

DIFFERENTIATING UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES FROM UNANTICIPATED ONES: A POLICY FRAMEWORK¹

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ABSTRACT

The views of de Zwart (2015) related to the conflation of terms, “unintended consequences” and “unanticipated consequences”, the necessity to maintain their distinction and the need to take into account the “unintended but anticipated” consequences as a separate category are analysed.

The authors, while agreeing with de Zwart, also point out the need to recognise the quantitative aspects of consequences in addition to the qualitative aspects, and propose a modified framework, that can enable policy analysts to distinguish between unintended and unanticipated consequences in qualitative as well as quantitative terms. In view of the authors, this modified framework can be used as a tool in policy analysis, particularly in evaluating existing policies or while analysing the option of policy continuation or incremental changes in an existing policy.

Introduction

Unintended and unanticipated consequences of social action are one of the most important considerations in public policy. It is now more or less accepted that such consequences occur in spite of all possible rigors of policy analysis, and hence must be taken into account in every analysis undertaken, either for the purpose of selecting a policy option or for the purpose of evaluating a policy in existence. De Zwart (2015) pointed out the distinction between “unintended” and “unanticipated” consequences and the need to pay them separate attention.²

While tracing the origin of this conflation of these two distinct terms to Merton (1936), de Zwart explains how the two terms seem to have got mixed up and why treating them as distinct may be required.³ Citing several examples, he argues that the distinction between them necessitates that “unintended but anticipated” consequences be recognised as a separate category to enable policymakers to document the negative consequences of their actions, making it clear that such consequences, though unintended, have been anticipated and accepted as part of the overall outcome of the social intervention.

This paper is an attempt to examine some of these assertions and arguments put forward by de Zwart in his analysis, and to propose a framework that can possibly help as a tool for the policymakers in real life.

(All views expressed in this paper are the personal views of the authors, and do not represent the views of any organisation or institution.)

Unintended and Unanticipated Consequences

The near universality of unintended and unanticipated consequences lies in intense inter-connectivity of actions and their consequences. In science, this is exemplified by the so-called '*butterfly effect*', arising from the demonstration by Edward Lorenz using a computerised weather prediction model that the smallest changes in initial conditions, as resulting from the flaps of a seagull or even a butterfly, can result in significant differences in weather outcomes (Gleick, 1987).⁴ This phenomenon highlights the importance of dependence of forces and things in the universe, a concept also highlighted in literature as well as in economics.⁵ In fact, there cannot be a better illustration of this recognition than the theory of '*invisible hand*' of Adam Smith (1759) which highlights how individually selfish actions lead to optimisation of the economy as a whole. The concept of consequences that are not easily foreseen and may even be counter-intuitive was also very articulately highlighted by Frederick Bastiat (1948) while countering some of the common fallacies of populist arguments.

The seminal work by Merton (1936) in describing these unforeseen consequences has greatly facilitated the understanding of their occurrences and relevance in social action and policymaking. His work details the underlying causes for the inability of policymakers to foresee such consequences and highlights the need for not only more rigorous analysis in policymaking, but also the need to be aware of the fact that despite such rigors, there can still be unforeseen consequences. Merton used both terms, "unintended" as well as "unanticipated" in his paper, indicating that he accepted the distinction between them, but that distinction seems to have been lost in subsequent narratives, where the terms are often used for the same purpose. De Zwart (2015) shows that the term "unintended" consequences is used far more commonly these days than the term "unanticipated" consequences. He also argues against the rationale of conflating these two terms. In particular, he stresses on the need to recognise "unintended but anticipated" consequences as a distinct set of consequences that are known to policymakers and may have already been taken into account while taking policy decisions.

The terms "unanticipated" and "unintended" are distinct in their literal meaning, as per their literal construct, meaning "not anticipated" and "not intended" respectively. However, in common parlance, they seem to have an overlapping meaning. As per Cambridge Dictionary, "unintended" means "*not intentional; happening unexpectedly or by accident; One unintended consequence of the Industrial Revolution was the rapid increase in air pollution*".⁶ The Cambridge Dictionary does not offer the meaning of the word "unanticipated" though it includes the word "anticipate" which is defined as "to imagine or expect that something will happen". From the dictionary meanings, it appears that both these words "unintended" and "unanticipated" are often used to depict an absence of expectation. The absence of the term "unanticipated" in Cambridge dictionary may provide an explanation to the observation made by de Zwart (2015) that the word "unintentional" is used far more often than the word "unanticipated".

The literature on public policy does much better in differentiating these two terms. 'Unintended consequences may be anticipated' is considered as one of the fundamental principles of good public policy analysis.

However, the understanding of the variety and aetiology in unintended/unanticipated consequences of policy decisions is limited (Perry 6, 2014).⁷ Consequently, while the difference between these terms is understood in public policy, this has not been imported as a tool in the formal public policymaking and analysis process (Jimenez and Lopez-Sanders, 2011).⁸

In recent times, de Zwart's observation that the word 'unintended' is used more often than 'unanticipated' holds true for public policy literature as well. For instance, *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy*, while focusing on the role of unintended consequences, points out that every government action pursued towards a specific goal will inevitably have winners and losers even if these distributional effects are unintended.⁹ Consequences which are both unintended and unanticipated do seem to get greater attention in public policy than the remaining three categories (anticipated but unintended, intended but unanticipated, and both intended and anticipated), as also inferred by the Oxford Handbook of Public Policy in the following words:

"The story of government initiatives of the past decade has too often been one of unintended and unanticipated negative consequences swamping the positive results of programs whose intent may have been worthy, but whose intellectual underpinnings were regrettably weak".¹⁰

As highlighted by de Zwart, the two terms can be seen to be used interchangeably in public policy. For instance, *The Handbook of Public Policy Analysis* lists these basic questions for verifying the efficiency of public policy outcomes:¹¹

"Does the program fulfill its stated objective(s)?"

Does the empirical analysis uncover secondary or unanticipated effects that offset the program objectives?"

Does the program fulfill the objectives more efficiently than alternative means available?"

In view of the authors, the conflation of these two different terms in public policy may be largely a result of the focus in public policy approaches, such as cost benefit analysis, on differentiating positive consequences from the negative ones. However, in view of the authors, differentiating unanticipated from unintended consequences can have an additional advantage of enabling policy analysts to not only evaluate the policy under examination, but also gain insights about the accuracy or limitations of anticipating the unintended consequences. The authors are in agreement with de Zwart's observations that there is a conflation of these two terms in ordinary parlance, and may have also crept not only into literature on sociology (Scott and Marshall, 1998)¹² and economics (Norton, 2008)¹³, but also public policy. Given the differences in what these terms actually denote, the authors also endorse the need to maintain the distinction between these two terms from the context of policy analysis.

De Zwart’s Framework for “Unintended” and “Unanticipated”

De Zwart uses a framework for pointing out the distinctions between the “unintended” and “unanticipated” consequences, which he explains through the following words:

“True, unanticipated consequences can only be unintended, but unintended consequences can be either anticipated or unanticipated, a distinction lost in the single opposition of “intended” versus “unintended.” Table 1 illustrates:

Table 1: Consequences of Purposive Action

	<i>Intended</i>	<i>Unintended</i>
<i>Anticipated</i>	A	B
<i>Unanticipated</i>		D

The left bottom cell is empty because what is intended cannot be unanticipated, and vice versa. Intended consequences can only be anticipated (A). But unintended consequences can be either anticipated or unanticipated (B or D). The focus when theorising unintended consequences has been on A and D. A represents the rational ideal—purposive action realises intentions; D is the realm of unexpected outcomes, the core subject of social sciences according to many. Our concern here is B, unintended but anticipated outcomes. Like D (unintended and unanticipated), B consists of “things nobody wants,” but unlike D, things under B are foreseen. Category B effects are real and common, and, as noted, in need of separate attention.”

De Zwart uses this framework to illustrate the distinction between unintended and unanticipated consequences. It is not proposed by him as a tool for policy analysis. However, in view of the authors, this provides a useful framework that can be used as a tool in policy analysis to clearly distinguish the unintended from the unanticipated consequences. For this purpose, however, there would be a need to address some of its limitations.

De Zwart leaves the left bottom cell empty as in his view, what is intended cannot be unanticipated. However, this is true only if all consequences are viewed as ‘all or none’ phenomenon in purely qualitative terms. Thus, one of the limitations of this framework could be in neglecting the quantitative aspect of consequences.

Another limitation of de Zwart’s framework appears to be in the presumption that all intended consequences are beneficial in nature, while all unintended consequences are adverse. While the first part of the presumption would usually be true, the second part may not always be true. For instance, in a case of demonetisation of currency to reduce unaccounted commercial transactions and tax evasion, there could be other benefits like promotion of digital transactions and suppression of counterfeit currency, which may be considered beneficial, but may not have been anticipated. Thus, unanticipated consequences, represented by ‘D’ in de Zwart’s framework, would include not only the qualitatively unanticipated benefits that are adverse, but also qualitatively unanticipated benefits that are beneficial.

Further, it would also need to include excess of adverse consequences that were qualitatively recognised, but quantitatively underestimated.

An Analysis of de Zwart's Arguments and its Limitations

De Zwart's framework clearly lays down the distinction between "unintended" and "unanticipated" as well as puts forward a very insightful framework to analyse them further. He correctly points out that the unintended consequences of a social action can be either anticipated or unanticipated. In sophisticated policy analysis, some unintended consequences can be recognised by policymakers. Such unintended consequences, even when taken into account, may not alter the policy, if the expected policy outcomes, after taking the unintended consequences into account, remain positive enough for that policy to be put in place.

It can also be seen that the consequences of social actions is likely to have a qualitative as well as quantitative dimension. For illustration, in case of mechanisation of an erstwhile manual industry, greater release of polluting gases would constitute 'air pollution', which is a qualitative dimension of this consequence and per se defines the nature of that consequence. However, the quantitative aspect of those consequences, i.e. the quantity of these gases that are produced is likely to be an equally significant dimension from the perspective of evaluation of a social action or public policy. It is possible that if the quantity of polluting gases is very small, the outcomes would largely remain unaltered, whereas if their quantity is very large, such negative unintended consequences may be sufficient to completely negate the intended benefits and result in an overall negative outcome. Thus, in view of the authors, it is essential to recognise the quantitative aspect as distinct from the qualitative aspect of consequences.

Another significant reason for taking the quantitative aspect into account is that in many cases, social actions as well as public policies are incremental in nature. It is possible that the adoption of a new policy may not lead to any new consequences, but significantly alter the earlier consequences in quantitative terms, for example, by a rise in emission of polluting gases.

In such a case, a rise by 0.5% in existing emissions would be far more acceptable than say, a rise of emissions by 75%. Thus, for such analysis, it is essential that quantitative aspect of consequences is taken into account.

Proposal to Modify de Zwart's Framework by taking Quantitative Aspect into Account

Once quantitative aspects of consequences are taken into account, one can presume that the quantification of intended consequences will also form part of any proposal or plan for policy actions contemplated by policymakers.

Wherever such a presumption can be made, and wherever the intended benefits exceed the anticipated quantity, they would give rise to a category of “intended but not anticipated” consequences that would fill up the left bottom cell that was left unfilled by de Zwart on the ground that “*what is intended cannot be unanticipated*”. This provides us the missing C in de Zwart’s framework.

Here it may be worth recalling that what cannot be anticipated is unlikely to be of much use in planning.

Thus, from the perspective of a policy analyst, undertaking a comparative analysis of positive (intended) and negative (unintended) consequences with the objective of facilitating an informed choice among different policy options cannot be of any use, unless the positive or negative consequences can be anticipated,. Such policy analysis, therefore, can only proceed on the basis of what can possibly be anticipated. However, from the perspective of policy evaluation being undertaken at the time, once all consequences, positive as well as negative, are apparent, unanticipated consequences provide significant insights. Documenting unanticipated consequences, not only the negative ones but also positive ones, can contribute to the policy analysis capacity.

The authors propose the following modification in the framework put in place by de Zwart (2015) for the purpose of making it a useful tool for policy makers:

Table 1

	<i>Intended</i>	<i>Unintended</i>
<i>Anticipated</i>	A	B
<i>Unanticipated</i>	C	$D = (d' + d'') - d$

Where,

A represents ‘*Planned Beneficial Outcomes*’ or the benefits in qualitative as well as quantitative terms that are anticipated to arise from a public policy intervention;

B represents ‘*Negative but Anticipated Consequences*’ or those negative consequences that were anticipated from the proposed public policy intervention in qualitative as well as quantitative terms;

C represents ‘*Underestimation of Planned Benefits*’ or the amount of beneficial outcomes that were underestimated in the original plan;

D represents the ‘*Sum of all unintended and unanticipated consequences*’, and is a combination of ‘*Qualitatively Unanticipated Benefits*’ represented by **d**, ‘*Underestimation of Negative Consequences*’ represented by **d’** and ‘*Qualitatively Unanticipated Negative Consequences*’ represented by **d’’**.

Thus, the modified version, which the authors would prefer to call as “Modified de Zwart’s Framework” in view of its derivation from the Model first proposed by de Zwart (2015), can be elaborated as represented in Table 2:

Table 2: Modified de Zwart’s Framework

	<i>Intended</i>	<i>Unintended</i>
<i>Anticipated</i>	<i>Planned Benefits</i>	<i>Negative but Anticipated Consequences</i>
<i>Unanticipated</i>	<i>Underestimation of Planned Benefits</i>	<i>Underestimation of Negative Consequences & Qualitatively Unanticipated Benefits & Qualitatively Unanticipated Negative Consequences</i>

Utility of the Proposed Framework for Policy Analysis

The proposed framework facilitates policy analysis by enabling a distinction between unintended and unanticipated consequences, the necessity of which has already been elaborated by de Zwart (2015). In view of the authors, it would be particularly useful for evaluation of policies already in place, or while analysing the option of continuation of an existing policy.

In addition, by enabling a distinction between intended and unintended consequences, both beneficial and adverse, it can also contribute in improving the capacity of policy analysis, especially for incremental changes in policies.

Summary and Conclusions

In summary, the authors agree with the view of de Zwart (2015) regarding the conflation of the terms “unintended” and “unanticipated” in social science, which in view of the authors may have been partly contributed by the overlap in their meaning in common parlance.

The authors conclude that maintaining a distinction between unintended and unanticipated consequences enables greater sophistication in policy analysis, in particular for the purpose of policy evaluation where more details about unanticipated consequences, both positive as well as negative, are likely to be available. For this purpose, the authors propose a framework derived from the framework originally used by de Zwart (2015). The proposed framework can be a useful tool in policy analysis, especially for the purpose of evaluating existing policies or for the purpose of analysing the need for policy continuation or incremental changes in an existing policy.

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