Introduction

The role of experts in public policymaking and the relations between political executives and experts has a long history in public administration research. Wildavsky (1979) addressed the issue of ‘speaking truth to power’ and Aberbach et al. (1981) discussed the grey zones between politicians and bureaucrats. In his seminal article “The science of muddling through”, Lindblom (1959) argued that political rationality is less about means-end relations than about collective agreement on policy action. Thus, the scientization of public decision-making processes are nothing new, but seems to have intensified during the last decade.

There has been an expansion and increasing influence of scientific discourse and organization throughout the world resulting in a global scientization in modern world polity (Drori & Meyer, 2006; Drori et al., 2003). Actors that convey scientifically based knowledge are emerging as more important actors in public decision-making processes and making sense of science in policy making and politics is becoming more crucial (Pielke, 2007). Higher education institutions have changed because professions and semi-professions would like to be made more academic through longer educations, new degrees, and higher prestige. Public organizations, like increasingly independent central banks, have developed their own research units (Marcussen, 2006). Policy advice in diverse decision-making processes has also become more scientifically oriented, for example through more scientists represented in public committees or as close advisors to political executives (Christensen, 2018). And there are more and more talks about ‘evidence-based’ policies and...
decisions, for example in education policy, health and social policy, environmental policy, etc. (Head, 2010).

First, scientization as a concept is connected to scientific objectivity and rationality, meaning that we can use different types of rational-instrumental theories to understand it (Christensen et al., 2020). The underlying argument is often that more scientific basis for public policies and organizations is good and will improve their activities and quality of outputs and outcomes (Lentsch & Weingart, 2011). Given an instrumental approach, scientization may either mean hierarchical control and use of academic results, because science is hierarchically organized, or imply a negotiation and dialogue among scientists with different perspectives and results (Christensen & Lægreid, 2020a).

Second, based on a more culturally oriented perspective, scientization may imply focusing on the gradual and long-term development of professions and research communities (Christensen, 2021). It may be seen as gradually changing what is seen as appropriate professional norms or research in different fields develop over time regarding what the best knowledge to provide based in diverse research. This could also be influenced by how clearcut societal problems and followed the border of different scientific disciplines, which is most challenging in wicket issue.

Third, based in neo-institutionalism, scientization will deal with ‘social construction of reality’ or myths/symbols, meaning that different actors actively will use scientization as a tool for increasing their legitimacy and resources, while it often will be received by the media, the public or other actors as if knowledge in fact is objective and scientifically based, while in reality it is not (Drori et al., 2003).

There are arising challenges from the growing role of experts and expert knowledge in policymaking especially in times of crises (Holst & Molander, 2021; Zolenhöfer & Rüb, 2016). On the one hand good governance requires a significant amount of expert inputs but on the other hand there are also democratic worries about “expertization” Thus, the role of experts are important in crises management both regarding governance capacity and governance legitimacy (Christensen et al., 2016).

This special issue addresses the role of scientization/expertization and the complex relationship between politics and science in the crisis management of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has been interesting in the way that scientization and expertization again is extremely relevant. Thus, examining how knowledge claims are addressed in time-pressured situations under ambiguity and uncertainty is an important task (Donovan, 2021). The world has been searching for the real origin of the pandemic, the international scientific communities has continuously discussed its spreading and main characteristics, international organizations have discussed how to handle it, pharmaceutical firms competing for finding the best vaccines, and national authorities and their expert bodies have searched for answers.

The pandemic response has demonstrated a surge in the number of expert advisory bodies (Pattyn et al., 2021), experts play a major role in crisis communication (Christensen & Lægreid, 2020b) and social distancing as a measure to fight the pandemic has been linked to ‘scientization” (Moran & Green, 2020). But, it is also been two year of challenges, conflicts, disagreement, uncertainty and some victories in the scientific community, spilling over into the public debates and decisions. Some leaders say that their handling is purely scientific, some that they
do not really know and decide under uncertainty, while others say that they must balance scientific knowledge with other concerns when making political-administrative decisions and regulations (Yang, 2020). Vaccines have been produced faster than ever before, but their distribution is often disputed (Christensen & Lægreid, 2022b). Overall, countries seem both to converge and diverge concerning how they have handled the pandemic and used scientific knowledge.

In some countries, such as Sweden, crisis responses have been characterized by scientization and depolitization in which decision-making authority was delegated to scientific experts informed by a proportional principle (Boin & Lodge, 2021). A main strategy was policy making by experts, and ‘following the science’ based on evidence-based policy making. In other countries, such as the USA and Brazil, there were high degree of polarization and much more political control (Kapucu & Moynihan, 2021). A main strategy was policymaking by political executives and the political leaders trumped the expert advices. A third group of countries such as Norway, Denmark and Finland applied a suppression strategy based on a precautionary principle, followed by a pragmatic control strategy and policy making informed by experts (Christensen & Lægreid, 2022a). Close collaborations were formed between political executives and scientists.

This special issue includes articles that analyze the role of scientization and experts in various aspects of the crisis management of the COVID-19 pandemic, based in instrumental and institutional theories underlining the administrative foundation of expert advice (Christensen, 2021). It includes both comparative papers of European countries (Hodges et al., 2022; Jensen et al., 2022) as well as Belgium and Australia (De Pape et al., 2022) and New Zealand and Brazil (Donadelli & Gregory, 2022); and national case studies of Norway (Christensen & Lægreid, 2022c) and Germany (Kuhlmann et al., 2022).

The articles address different topics such as:

- How is scientization playing into national processes? What is the role of expert bodies overall in the decision-making process? What is the role of science and politics in shaping governmental responses to the pandemic? Do we see policy-making by experts or policy-making informed by experts?
- Are there disagreement among the experts concerning the scientific basis for giving advice to the politicians? What is the disagreement about and what is the relevance for decisions?
- Are advisory processes by expert stable or turbulent? Do they change over time? Do we see a growing or decreasing gap between scientific advice and political decisions over time?
- What similarities and differences can be observed across different countries in the relationship between experts and politicians in the crisis management of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- To what degree are politicians taking the difficult trade-offs between public health, individual rights, economy and social considerations, and to what degree are they informed by expert advices?
• To what degree is there a mixed decision-making regime going beyond the narrow epidemiology expertise and to what degree are experts from other disciplines involved?
• What was the role of data driven scientific policy advice during the covid-19 pandemic?
• What characterizes the crises communication? Is it a joint crisis communication by politicians and experts or not? How are scientific knowledge about the virus presented in the media and how is that influencing the decision-making and public opinion?
• Are there tensions in using or interpreting the scientific advises between supranational, national, regional, and local level in the handling of the pandemic?
• To what degree are there learning from previous pandemics? What kind of learning are there within the crises between the different phases of crises and between countries?

The Different Articles

The article “Paths, punctuations and policy learning – comparing patterns of European use of scientific expertise during the COVID-19 crises” by Mads Dagnis Jensen, Kennet Lynggaard and Michael Kluth, addresses the role of scientific expertise and policy learning during sequences of lockdowns and reopening in 30 European countries based on an extensive expert survey. A main observation is a support for path dependency regarding the pattern of expertise usage and policy learning in many countries. This leads the author to conclude that pre-crises institutional configurations are framing the government-expertise interaction when managing the covid-19 pandemic.

The article “The role of scientific expertise in COVID-19 policy making: evidence from four European countries” by Ron Hodges, Eugenio Caperchione, Jan van Helden, Christoph Reichard and Daniela Sorentino, explores the role of scientific advice in Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK. It shows that scientific advice is mainly based on medical expertise, but it is also influenced by social and economic values which are important for politicians. Expert advice contributed to sense-making by providing convincing narratives to politicians for guiding their citizens towards proper behavior. However, over time there was a growing gap between scientific advice and political decisions.

The article “Evidence-based management of the COVID-19 crises? The role of data for scientific policy advise in Germany” by Sabine Kuhlmann, Jochen Franzke and Benoit Paul Dumas, analyses the existing mechanisms, actors and problems of data-driven scientific policy advise during the COVID-19 crises in Germany. It reveals that multifaceted role conflicts, ambiguities, and tensions have become apparent in the interface between scientific advisors and policy makers. Another challenge was to bundle, process and make the existing data accessible for various decision makers to use these data for different purposes. Because of ‘silico thinking’ and ‘inhouse data hoarding’ the readiness and willingness to share data across administrative borders are limited.
The article “Scientization under pressure – the problematic role of expert bodies during the COVID-19 pandemic”, by Tom Christensen and Per Lægreid, focuses on the role of experts in the Norwegian decision-making process in central government during the crisis management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on a structural-instrumental and a cultural perspective, the main findings are that managing the pandemic led to a centralization of power in the hands of the political leadership, a blurring of the dichotomy between politics and administration, and a variety of expert advice. The crisis management also reflected the cultural appropriateness of a collaborative decision-making style, but it was not characterized by a scientization of policymaking. Rather than policymaking by experts it was policymaking informed by experts.

The article “Embedding expertise for policy responses to COVID-19: comparing decision-making structures in two federal democracies” by Marleen Easton, Jasper De Paepe, Phoebe Evans, Brian W. Head and Jennifer Yarnold, examines the role of expert committees and task forces in Belgium and Australia. Despite the coordination challenges inherited in federalism, the Australian case showed robustness and significant stability in the advisory mechanism, and more unified but limited transparency in how expertise was deployed. In Belgium the advisory process was more transparent and flexible, and less unified but also less stable with advisory councils being abandoned, replaced, expanded, or downgraded during the course of the crises.

The article “Speaking truth to power or power to truth: Reflections from the pandemic” by Flavia Donadelli and Robert Gregory, is on the complex relationship between science and politics in handling the pandemic in Brazil and New Zealand. In these two countries there have been markedly different pandemic outcomes and there has been different relationships between science and politics during the public health crises. In New Zealand there has been a positive and effective and technocratic relationship between science and politics in which the political leadership embraces scientific advice, while in Brazil the relationship between the two domains has been fraught and the political leadership undermines social trust in scientific advice.

To conclude, this special issue strengthen the knowledge base on how the relationship between political executives and experts in the crisis management of the Covid-19 pandemic plays out in a comparative context. It provides theoretically informed empirical studies on the role of scientization in different countries and over time during a transboundary, creeping, long lasting mega crises characterized by urgency, complexity, uncertainty regarding mean-end knowledge, and ambiguity about goals and values.

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