

R. Karl Rethemeyer
Statement of Research Interests

Theoretical and Methodological

My research has focused on the ways and means by which policy is made and implemented at the state and local level. The primary lens through which I view this question is the concept of policy networks—sets of social actors who have a persistent interest in a substantive area of policy. The “actors” in policy networks are and must be organizational in nature. Thus, policy networks must be analyzed and understood using insights from organizational sociology—especially the subfield that deals with interorganizational networks. Policy networks are a special type of interorganizational networks. Methodologically, policy networks must be studied using network data and methods rather than randomized samples. Networks are not randomly constructed and thus cannot be fully understood by sampling. Sampling destroys part of the essence of the network—its interconnections. Finally, policy networks are shaped at least in part by the formal structure of the political system in which they are embedded.

Given these prior theoretical and methodological commitments, my research focuses on several concrete areas of interest. First, I wish to understand more about how policy networks operate in states and localities. To a large extent, state-level phenomena have not been analyzed using policy network concepts. One area of particular interest is the interconnection of state and/or local networks to federal networks. How do ideas and initiatives in federal networks spread and/or affect policy choices in state and/or local networks or vice versa? Second, I wish to advance our understanding of interorganizational networks generally. One particular goal is to help move interorganizational theories beyond static concepts to ones that are dynamic. My dissertation work is a step in that direction, using the spread of the Internet as a motivating event to theorize about one factor that can cause change in an interorganizational networks: innovations in information technology. Third, I hope to make some in-roads on a vexing question for all network-analytic studies: how to treat the actors that are outside the network “boundary.” Network studies are usually inward looking – focusing on those who are part of the network to the exclusion of those who are not. In policy networks, this may be an incomplete perspective, for those outside the network often desire to be part of it. One goal is to design a study to find out what factors differentiate those who are in the network from those who, by virtue of their interests and material resources, could be or should be. Finally, I wish to link differences in state-level institutional structures to differences in policy network configurations. Previous work has focused on cross-national comparisons; little has been done to examine how different state-level arrangements impact the membership and distribution of influence in policy networks.

Topical Interests

For the past five years, I have examined issues related to male involvement with children and responsible fathering. This research addresses a series of questions: What federal, state, or local policies prevent fathers—especially those from poor and/or minority backgrounds—from participating in the lives of their children? What institutional practices and institutionalized norms and expectations undermine male involvement with children? How might government support and promote father involvement with their children? Part of my on-going work with the University of Pennsylvania is to provide a historical context for this set of questions by analyzing family structure (but especially the prevalence of father-absent families) over the last century using U.S. Census microdata. Another initiative links my topical interests with my theoretical/methodological interests. Through a Hewlett Foundation grant, my colleagues at Penn and I are trying to change the local-level policy networks in the San Francisco Bay Area that focus on child support enforcement. Through a series of facilitated meetings, we are seeking to make fathering support practitioners more central players in discussion of child support issues and to have private providers participate more actively in publicly financed male involvement programs that are supported by state funds. A longer-term goal is to examine how social services might be more effectively offered and managed using interorganizational service provider networks that are coordinated by case managers. This approach has been used to improve mental health care; I believe it could be used more generally to provide social services (including fathering support services).