

## 19. Which Aspects of Policy and Practice?

In considering the question ‘*Which aspects of policy and practice are targeted by the provision of integrated research support?*’, the focus is different from the first two domains of knowledge synthesis and unknowns; it is not on the problem, but on the government, business and civil society arenas where support can be provided to those in a position to bring about change. Nevertheless, the six categories of concepts and methods (taking a systems view, scoping, boundary setting, framing, taking values into account and deciding which differences to harness and which to manage) still apply.

### Taking a Systems View

Whereas taking a systems view in the first two domains entails considering the *problem* as a system, in this domain the focus is on the *policy or practice* system that is being supported by the integrated research. There are two relevant dimensions here. One is the organisational structures, how they operate and how they are interconnected. The other is understanding the process by which decisions are made and actions taken. Each of these is described separately, after which I deal with how they are related.

In the government policymaking system, the structures include the government ministry (that is, cabinet), government departments which advise each minister, committees where deliberations on policy matters occur, and so on. On the surface, this seems to be relatively straightforward; however, the structures vary with the type of government (for example, democracy or dictatorship), are country specific and may vary across jurisdictions within countries. Furthermore, they differ from those researchers are generally used to and finding out about them may be challenging, as they are not necessarily transparent. For example, in Australia, a government department website generally provides only limited information in an organisational chart and does not identify the incumbents of most positions. Such information is generally only available informally from contacts within the department.

The process of government policy making is even less transparent than its structure and has many facets. Theories of policy making can help I2S specialists better understand different aspects of the process. No one theory provides a complete view of government policy making, but each theory provides a set of useful understandings for providing integrated research support. Three widely employed and broadly useful theories are summarised in Box 19.1.<sup>1</sup>

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1 The versions presented here are highly simplified, especially the last two theories.

They provide insight into: i) technical procedures whereby incremental change is made, ii) responses to pressures exerted by specific interest groups, and iii) entrepreneurial activity, where key decision makers look for windows of opportunity to enact change.

### **Box 19.1 Examples of Different Theoretical Perspectives of Government Policy Making**

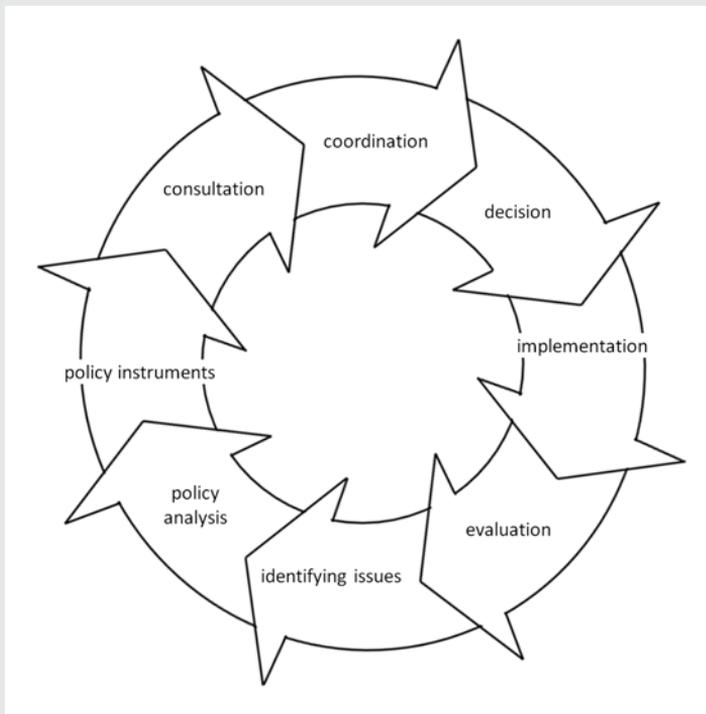
Three theoretical perspectives of government policy making are presented here to highlight different aspects of the process. They are government policy making as

1. a technical-rational cycle
2. a response to pressures exerted by different interest groups
3. an entrepreneurial activity involving the seizing of windows of opportunity.

#### **Government policy making as a technical-rational cycle**

This theory describes a cycle of activity depicted in Figure 19.1. The starting point is an issue or problem coming onto the government agenda ('identifying issues'), at which time the policy process involves examination of existing policy and identification of new options for dealing with the problem—in other words, with policy analysis. This leads to consideration of possible ways of intervening—for example, by changing laws or regulations, by increasing or decreasing certain types of taxation, by introducing an education program or by changing available services. These interventions are often referred to as policy instruments or levers.

Policy makers will also assess the likely impact of proposed policy changes through consultation with affected parties. Consultation generally involves various stakeholders who may be businesses, consumer groups and service providers. There will also be a process of coordination with other relevant government departments. Usually, ministries in charge of expenditure (such as the Department of Treasury) will be involved, but the coordination may also be more widespread. For example, the development of a new public health policy on physical exercise may involve coordination between departments overseeing health, sport and urban planning. Based on all these inputs, a decision will be made and an implementation plan established. Specific evaluation of the effects of the policy change may be undertaken, but more often governments rely on the stakeholders to alert them to problems, which may then be attended to in a new cycle of policy making.



**Figure 19.1 Key Elements of a 'Policy Cycle'**

Source: Althaus et al. (2007, p. 37).

### **Government policy making as a response to pressures exerted by interest groups**

Anyone who has been involved or interested in government policy making knows that such a technical-rational view represents only one aspect of policy making and de-emphasises the critical political aspects. Another way of looking at government policy making is to see that 'public policy is the outcome of the pressures of society's many and diverse interest groups'.<sup>a</sup> Within the policy cycle shown in Figure 19.1, such groups have most influence during the consultation phase; but exploring pressure groups through the framework of the policy cycle misses the richness of their impacts.

Most interest groups are not passive entities waiting for a government call for input into policy. Instead they are often strong and proactive advocates seeking to shape agendas, highlight failures and counteract the influence of competitors. Interest groups often increase their power to influence policy by forming coalitions with others who seek the same specific outcomes on particular problems.

As a consequence, some policy reflects the overwhelming dominance of one coalition. At other times there are competing coalitions and the resulting policy is a compromise rather than an outright win for any side. In any case, a given policy can be seen as representing the balance between different advocacy coalitions. Looking at policy in this way highlights that policy change occurs in three different ways: when an external perturbation upsets the balance between existing advocacy coalitions; when a new advocacy coalition gains power; or when an existing powerful advocacy coalition changes its beliefs.<sup>b</sup>

### **Government policy making as an entrepreneurial activity that entails seizing windows of opportunity**

Much policy change occurs incrementally by finetuning existing policies;<sup>c</sup> but from time to time a major policy change occurs. For example, in 1996 a lone gunman killed 35 people at a tourist destination in Australia.<sup>d</sup> The newly elected Prime Minister, John Howard, seized the opportunity created by the outrage at this crime to enact major changes to Australian laws on gun ownership.<sup>e</sup>

Sometimes a window of opportunity is opened by an unexpected event, although others are routine occurrences, such as those attached to preparation of government budgets, as well as changes of government following an election. But such a trigger event on its own is not enough.<sup>f</sup> Two additional circumstances are required. First, the event must occur in the right political context, which is influenced by the national mood, the organisation of political forces and the position of influential interest groups. For example, major policy change is more likely to occur when the electorate is deeply and obviously concerned about the issue, soon after a government has been elected rather than just before an election and when the influential interest groups are aligned or when the positions of powerful opposing groups can be managed. In the example presented, many Australians were worried about gun availability, the massacre occurred early in the electoral cycle and, although there were powerful groups (such as farmers) opposed to changes in gun laws, the Government decided it could manage that opposition. This may not be the case in other political environments; indeed similar events in the United States have not led to major policy change, partly because of the significance of the 'right to bear arms' in the US Constitution and the strength of opposition to gun control.

The other requisite circumstances involve the practicalities of achieving change; in other words, change will only occur if it is 'doable'. Considerations include whether space can be made on the government agenda to take on the

new issue, whether acting is technically feasible and whether there are any considerations that militate against public acceptance of the problem or the proposed solution. A key factor in the change to gun laws in Australia was that the Government was able to devise an effective scheme to buy newly outlawed guns from those who had previously legitimately held them.

- a. Fenna (2004, p. 123).
- b. Sabatier (1988); Sabatier and Weible (2007).
- c. Lindblom (1959, 1979).
- d. Port Arthur in Tasmania.
- e. Smeaton (1997) gives a policy maker insider account; Mouzos (1999) briefly reviews other changes when windows open, especially related to firearms; Chapman (1998) is a useful reminder that entrepreneurial activity often occurs in a climate of intense advocacy.
- f. Kingdon (2003).

Taking a systems view involves combining structure and process, and again, this can be done in different ways. For example, if the process is viewed as technical-rational then organisation hierarchies and committees are the key structural elements; however, if the process concentrates on pressure groups then structural elements include links between decision makers and pressure groups, including contributors to campaign funds, access to decision makers through direct and informal mechanisms, and so on. This requires additional systems thinking techniques to those presented in Chapters 5 and 12, such as social network theory, which can facilitate analysis of positions of influence.<sup>2</sup>

Effective targeting relies on identifying the relevant people and research support activities within the structures and processes. For example, there is little point interacting with someone who may be interested in the research but has no responsibility for the decision making, in seeking an urgent response from a committee which only meets once a year, in deciding to lobby a minister at an event attended by 1000 other people or in being uncontactable when a policy window opens. Instead, it is more effective for the research findings to be tailored for and presented to those in the key decision-making positions, for relevant committee processes to be taken into account, for lobbying at a time when there is a good chance of being heard and in having built a relationship with policy entrepreneurs that makes it easy for them to get in touch when the time is right.

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<sup>2</sup> The techniques described in the earlier chapters may still be useful, but in different ways. For example, big policy changes often employ several strategies, including legal amendments, incentives and marketing, which are intended to operate synergistically. System dynamics modelling, for example, can check how these different policy levers are likely to interact.

### Tasks for the I2S Development Drive

Collect case examples of various ways of considering the major arenas for implementation (government, business and civil society) as systems, showing the organisational structures and processes for decision making and action, as well as the interactions between them.

Produce a guide for systems approaches to each of the major arenas of implementation (government, business and civil society), showing the organisational structures and processes for decision making and action, as well as the interactions between them. Work with relevant experts, such as political scientists for the government arena, business analysts and experts in civil society.

## Scoping

The key aim of scoping is to broaden the thinking of the integrative applied research team to help identify various options for supporting policy and practice with their research. It aims to move the team beyond what they know and are comfortable with to a wider range of possibilities. Scoping therefore involves identifying various prospects for support

1. starting with what can be done through each of the government, business and civil society arenas
2. thinking about structure and process together as a system, and identifying various useful systems approaches
3. identifying the range of organisations and individuals within each systems approach.

For example, in scoping possible targets for integrated research support on global climate change, the government, business and civil society arenas are all relevant. Focusing on government and taking a systems view then leads to thinking about structure and process, as described above. For example, if the technical-rational view of policy making is considered, important structural elements are pertinent departments including those responsible for the environment, finance, mining and health. Within those there are various staff, committees and other processes to take into account. On the other hand, focusing on how policy is affected by pressure groups requires scoping out all the relevant advocacy groups and their agendas, understanding what mechanisms are used to keep a coalition between different groups together, and ascertaining how they exert influence.

Tasks for the I2S Development Drive
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Gather together literature and undocumented practical experience providing concepts for scoping, methods for undertaking it and illustrative case examples, relevant to
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the roles of government, business and civil society</li> <li>• key individuals and groups, along with specific sub-processes.</li> </ul> |
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Provide guides to the roles of government, business and civil society that can help teams understand where action is possible. This requires collaboration with political scientists, public policy experts, business analysts and experts in civil society processes.
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## Boundary Setting

Boundary setting narrows the options to those that will be implemented given the available time, money and person power. In combination with scoping, the aim of boundary setting is to guide the integrative applied research team to the areas of action that are most likely to be fruitful in providing integrated research support. In other words, the aim of scoping and boundary setting is to move teams away from 'business as usual' to an analysis of how they can be most effective. This may lead to a change in how research support is provided. To take a hypothetical example, a team may come to realise that their usual course of action in writing letters to the relevant minister is likely to be less effective than working with pressure groups which have access and clout, especially if these are open to research input.

Nevertheless, teams should not discount any special advantages that they have. For example, if a team has spent a long time building a relationship with a particular policy or practice group or if it has a particularly effective communications strategy, these should be taken into consideration in the boundary-setting process.

Tasks for the I2S Development Drive
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Collate published and unpublished concepts and methods for boundary setting, along with case examples that emphasise how and why decisions were made.
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Collate case examples demonstrating how special advantages of teams (such as long-established relationships with particular policy makers) were taken into account.
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## Framing

Framing is relevant to both the problem being tackled and the integrated research findings that are brought to bear. Further, it may be that the *problem* needs to be framed differently when providing integrated research support to policy and practice change than it does for bringing disciplinary experts and stakeholders on board for knowledge synthesis and considering unknowns. The *findings* need to be presented in a way that is both accurate and meaningful for their target audience.

Framing becomes particularly important when there is competition for policy or practice influence. For example, in our research on the feasibility of diamorphine prescription, we used the same framing for all three domains. We referred to our investigation as ‘Feasibility Research into the Controlled Availability of Opioids’. We wanted to signal that we were undertaking a scientific investigation, which was fully and dispassionately considering both sides of the argument, and that the outcome was not predetermined. Once the research was complete, however, and we recommended a pilot study for a trial, we did not think about how we were presenting the trial proposal and were blind-sided by a concerted attack by a powerful media group which reframed the discourse focusing on emotive issues such as ‘surrender in the war on drugs’, ‘government as drug pedlar’ and ‘deserving and undeserving citizens’.<sup>3</sup>

Tasks for the I2S Development Drive
Draw together useful concepts and practical methods for framing, along with case examples of when it has worked well and when it has failed. Framing is relevant to both the problem and the findings of the integrated research.
Collect case examples of competition between framings trying to influence policy or practice change.

3 A three-week intense campaign against a trial of diamorphine prescription ended with the Prime Minister and cabinet withdrawing support. Later, Sydney researcher Simon Chapman invited me to work with him and Glenda Lawrence (then a masters student) on an analysis of newspaper reports (Lawrence et al. 2000). The analysis showed that while the opponents effectively reframed the discourse, supporters stayed with issues such as ‘failure of prohibition’ and ‘time for new approaches’, which had little power in countering the denigration by the opponents. The analysis concluded by stating: ‘The mid-1997 policy reversal on [diamorphine] prescription was due, in part, to the higher activity of opponents following approval of the trial and because proponents did not reframe discourses used to denigrate the proposal’ and ‘[t]o be successful, advocates of new policy need to recognise and reframe negative discourses to create new dominant themes which address the concerns of the public’ (p. 254). It is also worth noting that the media campaign and associated negative framing were unlikely to have been the sole cause of the Federal Government’s reversal.

## Dealing with Values

Values will influence what the integrative applied research team aims for and how. For example, working with advocacy coalitions may be ruled out if the integrative applied research team is not willing to work with some lobby groups, such as the pharmaceutical industry or Greenpeace. Further, some approaches may be excluded if the team insists on being open and transparent rather than working behind closed doors.

A critical issue is that there must be congruence in values across the team's integration and implementation efforts. For example, if the research team aims to be dispassionate and independent, members cannot make secret deals with specific interest groups to provide them with information for their advocacy. That is not to say that researchers cannot be political players, but their actions and values need to be aligned.

### Tasks for the I2S Development Drive

Compile case examples that illustrate different experiences in bringing values into play and their consequences for providing integrated research support for policy and practice change.

Compile case examples examining congruence in values across the three domains, as well as assessing integrity.

Work with applied philosophers and other experts to produce a guide to concepts and methods for understanding and responding to the various dimensions of values.

## Harnessing and Managing Differences

The worlds of researchers and those of policy makers and practitioners are often poles apart, as has regularly been pointed out (including the quotation from Peter Shergold that opens Chapter 17). Successfully negotiating those differences is a critical element of providing integrated research support. As described in Chapter 23, a valuable role for I2S disciplinary specialists is to understand these differences and to help the integrative applied research team effectively work with them. Box 19.2 provides a flavour of some of the differences between researchers and government policy makers.

With increased understanding and hindsight, I have come to appreciate that during our research into the feasibility of diamorphine prescription, I had a lot of access to and interaction with relevant policy makers; however, I dismissed what I saw of the policy making process as unimportant, while waiting for the

'real' process to begin.<sup>4</sup> I now realise that I was waiting for a process where the policy makers mirrored the weighing up of benefits and risks that we researchers were engaged in, and that I had no understanding of other considerations relevant to the policy makers.

### **Box 19.2 Examples of Differences between Researchers and Government Policy Makers**

Much has been written about the differences between research and government policy making.<sup>a</sup> Two of the more detailed and useful examples, by Heyman and by Gregrich, are summarised here.

Heyman<sup>b</sup> provided six examples of mismatches between the common approaches of researchers and of policy makers

1. researchers focus on making one change at a time while holding other variables constant, whereas multiple changes and 'horsetrading' between options are standard in the policy domain
2. researchers favour randomised controlled trials, especially double-blinded experiments, but these are politically difficult because sound bites cannot convince the public that something that may fail should be tried nor that something that might succeed should not be made available to everyone; further, trials usually occur in only one setting, but policy has to be effective in a wide range and, if results are mixed, failures get more attention than successes
3. researchers concentrate on means and other measures of central tendency rather than distributions, whereas for political support, how effects are distributed may be equally or more important
4. researchers eliminate 'outliers', whereas in policy spheres outliers can drive the debate (by capturing media attention and symbolising programs)
5. researchers emphasise targeting specific groups for maximum advantage, while policy makers look for widespread benefits
6. while both researchers and policy makers value long-term effectiveness as the gold standard, the practical reality in the policy sphere is that programs must show effectiveness early on, preferably demonstrable in line with budgetary, electoral or other politically significant cycles.

Gregrich<sup>c</sup> (writing from a policymaker perspective) concentrated on issues researchers need to understand, especially that

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4 For example, in my interactions with a senior public servant in the Australian Capital Territory, I was somewhat irritated by what I saw as gossip about what relevant public servants and politicians in other parts of Australia were likely to think about the proposal to prescribe diamorphine. First, the factual basis for his assessments seemed to be very unscientific and slender, and I could not understand why he did not just ask them. Second, I thought this was unimportant in any case as they would surely be guided by our evidence once it had been gathered.

1. finding relevant studies can be difficult and furthermore the language of research papers is often inaccessible, requiring effort that policy makers simply cannot devote
2. their research may not address the most urgent questions for policy makers
3. findings are often of marginal importance for the overall state of knowledge
4. findings are open to manipulation by advocates of particular positions.

He also urged researchers to

1. avoid self-interested advocacy seeking to influence public policy or allocation of public resources
2. be aware of policy time cycles, including, for example, presenting results at times of greatest receptivity
3. consider policy funding constraints.

a. This information is not, however, gathered together in one place, although some was brought together in Bammer et al. (2010b).

b. Heyman (2000).

c. Gregrich (2003).

As in Chapters 5 and 12, here the critical issue is not only understanding the differences, but also figuring out how to harness those that advance the provision of integrated research support, as well as managing those that impede it. For example, it may be possible to harness some of the mismatches that Heyman identified to get the best of both worlds. If we consider the approaches to outliers and measures of central tendency, for example, researchers and policy makers could work together to provide vignettes for the media describing the typical person or family and how they are affected by a policy, as well as some of the less typical consequences.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, some differences are less amenable to win-win solutions and have to be managed. The conflicts in priorities and time cycles, as identified by Gregrich, are likely to be in this category.

#### **Tasks for the I2S Development Drive**

Gather together concepts and methods for understanding differences, as well as for harnessing and managing them, along with illustrative case examples.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed this seems to be happening in some Australian Government advertising about its policies as well as in media coverage about proposed policy changes.

## Dealing with the Six Categories

The need for iteration and evolution, as well as the inability to use a formulaic way of proceeding, also applies in this domain. In other words, like undertaking the research, providing integrated research support is messy. This is compounded by the unpredictability of success in influencing policy or practice, as well as by the fact that change is ongoing (as described in Chapter 10). No matter how well thought out a support plan is, it may be derailed by circumstances like departmental staff turnover, reshuffling of cabinet positions, governments losing elections, transformations in interest groups as advocates modify positions or coalitions realign, and windows of opportunity opening (or closing).

Nevertheless, the six categories of concepts and methods provide a systematic way for integrative applied research teams to put their aims for the provision of integrated research support into action and to review progress along the way.

<b>Task for the I2S Development Drive</b>
Compile case examples of how iterative processes between these six elements played out.

This text is taken from *Disciplining Interdisciplinarity: Integration and Implementation Sciences for Researching Complex Real-World Problems*, by Gabriele Bammer, published 2013 by ANU E Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.