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GENERAL EDITOR
ROBERT E. GOODIN

EDITED BY
MICHAEL
MORAN
MARTIN
REIN
ROBERT E.
GOODIN

≡ The Oxford Handbook of
PUBLIC POLICY

modifications, and shifts of activity to the private sector. If you were considering investment in large-scale SEs, our advice would be: hold off. The product is a sound one, with high potential, but the time is not now—at least in the USA. But hang in. Some version of SEs will have their day.

We also began our story with an outline of three themes: the complexity of the policy world, the technical complexity of the research world, and the alignment or misalignment between experimental findings and policy questions. Overall, SEs have showed the possibilities and the limits of affecting policy through social science research. They have contributed considerable new knowledge. Some of their findings have infiltrated the policy arena and are part of policy-speak (Anderson 2003; Weiss 1999). Influentials in Congress, federal agencies, international organizations, interest groups, and the media learn to be conversant with experimental findings in order to take an informed part in policy conversation.

On the other hand, there are no examples of an SE that led directly to policy change. Results of the health insurance experiments were so late and so unfocused on actual legislative proposals that they were pretty much ignored—except by economists, who have used them to model new proposals. The nursing home reimbursement experiment results also arrived late, after the zing had gone out of the incentive idea. Almost nobody was still interested in incentives for nursing homes; the action was in the area of regulation. While widely published, the income maintenance experiments led to little concrete change in policy. The welfare-to-work experiments seemed to have policy consequences. The MDRC study provided support for mandatory work-first requirements and demonstrated the ability of states to design and manage their own welfare programs. All three of these program design aspects ultimately ended up in the Family Support Act of 1998. Nevertheless as we have seen, the experiment merely reinforced what policy makers were planning to do on other grounds.

Because policy making is such a complicated business, with so many players pursuing such divergent interests, it is overly optimistic to expect research information to carry the day. Even the high-quality information supplied by SEs cannot overwhelm all the other forces on the scene. And as we have seen, the timing of SEs is often off. The policy agenda moves on, while the SE is still studying last year's proposals.

Yet, totting up advantages and disadvantages, we come out in favor of further experimentation. The world is in dire need of greater understanding of the consequences of government action. Social experimentation cannot fully satisfy the needs for knowledge about policy outcomes, partly because of the intrinsic nature of social science research and partly because of the limitations imposed by the conditions under which it is done. Still it makes headway. Anything that advances rationality in the messy world of policy is worth supporting. Not venerated or kowtowed to, but cheered on.

But we also need to moderate our expectations of the contributions that SE can make. The notion of basing policy strictly on experimental evidence is wrong-headed. SE doesn't tell everything that a polity needs to know about a pending policy option.

Many other considerations have to go into government action, such as popular demands, costs, capabilities available for implementing the policy, competing needs, effects on neighboring policies, and so on. Resolution comes through politics. Although the word has fallen on evil times, politics is the system we have for resolving differences in our complex societies and reaching decisions that are at least minimally acceptable to all parties (for a resounding affirmation of politics, see Crick 1972).

Evidence of policy outcomes cannot and should not supplant the play of politics as the basis of policy. Of course, we do not want to see policy developed on the basis of faulty understanding of the situation or unrealistic expectations for the effects of action, but it does seem presumptuous to think that experimental data alone can point to the best resolution of complex policy issues. History matters, as do political culture and institutional practices. What SE can do is illuminate the understanding of publics and elites and infuse policy discussion with insight.

Science and politics cohabit in the policy sphere, but their alliance is an uneasy one. Social scientists, to put the best face on the relationship, have pointed to the “value-added” features that social science brings to the table: an inventory of knowledge for the future to draw on, general enlightenment of elites and publics in the present, puncturing of faulty assumptions, and confirmation of wise instincts for action. But for all the understanding and insight contributed by the social sciences—and by SEs in particular—they do not run the show. There is inevitable tension between science and politics, and convergence is usually a happy accident.

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PART IX

PUBLIC POLICY,
OLD AND NEW

CHAPTER 40

THE UNIQUE METHODOLOGY OF POLICY RESEARCH

AMITAI ETZIONI

POLICY research requires a profoundly different methodology from that on which basic research relies, because policy research is always dedicated to *changing* the world while basic research seeks to understand it as it is.¹ The notion that if one merely understands the world better, then one will in turn know how to better it, is not supported by the evidence.

Typical policy goals are the reduction of poverty, curbing crime, cutting pollution, or changing some other condition (Mitchell and Mitchell 1969, 393). Even those policies whose purpose is to maintain the status quo are promoting change—they aim to slow down or even reverse processes of deterioration, for instance that of natural monuments or historical documents. When no change is sought, say, when no one is concerned with changing the face of the moon, then there is no need for policy research in that particular area.

Moreover, although understanding the causes of a phenomenon, which successful basic research allows, is helpful in formulating policy, often a large amount of other information that is structured in a different manner best serves policy makers.² Policy researchers draw on a large amount of information that has no

¹ The first book to deal with policy sciences and consequently often cited is Lasswell and Lerner's *The Policy Sciences* (1951). However this book does not address the methodological issues at hand. For an early treatment of these issues, see Etzioni 1971*b*, 1968.

² For an example of how to structure and present policy research and analysis, see Dunn 1981, 322.

particular analytical base or theoretical background (of the kind that basic research provides).³ In this sense medical science, which deals with changing bodies and minds, is a prototypical policy science. It is estimated that about half of the information physicians employ has no basis in biology, chemistry, or any other science; but rather it is based on an accumulation of experience.⁴ This knowledge is passed on from one medical cohort to another, as “these are the way things are done” and “they work.”

The same holds true for other policy sciences. For instance, criminologists who inform a local government that studies show that rehabilitation works more effectively in minimum security prisons than in maximum security prisons (a fact that can be explained by sociological theoretical concepts based on basic research)⁵ know from long experience that they had better also alert the local authorities that such a reduction in security could potentially lead some inmates to escape and commit crimes in surrounding areas. Without being willing to accept such a “side effect” of the changed security policy, those governments who introduced it may well lose the next election and security in the prison will be returned to its previously high level. There is no particular sociological theoretical reason for escapes to rise when security is lowered. It is an observation based on common sense and experience; however it is hardly an observation that policy makers, let alone policy researchers should ignore. (They may though explore ways of coping with this “side effect,” for instance by either preparing the public ahead of time, introducing an alert system when inmates escape, or some other such measure.)

The examples just given seek to illustrate the difference between the information that basic research generates versus information that plays a major role in policy research. That is, there are important parts of the knowledge on which policy research draws that are based on distilled practice and are not derivable from basic research. Much of what follows deals with major differences in the ways that information and analysis are structured in sound policy research in contrast to the ways basic research is carried out.

One clarification before I can proceed: Policy research should not be confused with applied research. Applied research presumes that a policy decision has already been made and those responsible are now looking for the most efficient ways to implement it. Policy research helps to determine what the policy decision ought to be.

³ For example many policy makers subscribe to George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson’s criminology theories because they make sense, despite the fact that they are not grounded in academic research. See Wilson and Kelling 1982. For criticisms of this approach to criminology, see Miller 2001.

⁴ “Much” of medicine is not scientifically supported (Inglefinger, Relman, and Findland 1966). “85 percent of the problems a doctor sees in his office are not in the book” (quoted from a physician in Schön 1983, 16).

⁵ See Etzioni 1971a, 246–7.

1. MALLEABILITY

A major difference between basic and policy research is that malleability is a key variable for the latter though not the former (Weimer and Vining 1989; 4). Indeed for policy researchers it is arguably the single most important variable. Malleability for the purposes at hand ought to be defined as the amount of resources (including time, energy, and political capital) that would have to be expended to cause change in a given variable or variables. For policy research, malleability is a cardinal consideration because resources always fall short of what is required to implement given policy goals. Hence, to employ resources effectively requires determining the relative results to be generated from different patterns of allocation (Dunn 1981, 334–402). In contrast, basic research has no principled reason to favor some factors (or variables) over others. For basic research, it matters little if at all whether a condition under study can be modified and if it can how much it would cost. To illustrate, many sociological studies compare people by gender and age and although these variables may seem relevant, they are of limited value to policy research. Other variables used, such as the levels of income of various populations, the extent of education of various racial and ethnic groups, and the average size of cities, are somewhat more malleable but still not highly so. In contrast, perceptions are much more malleable.

One may say that basic research should reveal a preference for variables that have been less studied; however, such a consideration concerns the economics and politics of science rather than methodology. Because all scientific findings are conditional and temporary and often subject to profound revision and recasting, for basic researchers, retesting old findings can be just as valuable as covering new variables. In short, although in principle for basic research the study of all variables is legitimate, in a given period of time or amongst a given group of scientists, some may consider certain variables as more “interesting” or “promising” than others. In contrast, to reiterate, for policy research, malleability is the most important variable as it is directly related to its core reason for being: Promoting change.

Given the dominance of basic research methodology in the ways policy research is taught, it is not surprising to find that the question of which variables are more malleable than others is rarely studied in any systematic way. Due to the importance of this issue for policy research, some elaboration and illustrations are called for. Economic feasibility is a good case in point. Many policy researchers’ final reports do not include any, not even crude estimates of the costs involved in what they are recommending.⁶ Even less common is any consideration of the question of whether such changes can be made acceptable to elected representatives and the public at large; that is, political feasibility (Weimer and Vining 1989, 292–324). For instance, over the last decades several groups favored advancing their policy goals through constitutional amendments, ignoring the fact that these are extremely difficult to get passed.

⁶ See for example Free Expression Project 2003; Raver 2002, 3–19.

In other cases, feasibility is treated as a secondary “applied” question to be studied later, after policy makers adopt the recommended policy. However, the issue runs much deeper than the assessments of feasibility of one kind or another. The challenge to policy research is to determine the relative resistance to change according to the different variables that are to be tackled. And this question must be tackled not on an ad hoc basis, but rather as a major part of systematic policy research. Moreover, if the variables involved are studied from this viewpoint, they themselves may be changed; that is, feasibility is enhanced rather than treated as a given.

Another example of the cardinal need to take malleability into account when conducting policy research concerns changing public attitudes. Policy makers often favor a “public education” campaign when they desire to affect people’s beliefs and conduct. Policy makers tend to assume that it is feasible to change such predispositions through a way that might be called the Madison Avenue approach, which entails running a series of commercials (or public service announcements), mounting billboards, obtaining celebrity endorsements, and so on.

For example, the United States engaged in such a campaign in 2003 and 2004 to change the hearts and minds of “the Arab street” through what has also been termed “public diplomacy.”⁷ The way this was carried out provides a vivid example of lack of attention to feasibility issues. American public diplomacy, developed by the State Department, included commercials, websites, and speakers programs that sought to “reconnect the world’s billion Muslims with the United States the way McDonald’s highlights its billion customers served” (Satloff 2003, 18). It was based on the premiss that “blitzing Arab and Muslim countries with Britney Spears videos and Arabic-language sitcoms will earn Washington millions of new Muslim sympathizers” (Satloff 2003, 18). A study found that the results were “disastrous” (Satloff 2003, 18). Some countries declined to air the messages and many Muslims who did see the material viewed it as blatant propaganda and offensive rather than compelling.

Actually, policy researchers bent on studying feasibility report that the Madison Avenue approach works only when large amounts of money are spent to shift people from one product to another when there are next to no differences between them (e.g. two brands of toothpaste) and when there is an inclination to use the product in the first place. However, when these methods are applied to changing attitudes about matters as different as condom use,⁸ the United Nations,⁹ electoral reform, and so

⁷ See, for instance, The Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World, “Changing minds, winning peace: a new strategic direction for U.S. public diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim world,” Oct, 2003, Edward P. Djerejian, chair.

⁸ For instance, the Centers for Disease Control conducted a ten year ad campaign to educate Americans about condoms and to encourage their use to prevent HIV transmission. After spending millions of dollars on these ads, a CDC study found that only 45 % of sexually active high school students used a condom the last time they had sex: see Scott 1994. A recent evaluation of the program issued an unqualified “no” in answer to the question, “Has the U.S. federal government’s HIV/AIDS television [public service announcement] campaign been designed not only to make the public aware of HIV/AIDS but also to provide appropriate messages to motivate and reinforce behavior change?” See DeJong, Wolf, and Austin 2001, 256. Of the fifty six ads reviewed, fifty were created by the CDC, the other six were created by the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

⁹ Star and Hughes 1950, quoted in Berelson and Steiner 1964, 530.

forth, they are much less successful. Changing people's behavior—say to conserve energy, drive slower, cease smoking—is many hundreds of times more difficult. This is a major reason why totalitarian regimes, despite intensive public education campaigns, usually fail. The question of what is most feasible is determined by fiat by policy makers and their staffs rather than by studies that are reported to the policy makers by policy researchers. Hence decisions are often based on a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants sense of what can be changed rather than on empirical evidence.¹⁰ One of the few exceptions is studies of nation building in which several key policy researchers presented the reasons why such endeavors can be carried out at best only slowly while at the same time many policy makers claimed that it could be achieved in short order and at low cost.¹¹

In a preliminary stab at outlining the relative malleability of various factors, one may note that as a rule the laws of nature are not malleable; social relations, including patterns of asset distribution and power, are of limited malleability; and symbolic relations are highly malleable. Thus any policy-making body that would seek to modify the level of gravity, for example, not for a particular situation (for instance a space travel simulator) but in general, will find this task at best extremely difficult to advance. In contrast, those who seek to change a flag, a national motto, the ways people refer to one another (e.g. Ms Instead of girl or broad), have a *relatively* easy time of doing so. Changes in the distribution of wealth among the classes or races—by public policy—are easier than changes involving the laws of nature, but more difficult than changing hearts and minds.

When policy researchers or policy makers ignore these observations and enact laws that seek grand and quick changes in power relations and economic patterns, the laws are soon reversed. A case in point is the developments that ensued when a policy researcher inserted into legislation the phrase “maximum feasible participation of the poor.” This Act was used to try to circumvent prevailing local power structures by directing federal funds to voluntary groups that included the poor on their advisory boards, which thus helped “empower the poor.” The law was nullified shortly thereafter. Similarly, when a constitutional amendment was enacted that banned the consumption of alcohol in the United States, it had some severely distorted effects on the American justice and law enforcement systems and did little actually to reduce the consumption of alcohol. It was also the only constitutional amendment ever to be repealed.

Among social changes, often legal and political reduction in inequality is relatively easier to come by than are socioeconomic changes along similar lines. Thus, African-Americans and women gained *de jure* and *de facto* voting rights long before the differences in their income and representation in the seats of power moved closer to those of whites (in the case of African-Americans) and of men (in the case of women). Nor have socioeconomic differences been reduced nearly as much as legal

¹⁰ Indeed unlike science, Carol Weiss has argued that in the policy field it may be impossible to separate objective knowledge from ideology or interests: see Weiss 1983.

¹¹ See Carothers 1999; Etzioni 2004.