

Gaining Traction for Psychology in the Public Arena

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In previous columns, I expressed concerns about the relative lack of psychology's presence in the public policy arena, and examined some of the reasons for that absence. Here, I want to begin to sketch a plan for increasing our presence in the worlds of public policy.

One thing is clear: To have an impact on public policy, we need a theory of how public policy is made, one we can scan for entry points for what we know. What I want to do is analyze the possible points of entry for our research findings. (For the sake of this discussion, let us assume that the kind of public policy I'm talking about is the kind that is made by legislative entities, with input from the executive branch of government.)

One quite plausible theory of public policy formation, drawn from the "public choice" perspective in economics, suggests that psychology – as with social science in general – finds remarkably little traction for its potentially useful discoveries in the public policy making process.

The central realization of public choice economists is that when some segment of the electorate elects a person to the state or federal legislature, this does not transform the elected official into a saint or an abnormally self-sacrificing individual. In fact, since politics at this level is now a full-time occupation, it means that politicians must be disproportionately concerned with establishing loyal constituencies and amassing the financial resources to gain reelection. An unfortunate consequence is that they may be less open to objective arguments for policy, particularly if their political survival depends on supporting policies that will earn them reelection.

In a particularly cynical moment, at lunch with two college classmates, I was propounding an extreme form of this view, suggesting that neither rational thinking nor social goals had any traction in the practice of policy formation. Both of them had experience in government, and both indignantly resisted the notion that social science perspectives were functionally excluded from policy formation processes. Thanks to them this column does not end right here! Instead, let me suggest some pragmatic objectives for our field to aspire to in pursuit of the goal of increased impact on public policy.

HAVE SOLUTIONS READY

Occasionally, events mobilize public opinion, or otherwise serve to put a problem on the "urgently needs to be solved" agenda of legislative or executive branch policy makers. When this will happen is unpredictable, and when it happens it is too late to engage in extended research studies to create a scientifically-validated set of ready-to-be-implemented actions. We need to have our validated policy recommendations already clear in our heads, because the legislative or executive response to the problem, driven by its prominence on the agenda of public opinion, is seen as demanding quick solutions.

One of our rare success stories is about police lineups and ways we know to make them less susceptible to false positive eyewitness identifications of not-guilty crime suspects. As Gary Wells has pointed out, receptiveness to the criticism of what were previously standard procedures was created by the invention of DNA testing to identify criminals or clear those falsely accused. A number of pre-DNA prosecutions were found to have convicted innocent people, and in about two-thirds of those cases, eyewitness evidence had been instrumental in the conviction of these innocents. This was a window of opportunity for our message to be heard about the unreliability of standard lineup procedures, and we were ready with experimentally-documented improved procedures to recommend.

CONNECT WITH IDEA BROKERS

As well as having solutions in hand, we need to have already-established connections with those who will be searching for possible solutions when a crisis strikes. Those charged with finding the political solution don't have the luxury of doing a literature search. Instead they will contact experts who they think might have some ideas about solutions.

These "idea brokers" – a label that somewhat under-specifies their real role – traffic in credibility and trust. Those who reach out to them are seeking reliable, workable solutions to problems; by extension, those of us who are in a position to be referred to the solution seekers must also be reliable, both in our information and in our judgement.

It may be that at some time, a drought or some other natural catastrophe will put global warming on the national agenda in a less fitful way than it now is; or some particularly vivid demonstration of the difficulties with K-12 education in America will engage the public. The idea broker needs to be able to identify psychologists who have spent enough time with physical scientists to have some ideas about enlisting people in changes in consumption patterns to deal with global warming. For problems in education, the idea broker needs to hear about what empirically-successful improvements are available for learning as well as the psychologists who know those techniques.

ANTICIPATE THE ARGUMENTS

A further requirement is that idea brokers and policy analysts need to know the sources of likely resistance to proposed changes, and from what directions opposition to the proposed solutions will come, as well as what can be said and done to counter that opposition. For example, we often see that proposals for changing educational practice encounter ideology-driven (rather than science-based) opposition to these changes. Policy makers need to be aware of the likely arguments of those who resist change, and the counter arguments that might overcome that resistance.

We therefore need a presence in Washington of idea brokers who develop this sort of trustworthy, credible and effective reputation with the policy-making community. The idea broker needs to have a mental map of the policy-making community that suggest what nodes of the community are influential on, for instance, education policies. The idea broker also must be prepared with stories of psychological breakthroughs to tell to congressional staffers who are trying to justify the presence of social science in granting agency budget allocations, often in the face of powerful competition for those dollars.

GET A GRIP

Not all of us comprehend the "Washington-present, Washington-trusted, idea broker" function – I have heard that "our successes speak for themselves" and all we need do is occasionally send our more

prominent scientists to Washington to tell the legislative peasantry about our importance. I admire the confidence of those who believe this, but not their grip on reality.

Still, enough of us “get it” so that we are willing and even eager to support people playing this role for psychology. For the years of APS’s existence, Alan Kraut has played this role, often single-handedly, often in tandem with other social scientists. Are we – psychology in general and APS in specific – doing a lot? Yes. Are we doing enough? Probably not. The APS Board of Directors has created a Fund for the Advancement of Psychological Science that would allow us to do more. It is needed.

GO BEYOND CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

So far, what I have suggested is generally understood among psychologists, and has, I suspect, the agreement of many of us. In fact, those reading this column so far will think they are reading nothing new. But let me see if I can get past conventional wisdom.

One way of conceptualizing the task of a basic science community is to look ahead to where policy issues will arise in the future, rather than react to issues that are thrown up by the events of the moment. For the events of the moment, such as the eyewitness example above, we better have our recommendations already in hand, because the “solutions” are going to be applied fast. For the issues that will arise in the future, we have the time to do the basic research that is needed to discover solutions and the applied research that will validate the specific programs that we would recommend.

What are the large shifts in the human and physical world that have a high probability of reaching the public policy agenda? There are several ways of answering this question: One (and I will suggest more in my next column) is to look at the constant, plate-tectonic grinding of the responsibilities that any society assigns to the classic three ensembles of organizations: the market sector, the state, and what is sometimes called the third ensemble of civic organizations (such as churches, affinity groups, clubs, societies and the other organizations that Putnam has recently redirected our attention to in his writings on the mediating and trust and talent building role of these organizations of “civil society.”)¹ Currently, the market sector is in the ascendancy in our society. “Privatization,” a current fad, is the call to place various services previously provided by the state under the control of the private sector for reasons of “efficiency.” A certain skepticism is appropriate here: when will privatization be effective and when not? We can help answer that and other public policy questions raised by trends in the market sector.

SHOW SECOND-ORDER CONSEQUENCES

The idea of taking the longer view brings up another dimension of social policy in which psychologists should play a central role. I have become convinced that one of the most useful functions of psychologists functioning in the public policy arena is to supply complex thinking about the effects of proposed innovations that are being touted as “perfect solutions” to social problems.

As social scientists, and ones particularly concerned with individual motivations, we are aware of the possibilities of “unintended consequences” – those second-order effects that may make apparently sensible first-order changes not only fail to improve the situation but possibly even undermine and destroy the social fabric of the organization in which the changes are prescribed and carried out.²

Legislators are under tremendous pressure to apply these first-order fixes in response to the public’s demand for quick or dramatic responses. Think back on what is now generally conceded to be the

disastrous effects of the Rockefeller-era laws mandating huge jail sentences for any convicted of a wide variety of drug-related crimes. We need to bring our perspective to bear on the legislative process to show what second-order consequences might be.

¹ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Renewal of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 2000.

² Elliott D. Sclar examines this problem in his book entitled *You Don't Always Get What You Pay For*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 2000.