It is a sad pleasure to contribute this article to a journal issue honoring the legacy of Howie Davis. It is fitting that this article should be dedicated to Howie, because he encouraged and supported my work on this subject with his characteristic enthusiasm. Without the continuing commitment that he and his office at NIMH maintained for research on knowledge utilization, very little of the work that I discuss in this article would have been done. All of us who are committed to using research as a strategy for reform owe a lasting debt to Howie for his farsightedness and his dedication to improving the linkage between knowledge and action.

The Circuitry of Enlightenment

Diffusion of Social Science Research to Policymakers

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Whether social science has effects on public policy is a subject that has engaged many people—savants, civil servants, and citizens. But there are two especially interested parties: the funding agencies that support research with the intent of improving policy and the social scientists who undertake research with the aim of bringing about reform. Over the decades they have contributed a large speculative literature on the relationship of social science and policy, some of it taken up with laments about policymakers' inattention and lack of use of social science and much of it recounting the obstacles that litter the path from research to application.

In the past decade we have seen the beginning of a body of empirical research on the subject of the influence of social science on policy. Several dozen case studies and a score of major surveys have now been done using a variety of a policy areas, sites, and research methods.

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Important generalizations have begun to emerge. Most of the work has concentrated on the use of social science by service agencies and government departments, but some has looked at legislatures as well.

I shall make four points:

(1) Direct efforts to target and reach specific decision makers with a specific social science message tend to have limited immediate effect. It usually takes time, supporting messages from many sources, and a climate of receptivity before policymakers act on the basis of social science. Even then, effects are usually bound by the environmental, institutional, and political constraints within which policymakers function.

(2) On the other hand, social science knowledge comes into currency through many diverse channels and comes to affect the issues people think about and the way they think about them. Policymakers often hear about research indirectly as findings and conclusions seep into conferences, consultant briefings, conversations, field reports, the media, mail, and so forth. Sometimes the findings do not fit together; sometimes they conflict; sometimes they provide evidence that settles an issue or raises a new issue to prominence.

(3) We are beginning to learn about the microprocesses by which policymakers both learn about social science and decide to pay attention to it. For example, in the legislative sphere, it turns out (at least in my own work) that interest groups are important purveyors of data and analysis as they seek to make the best case for the legislation they favor. The media represent an important source of social science information for decision makers, even though media stories are episodic and scattered.

(4) Although research does not move mountains, at least right away, it does sometimes move hills. And over the long run, knowledge of all kinds drastically reshapes the policy terrain.

Limited Search, Limited Reading, Modest Receptivity

Most policymakers are very busy people. More issues come at them each day than they have time to consider very carefully. As former Vice President Walter Mondale (1981: 67) wrote, "The pressures of the executive branch of government require that every issue be summarized

and categorized and filtered through intermediaries so that decisions can be made on a timely basis. The epitome of good staff work in Washington too often comes down to a three-page decision memo. Read it, choose an action, and on to the next subject. Often there's too little room or not enough time for subtlety or complexity." That is an understatement.

Even staff have too little time to seek out the best information. There is relatively little *search* for evidence or analysis. People tend to make do with what they already know—or at least know about. If they know that some useful material exists, they may call a few people to locate it. But only under rare circumstances are they likely to initiate a brand new search for research or data that they do not already have some inkling of.

The occasions that give rise to search for evidence are (1) new issues, something the policymaker has not dealt with before and therefore needs to get an orientation to, (2) big questions with important or expensive consequences, (3) issues on which they feel inadequately prepared, and (4) situations where their judgement may be challenged and they want authoritative support. But again, neither policymakers nor their aides are likely to embark on a library search, however computerized the system may be, unless they have prior awareness that a category of useful information on the topic actually exists.

Another factor that limits policymakers' use of social science is the limited time they have available for reading. Members of the House of Representatives spend about 11 minutes a day reading—and their greatest complaint is that they do not have time to study and analyze. When they do read something other then staff memos, it tends to be summaries of pending bills, crucial mail, and newspaper headlines. Just about nobody in high office reads social science journals.

Even when policymakers come across social science evidence or theory in the course of their daily work, they do not succumb to its truth and beauty on the spot. Intuitively, they subject it to a series of tests, such as: Does it agree with what I already know about how the world works? Is it credible? A brand new idea that is counterintuitive will take a while to get a reasonable hearing. They probably will not listen to it until evidence comes in from several authorities, through different channels, converging on the same general theme.

Enlightenment or "Knowledge Creep"

However, policymakers in many fields believe that they are influenced by social science. They find it hard to identify specific studies that have influenced them or to specify how they have been influenced, but they have a strong and genuine sense that social science has helped to shape their views. They tend to be interested in what topics social scientists have studied and what results they have found, and they see social science as a general background of facts and ideas that are useful for keeping up with the world. For some policymakers, social science provides a map of the social world, and when it happens to come their way, they are willing to pay attention.

But of course, social science is never their only source of information. They are barraged by information from many quarters. Nor does any one study, or even any body of research, encompass all the variables that decision makers have to attend to—such as public reaction, financial costs, social costs, instability, political advantage. Social scientists usually ignore factors such as these—they are not built into the model. Policymakers have to take them into serious account. So social science research is never a sufficient basis for decisions. Moreover, social science does not provide certainties; it deals in probabilities, which are always lower than 1.0. It tends not to simplify problems but to reveal new complexities. Its evidence comes from the past and extrapolations to the future are always problematic. So it cannot claim to provide the definitive answer. In all these senses, it inherently fails to satisfy policymakers' yearning for easy solutions.

Nevertheless, social science is often the best source available for descriptive "facts" about a situation and understanding of cause-effect linkages, in effect, the theories underlying policy action. As its findings move into public view, they tend to reshape the images we all hold of the social world. Moreover, in our Western-rationalist culture, reliance on systematic fact and tested theory is seen as a proper and rational mode of behavior. Even though many intellectuals belittle the pretensions of social science, it maintains considerable prestige in our postmodern societies. Policymakers who consciously pay attention to social science view themselves, and are often viewed by others, as behaving rationally.

So as social science evidence moves into currency and becomes accepted by informed publics, it tends to change the premises that are taken for granted and the issues that are seen as problematical. Thus, it

can have two kinds of consequences for policy: (1) By clarifying the nature and extent of problems and their susceptibility to purposive action, it can reorder the policy agenda, demoting some items to insignificance and elevating others to higher places; (2) by showing that some actions work well and others have little effect, social science can recast the type of alternatives considered as solutions.

Micro-Processes by Which Social Science Gains Attention

It is one thing to talk about knowledge creep and enlightenment (and many students of the subject have come to accept this imagery as descriptive of the phenomena at work); it is another to describe how social science travels to policymaking arenas, which channels are activated, which personal links matter, what personal experiences or characteristics make policymakers more receptive, what situations trigger attentiveness. Work on these issues is still in its early stages. We have quite a number of case studies but few generalizations that hold across time and place. We are just beginning to understand the circuits through which the light of enlightenment travels.

It does seem that there are some policymakers who are "users." The personal factor—a person's interest, commitment, enthusiasm—plays a part in determing how much influence a piece of research will have. We do not yet know why some people become committed enthusiasts—no identifiable background trait or experience has yet shown to be consistently associated with frequent reliance on research—but we do see a number of policymakers and a larger number of staff aides who give social science serious hearing in decision making.

Most social science reports seem to have little effect on policymakers in and of themselves. A book, a journal article, even a glossy, well-written, short, and spiffy summary document usually has little immediate effect. It usually takes repeated messages, amplified by personal consultation and advocacy, before word gets through. Even then, the work is unlikely to proceed very far unless, and until, it is "certified" by the certification authorities of the profession or field. Thus, controversial social science findings on alcoholism treatment make little headway if leaders in the alcoholism field dispute their validity; only when enough authorities and medical organizations line up behind the

findings are treatment personnel willing to grant them at least provisional credibility.

The mass media seem to be an important channel to policymakers. Even though many policymakers have their own specialized communications systems and their own analysis staffs, they may not be alerted to relevant social science findings until they hear about them in the public prints or on the airwaves. I have just finished a study of media reporting of social science and it becomes obvious that there are advantages and disadvantages for social science in getting into the media. But from the policymakers' perspective, media reporting of a study or commentary on a topic in their domain is a significant event. Policymakers prick up their ears, not only because *Time* or the *Washington Post* reaches them with a brief and simple version of social science, but even more important, because they know that the same story reaches all the other players in the policy game. They will be asked about it. They had better know about it. They can't sweep it under the rug.

I have recently become aware that social science is also relayed to policymakers through the activities of interest groups. In dealing with administrative agencies, and even more in dealing with the legislature, each specialized lobby tries to advance its own case. In so doing, it makes use of whatever evidence supports its claims. If it finds supportive data in social science, it makes those data part of its case. Competing groups press different evidence on administrative staff and legislators, and they criticize the data and analysis made available by opposition groups. Congressmen and congressional staff appear to be more receptive to social science that arrives in this form, interlocked with argumentation and proposals for action, than they are to social science that arrives under the guise of pure and objective evidence. They know that interested groups are giving them one side, but they are accustomed to dealing with interested groups, and they know what axe each one is grinding. When they get social science information—research, analysis, evaluation, data—from interest groups, they know what kind of correction factor to apply. They tend to be suspicious of academics who come bearing objective research; they want to know "What's in it for them?" They even show some skepticism toward the research and analysis provided by the congressional support agencies—the Congressional Budget Office, the Congressional Research Service, the General Accounting Office, and the Office of Technology Assessment. They seem more comfortable with social science that comes combined with political advocacy and legislative proposals; that is the context with which they are familiar.

As legislators and their staffs try to resolve conflicting policy positions through negotiation, they often test the cases of the various groups and therefore also test the empirical evidence on which the various cases seem to rest. No research experts themselves, they ask each group what it has to say about the case made by others. They assume self-interest and an adversarial process, and they also tend to assume that the facts lie somewhere between the extremes posited by the opposing groups. Political considerations will probably prevail in the end, but they will be tempered by clearer understanding of what social science has to say. Thus, advocacy groups tend to put on the congressional table a fair amount of social science data, generalizations, and ideas. It is not done in the interests of knowledge, but as a side effect of advocacy. Yet it seems to have consequences.

Perhaps the most potent purveyor of social science to policymakers is what Heclo has called "the issue network." Around many major issues in contention, there has grown up a set of people who have long-term interest and knowledge in shaping policy. These people include members of Congress and their staffs, leaders of major executive-branch agencies charged with developing and implementing policy, some state and local leaders in the field, academics, consultants, interest group representatives, and think-tank experts. As policy on the issue develops and is modified over time, these people maintain contact, circulating material and exchanging ideas. Since many of the most active issue networks, such as those concerned with welfare reform and energy policy, include researchers and analysts among their participants, they become an active channel for the dissemination of social science research and analysis. We need more systematic study of how these networks operate and what information travels through them.

Whoops, There Goes Another Rubber Tree Plant

For a long time social scientists were discouraged by the seeming failure of social science to alter policy. They expected one study and its recommendations to have a direct and immediate effect on policy action—to change it from A to B by the strength of its scientific findings. Once in a while, they found a "nugget," an exemplary case where social science did in fact change policy outcomes. But usually it seemed as though social science was ignored.

I think we know better now. We cannot expect social science to take the politics out of policymaking. Many factors matter in the development of policy, and each institution that makes policy (legislative, administrative, or judicial) has to take account of elements of its own organization and environment.

Still, evidence shows that social science can influence policy. Deregulation is a case in point. The idea of deregulating such industries as airlines, trucking, natural gas, and communications originally came from a group of academic economists. They studied, talked, wrote, and argued for years. Although most of the companies involved were opposed to deregulation, the power of the idea and the supporting evidence eventually took hold. It overcame inertia and industry resistance, and deregulation became the law of the land.

It often takes time and patience and multiple messages conveyed through multiple channels before social science has an impact. But over time it helps to alter the manner in which each of us makes sense of the world, both the facts that we assume and the models by which we put the facts together. As changes in thinking occur, they change the premises on which policy is made. They shift plants, hills, and maybe in geologic time, like tectonic plates, they can move mountains.

Reference

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