalization signifies the development of distinct political rules, practices, and procedures partly independent of other institutions and social groupings (Huntington 1965). Political orders are, however, more or less institutionalized and they are structured according to different principles (Eisenstadt 1965).

This institutional perspective stands in contrast to current interpretations of politics that assume self-interested and rationally calculating actors, instrumentalism, and consequentialism. In the latter perspective rules simply reflect interests and powers, or they are irrelevant.<sup>1</sup> It can never be better to follow a rule that requires actions other than those that are optimal under given circumstances (Rowe 1989, vii); and the idea that society is governed by a written constitution and rules of appropriateness is seen as a possible reflection of the naive optimism of the eighteenth century (Loewenstein 1951). The logic of appropriateness, in contrast, harks back to an older conception that sees politics as rule driven and brands the use of public institutions and power for private purposes as the corruption and degeneration of politics (Viroli 1992, 71).

<sup>1</sup> Following the logic of consequentiality implies treating possible rules and interpretations as alternatives in a rational choice problem and it is usually assumed that “man’s natural proclivity is to pursue his own interests” (Brennan and Buchanan 1985, ix). To act on the basis of the logic of consequentiality or anticipatory action includes the following steps: (a) What are my alternatives? (b) What are my values? (c) What are the consequences of my alternatives for my values? (d) Choose the alternative that has the best expected consequences. To act in conformity with rules that constrain conduct is then based on rational calculation and contracts, and is motivated by incentives and personal advantage.

Rules of appropriateness are also embodied in the foundational norms of contemporary democracies. Subjecting human conduct to constitutive rules has been portrayed as part of processes of democratization and civilization; and legitimacy has come to depend on *how* things are done, not solely on substantive performance (Merton 1938; Elias 1982/1939). For example, an important part of the modern democratic creed is that impersonal, fairly stable, publicly known, and understandable rules that are neither contradictory nor retroactive are supposed to shield citizens from the arbitrary power of authorities and the unaccountable power of those with exchangeable resources. Self-given laws are assumed to be accepted as binding for citizens. A spirit of citizenship is seen to imply a willingness to think and act as members of the community as a whole, not solely as self-interested individuals or as members of particular interest groups (Arblaster 1987, 77). Judges, bureaucrats, ministers, and legislators are expected to follow rules and act with integrity and competence within the democratic spirit. Officialness is supposed to imply stewardship and an affirmation of the values and norms inherent in offices and institutions (Hecló 2002).

In short, actors are expected to behave according to distinct democratic norms and rules and the democratic quality of a polity depends on properties of its citizens and officials. If they are not law-abiding, enlightened, active, civic-minded, and acting with self-restraint and a distance from individual interests, passions, and drives, genuine democratic government is impossible (Mill 1962/1861, 30). Yet, as observed by Aristotle, humans are not born with such predispositions. They have to be learned (Aristotle 1980, 299).

Democratic governance, then, is more than an instrument for implementing predetermined preferences and rights. Identities are assumed to be reflexive and political, not inherited and pre-political (Habermas 1998), and institutions are imagined to provide a framework for fashioning democrats by developing and transmitting democratic beliefs. A democratic identity also includes accepting responsibility for providing an institutional context within which continuous political discourse and change can take place and the roles, identities, accounts, rules, practices, and capabilities that construct political life can be crafted (March and Olsen 1995).

### 3. RULES OF APPROPRIATENESS IN ACTION

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The impact of rules and standard operating procedures in routine situations is well known (March and Simon 1958; Cyert and March 1963). The relevance of the logic of appropriateness, however, is not limited to repetitive, routine worlds, and rule prescriptions are not necessarily conservative. Civil unrest, demands for comprehensive redistribution of political power and welfare, as well as political revolutions and

major reforms often follow from identity-driven conceptions of appropriateness more than conscious calculations of costs and benefits (Scott 1976; Lefort 1988; Elster 1989).

Rules prescribe, more or less precisely, what is appropriate action. They also, more or less precisely, tell actors where to look for precedents, who are the authoritative interpreters of different types of rules, and what the key interpretative traditions are. Still, the unambiguous authority of rules cannot be taken as given—it cannot be assumed that rules always dictate or guide behavior. Rather, it is necessary to understand the processes through which rules are translated into actual behavior and the factors that may strengthen or weaken the relation between rules and actions. How do actors discover the lessons of the past through experience and how do they store, retrieve, and act upon those lessons? How do actors cope with impediments to learning and resolve ambiguities and conflicts of what the situation is and what experience is relevant; what the relevant role, identity, and rule are and what they mean; and what the appropriate match and action are?

Sometimes action reflects in a straightforward way prescriptions embedded in the rules, habits of thought, “best practice,” and standard operating procedures of a community, an institution, organization, profession, or group. A socially valid rule creates an abstraction that applies to a number of concrete situations. Most actors, most of the time, then, take the rule as a “fact.” There is no felt need to “go behind it” and explain or justify action and discuss its likely consequences (Stinchcombe 2001, 2).

A straightforward and almost automatic relation between rules and action is most likely in a polity with legitimate, stable, well-defined, and integrated institutions. Action is then governed by a dominant institution that provides clear prescriptions and adequate resources, i.e. prescribes doable action in an unambiguous way. The system consists of a multitude of institutions, each based on different principles. Yet, each institution has some degree of autonomy and controls a specified action sphere. The (living) constitution prescribes when, how, and why rules are to be acted upon. It gives clear principles of division of labor, maintains internal consistency among rules, prevents collisions between divergent institutional prescriptions, and makes the political order a coherent whole with predictable outcomes. Together, a variety of rules give specific content in specific situations both to such heroic identities as statesman or patriot and to such everyday identities as those of an accountant, police officer, or citizen (Kaufman 1960; Van Maanen 1973).

In other contexts actors have problems in resolving ambiguities and conflicts among alternative concepts of the self, accounts of a situation, and prescriptions of appropriateness. They struggle with how to classify themselves and others—who they are, and what they are—and what these classifications imply in a specific situation. The prescriptive clarity and consistency of identities are variables, and so are the familiarity with situations and the obviousness of matching rules. Fulfilling an identity through following appropriate rules often involves matching a changing and ambiguous set of contingent rules to a changing and ambiguous set of situations.

A focus on rules and identities therefore assures neither simplicity nor consistency (Biddle 1986; Berscheid 1994). It is a non-trivial task to predict behavior from



knowledge about roles, identities, rules, situations, and institutions, and describing action as rule following is only the first step in understanding how rules affect behavior. As a result, a distinction is made between a rule and its behavioral realization in a particular situation in the study of formal organizations (Scott 1992, 304; March, Schulz, and Zhou 2000, 23), institutions (Apter 1991), and the law (Tyler 1990). The possible indeterminacy of roles, identities, rules, and situations requires detailed observations of the processes through which rules are translated into actual behavior through constructive interpretation and available resources (March and Olsen 1995). We need to attend to the interaction between rules and purposeful behavior and the factors that enhance or counteract rule following and mediate the impact rules have on behavior (Checkel 2001).

Defining a role or identity and achieving it require time and energy, thought and capability. In order to understand the impact of rules upon action, we need to study such (imperfect) processes as attention directing, interpretation of rules, the validation of evidence, codification of experiences into rules, memory building and retrieval, and the mechanisms through which institutions distribute resources and enable actors to follow rules, across a variety of settings and situations.

For example, individuals have multiple roles and identities and the number and variety of alternative rules assures that only a fraction of the relevant rules are evoked in a particular place at a particular time. One of the primary factors affecting behavior, therefore, is the process by which some of those rules rather than others, are attended to in a particular situation, and how identities and situations are interpreted (March and Olsen 1989, 22). Fitting a rule to a situation is an exercise in establishing appropriateness, where rules and situations are related by criteria of similarity or difference through reasoning by analogy and metaphor. The process is mediated by language, by the ways in which participants come to be able to talk about one situation as similar to or different from another, and assign situations to rules. The process maintains consistency in action primarily through the creation of typologies of similarity, rather than through a derivation of action from stable interests or wants.<sup>2</sup>

Individuals may also have a difficult time interpreting which historical experiences and accounts are relevant for current situations, and situations can be defined in different ways that call forth different legitimate rules, actors, and arguments (Ugland 2002). Where more than one potentially relevant rule or account is evoked, the problem is to apply criteria of similarity in order to use the most appropriate rule or account. In some cases, higher-order rules are used to differentiate between lower-order rules, but democratic institutions and orders are not always monolithic, coordinated, and consistent. Some action spheres are weakly institutionalized. In others institutionalized rule sets compete. Rules and identities collide routinely

<sup>2</sup> Processes of constructive interpretation, criticism, justification, and application of rules and identities are more familiar to the intellectual traditions of law than economics. Lawyers argue about what the rules are, what the facts are, and what who have to do when (Dworkin 1986, vii). Law in action – the realization of law – involves legal institutions and procedures, legal values, and legal concepts and ways of thought, as well as legal rules (Berman 1983, 4).

(Orren and Skowronek 1994), making prescriptions less obvious. Actors sometimes disobey and challenge some rules because they adhere to other rules. Potential conflict among rules is, however, partly coped with by incomplete attention. For instance, rules that are more familiar are more likely to be evoked, thus recently used or recently revised rules come to attention.

In general, actors may find the rules and situations they encounter to be obscure. What is true and right and therefore what should be done may be ambiguous. Sometimes they may know what to do but not be able to do it because prescriptive rules and capabilities are incompatible. Actors are limited by the complexities of the demands upon them and by the distribution and regulation of resources, competencies, and organizing capacities; that is, by the institutionalized capability for acting appropriately. A separation between substantive policy making and budgeting is, for example, likely to create a gap between prescribed policy rules and targets and the capabilities to implement the rules and reach the targets.

Rules, then, potentially have several types of consequences but it can be difficult to say exactly how rules manifest themselves, to isolate their effects under varying circumstances and specify when knowledge about rules is decisive for understanding political behavior. While rules guide behavior and make some actions more likely than others, they ordinarily do not determine political behavior or policy outcomes precisely. Rules, laws, identities, and institutions provide parameters for action rather than dictate a specific action, and sometimes actors show considerable ability to accommodate shifting circumstances by changing behavior without changing core rules and structures (Olsen 2003).

Over the last decades focus has (again) been on the pathologies and negative effects of rule following, in the literature as well as in public debate in many countries. The ubiquity of rules, precedents, and routines often makes political institutions appear to be bureaucratic, stupid, insensitive, dogmatic, or rigid. The simplification provided by rules is clearly imperfect, and the imperfection is often manifest, especially after the fact. Nevertheless, some of the major capabilities of modern institutions come from their effectiveness in substituting rule-bound behavior for individually autonomous behavior.

Rules, for example, increase action capabilities and efficiency—the ability to solve policy problems and produce services. Yet the consequences of rules go beyond regulating strategic behavior by providing incentive structures and impacting transaction costs. Rules provide codes of meaning that facilitate interpretation of ambiguous worlds. They embody collective and individual roles, identities, rights, obligations, interests, values, world-views, and memory, thus constrain the allocation of attention, standards of evaluation, priorities, perceptions, and resources. Rules make it possible to coordinate many simultaneous activities in a way that makes them mutually consistent and reduces uncertainty, for example by creating predictable time rhythms through election and budget cycles (Sverdrup 2000). They constrain bargaining within comprehensible terms and enforce agreements and help avoid destructive conflicts. Still, the blessing of rules may be mixed. Detailed rules and rigid rule following may under some conditions make policy making and

implementation more effective, but a well-working system may also need discretion and flexibility. Consequently, short-term and long-term consequences of rules may differ. Rules may, furthermore, make public debate obligatory, but rule following may also hamper reason giving and discourse.

A one-sided focus on policy consequences may furthermore hide a broader range of effects. Logics of action are used to describe, explain, justify, and criticize behavior and sometimes the primary reason for rules is to proclaim virtue rather than to control behavior directly, making the implementation of rules less important (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Brunsson 1989; March 1994, 76). Rules and institutions of government are, in addition, potentially transformative. More or less successfully, they turn individuals into citizens and officials by shaping their identities and mentalities and making them observe the *normative* power of rules (Mill 1962/1861; Fuller 1971; Joerges 1996).

An important aspect of rules, then, is their possible consequences for the development of a community of rule, based on a common identity and sense of belonging. A key issue of political organization is how to combine unity and diversity and craft a cooperative system out of a conflictual one; and the democratic aspiration has been to hold society together without eliminating diversity—that is, to develop and maintain a system of rules, institutions, and identities that makes it possible to rule a divided society without undue violence (Wheeler 1975, 4; Crick 1983, 25).

The growth and decay of institutions, roles, and identities, with their different logics of action, are therefore key indicators of political change (Eisenstadt 1965; Huntington 1965). Rules also help realize flexibility and adaptiveness as well as order and stability. This is so because part of the democratic commitment is the institutionalization of self-reflection and procedures through which existing rules can legitimately be examined, criticized, and changed.

## 4. THE DYNAMICS OF RULES OF APPROPRIATENESS

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Why are the rules of appropriateness what they are? Why are specific behavioral prescriptions believed to be natural or exemplary and why do rules vary across polities and institutions? Through which processes and why do rules of appropriateness change? A conception of human behavior as rule and identity based invites a conception of the mechanisms by which rules and identities evolve and become legitimized, reproduced, modified, and replaced. Key behavioral mechanisms are history-dependent processes of adaptation such as learning or selection. Rules of appropriateness are seen as carriers of lessons from experience as those lessons are encoded either by individuals and collectivities drawing inferences from their own and others' experiences, or by differential survival and reproduction of institutions,

roles, and identities based on particular rules. Rule-driven behavior associated with successes or survival is likely to be repeated. Rules associated with failures are not.

A common interpretation of rules, institutions, roles, and identities is that they exist because they work well and provide better solutions than their alternatives (Goodin 1996; Hechter, Opp, and Wippler 1990; Stinchcombe 1997, 2001). They are, at least under some conditions, functional and consistent with people's values and moral commitments. In contemporary democracies, this interpretation is reflected in high learning aspirations. Appropriate rules, in both technical and normative terms, are assumed to evolve over time as new experiences are interpreted and coded into rules, or less attractive alternatives are eliminated through competition. Lessons from experience are assumed to improve the intelligence, effectiveness, and adaptability of the polity and be a source of wisdom and progress. The key democratic institution for ensuring rational adaptation of rules is free debate where actors have to explain and justify their behavior in public through reason-based argumentation, within a set of rules defining appropriate debates and arguments.

In practice, however, the willingness and ability of democracies to learn, adapt rules, and improve performance on the basis of experience is limited (Neustadt and May 1986; March 1999). Rules are transmitted from one generation to another or from one set of identity holders through child rearing, education, training, socialization, and habitualization. Rules are maintained and changed through contact with others and exposure to experiences and information. Rules spread through social networks and their diffusion is constrained by borders and distances. They compete for attention. They change in concert with other rules, interfere with or support each other, and they are transformed while being transferred (Czarniawska and Joerges 1995; March, Schulz, and Zhou 2000). Change also takes place as a result of public discourse and deliberate interventions. These dynamics reflect both the effects of change induced by the environment and endogenous changes produced by the operation of the rule system itself.

Yet, as is well known from modern investigations, such processes are not perfect. For example, the encoding of history, either through experiential learning or through evolutionary selection, does not necessarily imply intelligence, improvement, or increased adaptive value. There is no guarantee that relevant observations will be made, correct inferences and lessons derived, proper actions taken, or that imperfections will be eliminated. Rules encode history, but the coding procedures and the processes by which the coded interpretations are themselves decoded are filled with behavioral surprises.<sup>3</sup>

We assume that new experiences may lead to change in rules, institutions, roles, and identities and yet we are not committed to a belief in historical efficiency, i.e. rapid and costless rule adaptation to functional and normative environments and deliberate political reform attempts, and therefore to the functional or moral necessity of observed rules (March and Olsen 1989, 1995, 1998). Democratic institutions,

<sup>3</sup> March and Olsen 1975, 1989, 1995, 1998; Levitt and March 1988; March 1994, 1999; March, Schulz, and Zhou 2000; Olsen and Peters 1996.