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The Voice of Experience: How Social Scientists Communicate Family Research to Policymakers

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Abstract

Because scientific understanding of communicating family research to policymakers is incomplete, qualitative interviews were conducted with social scientists experienced in bridging the gulf between research and family policy. In keeping with the tenets of two communities and community dissonance theories, the underutilization of research in policymaking was attributed, in part, to misperceptions and miscommunication between researchers and policymakers who operate in different cultures. Social scientists identified cultural barriers they encountered and rewards they experienced when communicating research to policymakers. Ten recommendations detail pragmatic strategies for communicating across conflicting cultures to promote greater use of research in family policy decisions. The findings suggest a paradigm shift away from simply disseminating research to policymakers and toward developing collaborative relationships with them.

Keywords

family policy; policymaking; evidence-based policy; vulnerable families

Researchers lament that the knowledge they produce, no matter how good, does not find its way to policymakers (Rist, 1998), who can bring it to bear on family policy decisions. Policymakers report being unfamiliar with how children and families are faring in their districts and uninformed about what policies and programs work (State Legislative Leaders Foundation, 1995). Policymakers find it particularly difficult to access research on vulnerable children and families, who are the very ones most likely to come to their attention (e.g., developmentally-delayed children and disadvantaged families; Scott, Mason, & Chapman, 1999). Why are there so few examples of research being used in family policymaking when policymakers desire good information, and researchers are anxious to see their studies put to practical use?

This conundrum exists for several reasons. First, family science is a relatively new field and has not yet addressed some of the questions relevant to policymakers (Small, 2005). Second, policy questions can be complex and sometimes difficult to address given limitations of the measures and methods available to family scientists (Shonkoff, 2000; Small). Third, our knowledge of strategies for translating research for political consumption is conspicuously

incomplete; few such studies exist and most are dated (Huston, 2008; Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007). In this study, we interviewed social scientists who have developed the dual capacity to generate high-quality family research and disseminate it to policymakers so what these researchers have learned, often through trial and error, can be synthesized and put into more widespread use.

Granted, experts have been trying to figure out how to bring research to bear on policymaking for well over a hundred years (Smith, 1991). Yet, this issue may be particularly relevant now for scientific, political, and institutional reasons. Beginning with the scientific reasons, connecting research and policymaking is a two-pronged process: encouraging policymakers to become more research-minded and encouraging researchers to become more policy-minded. Most previous research has focused on the policymaker; that is, how to infuse research into policymaking in ways that will entice policymakers to utilize research to guide their policy decisions (Phillips, 2003; Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1980). An equally important consideration, which has attracted far less scholarly attention, is how to motivate researchers to enter the policy arena and what strategies are needed to communicate with policymakers about family research.

Politically, communicating with policymakers may be more important in the aftermath of landmark devolution legislation, which in the 1990s transferred federal responsibility to the states on a range of family issues, including children's health insurance and welfare reform (Kamerman, 1996). The 50 states, in turn, often have devolved decision making authority to the 3,141 counties and countless local municipalities across the country. These policymakers often do not have the staff or time to gather all the relevant data on the complex issues they confront.

From an institutional standpoint, universities have been forced to respond to public frustration that they are out of touch, out of date, and divorced from society's most pressing problems. A Kellogg Commission Report (1999) acknowledged that not all of this criticism is justified, yet urged universities to move beyond conventional outreach toward a more active, reciprocal engagement with community partners. Instead of a top-down transfer of knowledge, a two-way exchange of information is needed that encourages joint definitions of problems, solutions, and indicators of success. In this article, we review the evidence regarding how research has influenced policy, and then we turn to the empirical and theoretical guidance available for bridging the gap between the communities of research and policy.

Empirical Evidence Regarding the Potential of Research to Influence Policymaking

Scholars disagree about the extent to which science is used in policymaking (Bogenschneider, 2000). Chelmsky (1995) identified several areas in which research can and has been used for policy purposes: program and policy development, monitoring, and evaluation. For the purposes of family policy development, Senator John D. Rockefeller, IV (1998), credited the base of knowledge developed and synthesized by the National Commission on Children with providing the momentum for the 1993 expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, the 1996 strengthening of child support enforcement, and the 1997 partially refundable child tax credit.

For purposes of family policy monitoring, studies that revealed half of unmarried mothers were living with the fathers of their children at the time of birth were influential in transforming the terms of policy debate from *single parents* to *fragile families* (McLanahan, Garfinkel, & Mincy, 2001). For purposes of family program evaluation, nurse home visiting

has proven effective in improving children's school success, lowering child mortality from preventable causes, reducing mothers' welfare and food stamp use (Olds et al., 2007), and reducing subsequent births; this program has been replicated in over half the states in the country due, in part, to the quality of the program's evaluation along with its data on cost effectiveness.

These examples illustrate the influence of a single program of research, yet the most potent policy impacts often derive from the replication of findings that gradually become so well accepted that they are considered to be common sense. For example, the Head Start program was spurred by decades of research confirming the importance of the early years (Zigler, 1998). In fairness, scholars warn against over promising how much research can deliver as the basis for social action, yet ignoring its potential on some policies at certain times seems shortsighted.

Theoretical and Empirical Guidance Regarding the Utilization of Research in Policymaking

Family scientists have theorized about the gap between research and practice, which in policy circles has been conceptualized using the two communities theory (Small, 2005). The two communities theory attributes the underutilization of research to a communication gap between researchers and policymakers, who are portrayed as having goals, information needs, values, and language so different that they are best thought of as a cultural divide (Caplan, 1979). In his examination of researchers and practitioners, Small attributed this cultural divide to professional socialization that dictates what ends social scientists seek, who they respond to, how they work to achieve those ends, and what behaviors are considered appropriate. However, it has been suggested that these differences stem, not only from professional culture, but also from the culture of the institutions in which professionals operate (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2008). Institutional culture consists of the values, norms, rules, and operating procedures that define how an institution functions and makes decisions. For example, institutions such as a legislature, lab, or family service agency each have different work environments, ways of knowing, and reward structures as detailed in Myers-Walls's (2000) analysis of evaluators and program staff. Caplan introduced the two communities of researchers and policymakers, which Shonkoff (2000) expanded to also include practitioners who deliver services to children and families.

In a recent extension of these earlier models, community dissonance theory conceptualizes the communication gap between knowledge producers and consumers as multidimensional in nature, encompassing a set of professional and institutional cultures that shape how professionals think, act, and perceive the world (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2008). The cultural baggage each community carries makes communication difficult because they fail to realize how substantial the differences are across several dimensions: interactional preferences (preferred presentation and communication styles), targets of interest (salient constituents and stakeholders), cognitive frameworks (epistemological issues and decision making criterion), contextual preferences (time frames and comfort zones), focal interests (salient domains and questions), and feedback loops (organization rewards and concepts of success).

Based on two communities theory, this study aimed to identify what the cultural divides are between researchers and policymakers, and how social scientists have bridged these differences by careful attention to several pragmatic practices for increasing research use in policymaking. Because this is the first known study to apply two communities theory to family policy, it is framed using the family lens of structural family systems theory. Minuchin (1974) theorized that families serve two ends—nurturing and protecting their

members, and also adapting to changes in the cultural, economic, and social contexts in which families operate. The more societies change, the more significant families become for socializing and supporting their members. Because structural family systems theory demands exploration of how contextual changes affect families, it historically has provided the theoretical roots for family impact analysis. In this study, it served as the theoretical impetus for and guide to analyzing the data from a family perspective.

Empirical evidence, albeit limited, supports two communities theory. The most frequent constraint of research use is lack of communication between knowledge producers and consumers, mentioned by 80% of federal agency staffers, proposal reviewers, and researchers (Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1980). Policymakers agreed that face-to-face communication is the most important way to bring ideas to their attention (Mellman & Munger, 2003; Nutley et al., 2007; Walter, Nutley, & Davies, 2005). Several barriers to such communication have been identified: approach, criteria for decision making, kind and source of information, level of detail, rules of evidence, timing, views of complexity, and writing preferences (Bogenschneider, 2006; Shonkoff, 2000).

In the last quarter century, guidance has emerged for working with policymakers. For example, social scientists have focused on the research process itself, detailing how to collect, conceptualize, and analyze data in ways that will have more utility for policymakers. Scholars have described how useful theory can be to policymakers (Bogenschneider & Gross, 2004) and compared alternative approaches that focus, not only on *what* to do in the policy arena, but also on *how* to do it (Bogenschneider, 2006). To help policymakers grasp the pragmatic importance of significant findings, McCartney and Rosenthal (2000) explained how to compute effect sizes, conduct meta-analyses, and estimate a policy's costs and benefits. Scholars have explained how qualitative research can provide data pertinent to policymakers (Rist, 1998), and how quantitative epidemiological methods can produce policy-relevant data such as the prevalence of a problem, its risk to a population, and the cost savings of competing policy responses (Scott et al., 1999).

Attracting less scholarly attention, but no less important, are which barriers researchers encounter when getting involved in the family policy arena, what rewards they experience, and why they are successful. The current study addresses these gaps in existing knowledge.

Method

The sample derived from speakers at Family Impact Seminars—presentations, discussion sessions, and briefing reports that provide high-quality research to state policymakers (i.e., legislators, legislative aides, governor's office staff, legislative service agency staff, and agency representatives), and family professionals. The seminars aim to (a) build greater respect for and use of research in state policy decisions, and (b) encourage policymakers to examine the family impact of policies and programs. Between 1993 and 2002, 17 Family Impact Seminars were held in Wisconsin for 1,214 participants on topics selected by state legislators including child support; early childhood care and education; helping poor kids succeed; long term care; moving families out of poverty; parenting; prescription drugs; and welfare reform. Each seminar featured a panel of three or four researchers, policy analysts, and program directors followed by three discussion sessions for any participant, legislators, and state agency officials. In evaluations, policymakers reported the seminars increased their knowledge of research on family issues in ways that were useful in their jobs, shaped the development and enactment of policies, and changed their attitudes about the value of research and having a family perspective in policymaking (Bogenschneider, 2006).

The sample was drawn from the 49 researchers and policy analysts (not program directors) who presented at a Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar on 17 topics over a 9-year period. To be a seminar speaker, the researchers had to pass a professional screen of the quality of their research. To be included in the sample, the researchers also had to pass a policymaker screen of the effectiveness of their seminar presentation. The seminar speakers were chosen by 17 different planning committees composed of experts on the seminar topic including researchers, executive agency officials, and nonpartisan legislative service agency staff. Committee members selected speakers based on five criteria: (a) scholarly or practice-based reputation, as evidenced by awards, presentations at professional meetings, or recommendations from experts in the field; (b) a record of high-quality research as indicated by publication in prestigious, peer-reviewed journals; (c) a reputation of nonpartisanship; (d) experience presenting research to policymakers or the ability to draw pragmatic policy implications for lay audiences; and (e) the communication skills to present research in an engaging, understandable style (see Bogenschneider, 2006). Speakers were sought outside Wisconsin; the availability of grant funds allowed bringing in leading experts from across the country (see the sample's extensive family policy credentials in the Appendix).

The sample of 18 critical cases was chosen based on end-of-session evaluations collected to evaluate each seminar (average attendance = 68). The evaluations did not include an assessment of each speaker; however, when participants were asked what they liked best about the seminar, they often mentioned a speaker. The sample included the most highly evaluated speaker from each seminar so that it would represent a cross section of family policies. One speaker was selected from every seminar, except one (that included only one researcher who was not well-received); for two seminars, two speakers were selected because they were both well-received. The study's subjects received more positive mentions than any other speaker in their respective seminars with three exceptions—two program directors, who were ineligible for the study, and one speaker, who was a non-respondent and thus could not influence the results. Every subject received positive comments on this open-ended question by no less than 5% and up to 41% of the participants; overall, 70% of the sample received positive comments from 10% or more of participants, and 57% received comments from 20% or more.

We completed interviews of 14 researchers (response rate = 78%) spanning such fields as developmental psychology, economics, family studies, health care, and sociology from institutions including Harvard University, the Oregon Social Learning Center, University of Pennsylvania, and Urban Institute. The respondents (11 men and 3 women) were employed by universities ($n = 12$), and research organizations ($n = 2$). They had 274 years of combined experience working with policymakers, with an average of 20 years and a range of 5–30 years.

Researchers' contact with policymakers consisted primarily of four activities: (a) presenting or testifying before Congress, legislatures, and committees ($n = 14$); (b) responding to individual questions from policymakers and their staff via phone and e-mail ($n = 8$); (c) serving on committees, advisory panels, and task forces ($n = 7$); and (d) writing briefs, memoranda, and contract research reports ($n = 6$). All had experience disseminating research to policymakers at the state level, almost all (13) at the federal level, and six at the international level.

Procedures and Analysis

Because we were unaware of other protocols, two communities theory was used to develop the following open-ended questions: (a) the nature of the initial contacts and how they changed overtime, (b) barriers researchers encountered, (c) ways that policy work was and was not rewarding, (d) stereotypes of policymakers and changes over time, (e) differences

between the policy and research communities, (f) changes in research mission over time, (g) attitudes and beliefs necessary for policymaker-researcher collaboration, (h) and recommendations for working with policymakers. Questions were also asked about the nature of their policy contacts, where they occurred, and their most memorable experience. To schedule interviews, subjects were contacted via letter followed by e-mail. The first author conducted 14 interviews—six in person and eight by phone; all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Finally, this study received IRB approval.

Following Miles and Huberman (1994), a codebook was created to standardize the coding process, which included a priori codes that drew from previous theory and research (e.g., barriers, rewards, and recommendations) and inductive codes not initially anticipated (e.g., specific barriers and recommendations, and subpoints such as brevity in communication). Data were analyzed line by line using an iterative process with the researchers shuttling back and forth between separate pieces of data, emerging themes, and subpoints. To derive meaning from the data, we (a) clustered the themes into categories (e.g., specific barriers and recommendations), (b) counted the number of times these categories appeared, (c) searched for disconfirming evidence, and (d) drew contrasts where they existed (e.g., contacting policymakers or policy intermediaries). To confirm the validity of the analysis, we (a) reported the findings in the researchers' own voice as much as possible, (b) used theoretical triangulation to corroborate the results with two communities and structural family systems theories, and (c) relied on inter-coder confirmation. That is, the first author took the initial pass through the data and coded all interviews. The second author verified these themes and identified new ones; any new themes were subsequently verified by the first author. This process was repeated several times until we were confident that the analysis fairly and fully represented the data.

Findings

The researchers described their efforts to engage policymakers, identifying barriers they encountered, and rewards they experienced. Overall, one of the most striking findings, mentioned by the majority of researchers ($n = 11$), was that their initial contacts brought into sharp relief cultural differences that they were previously unaware of. Even among academics highly motivated to contribute to the policy process, one researcher observed that their professional culture made them ineffective. For example, based on his first experience testifying on the Family Support Act in the late 1980s, one researcher was surprised at how little he knew about the policymakers' world: "I think my first impression was that I could never talk to those people because their world was so different than mine, and I didn't want to think the way that they had to think." These cultural misunderstandings cut both ways. Policymakers also were uninformed about the research culture: "...policymakers were somewhat unrealistic about what you could and couldn't get out of research." This clash of cultures proved difficult, but not impossible, to overcome. When researchers were able to surmount these cultural barriers, their efforts paid off because of the rewards of communicating and collaborating with policymakers.

The Rewards of Communicating and Collaborating With Policymakers

Researchers reported three main rewards of their policy work: making the world a better place, seeing research applied in the real world, and feeling respected for their expertise.

Making the world a better place—Most ($n = 11$) researchers agreed that one primary motivation for policy work is the earnest desire to make the world a better place; of these, over half mentioned improving outcomes for children or families. Some researchers noted specific family policy goals such as better treatment for kids with serious problems, whereas others spoke more globally about benefits for families. One researcher, partially responsible

for a state law that used tobacco settlement money to make home visiting available to all low-income women, said: “[my] goal is not just to do science but to make a difference for families and children. Science is a means, not an end.” Another concurred: “It’s a way to do potentially good for many, many families, as opposed to helping individual families.” Three researchers were motivated by pragmatism, noting that policymakers control the “purse strings.” One 20-year veteran said:

I don’t have a lot of interest in doing research for research’s sake. I do what I do because I’m hoping that the knowledge we gain will make the world a better place for kids, [and] for families, and if I don’t work with policymakers, I stand very little chance of having my work make any difference.

The excitement of seeing their research applied in the real world—The motivation of the majority of researchers ($n = 10$) was exemplified in the comment: “I do it because I want policy to be better.” In several instances, these researchers were able to affect the enactment or implementation of a policy. “Policymakers are looking for good evidence,” according to one researcher with 28 years of experience. “When we can deliver good evidence, there is greater receptivity there than I originally expected.” However, even when a policy failed to pass, researchers explained that providing information to the media through public forums, talk shows, and public radio is a way of shaping public conversation and dialogue on high-profile issues. These researchers acknowledged that impact on policymaking is difficult to measure, but they take pride in having “a hand” in the political process with several characterizing it as “invigorating,” “stimulating,” and “gratifying.” One researcher, who worked to change the official U.S. poverty measure said: “Academics get so excited when something is statistically significant, when substantively it means very little. It’s stimulating to bring it to the real world.”

Being respected for the expertise they bring to the policy arena—Another reward, mentioned by half ($n = 7$) of the researchers, was feeling flattered that the value of their work was recognized by the policy community. “People outside the university often respect our expertise more than people inside the university. They see us as experts and communicate that respect. That’s very rewarding.” One researcher explained that it gives “a sense of satisfaction of being asked to give your opinion. It’s an ego thing, and my ego won’t let me pass up that opportunity.”

Advice for Overcoming the Barriers of Communicating Family Research to Policymakers

To communicate research to policymakers, the researchers discussed barriers they encountered and advice for overcoming them. Their 10 recommendations are summarized below.

1. Conceptualize policy work, not as disseminating information, but as developing relationships—Looking back over a decade of policy experience, one researcher claimed that the change in his thinking could be likened to a paradigm shift. He no longer thinks about disseminating information *to* policymakers, but instead focuses on developing relationships *with* them. If researchers are ever to become bi-culturally competent, they need to begin by building relationships with policymakers. When a relationship exists, a mutual sharing of knowledge naturally occurs, and the better the relationship, the more relevant the flow of information.

Through these relationships, researchers gained a richer, more nuanced understanding of the types of decisions policymakers have to make, the complexity of their role, and what researchers can contribute to the policy process. One respondent had “gotten better at understanding where they are coming from and how they like to get information.” These

long-term working relationships with policymakers were characterized by increased mutual understanding, which one researcher likened to a “partnership” that developed over time. As these relationships evolved, a fellow at a nonpartisan policy firm came to perceive them as:

... much more of a comfortable give-and-take. There is an assumption that we look at common problems, but from a very different perspective, and the challenge for both of us is to find the middle ground where we are mutually supportive of the other’s agenda. Because of the rapport he has established, one researcher with experience in 14 countries relayed that policymakers “come to [him] earlier in the process to help develop policy approaches” so he “can have input early on rather than the forest fires that you hit at the end.”

2. Take the initiative to contact policymakers or policy intermediaries—One surprising finding of the study is that even these exemplar policy communicators did not proactively seek out policy work. In fact, in only one instance was this contact self-initiated with a researcher contacting a policymaker. Six researchers explained that their first contacts occurred as the result of a request from an interest group or professional organization. Four researchers reported that their initial contact was part of their job; of these, three had previously worked in state government. Three researchers made initial contact as part of their undergraduate or graduate studies through involvement in a student organization, undergraduate job, or the encouragement of an advisor to present dissertation findings to policymakers.

Researchers identified two different avenues for contacting policymakers. First, researchers suggested making direct contact with policymakers by attending conferences that are situated between the two worlds (i.e., research conferences that are policy-oriented, and policy conferences that are research-oriented). These conferences can open the door to developing relationships. Policymakers and policy intermediaries can also be invited to the university as resources (e.g., to give guest lectures or join discussions) or as learners (e.g., to attend seminars).

Two scholars mentioned a second approach that arose from their frustration when their initial policy attempts failed—papers were ignored, presentations missed the mark, and press conferences were poorly attended. They suggested working through policy intermediaries who have developed the necessary relationships and the prerequisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes: “You either have to take it to the next steps yourself or make sure that the work gets into the hands of the brokering organization, like the Family Impact Seminars, who force that marriage.”

3. Learn about the target policymaking audience—Researchers’ first impressions were often that policymakers had “short attention spans,” “were driven by money,” and were “looking for easy solutions to complex problems, unwilling to take risks, and arrogant.” These perceptions can be barriers to communication because they shape the quality and character of relationships. Prolonged contact with policymakers helped dispel these stereotypes and, importantly, none of the researchers reported that their negative stereotypes were confirmed. Specifically, researchers’ expectations changed about what policymakers were like and which skills they needed to succeed. One researcher’s stereotypes changed when she was able to “put a human face” on policymakers:

... hanging out with policymakers helps you realize how smart they are. Everybody likes to bash them, and how the media covers them sets that dynamic up. But if you talk to them about their concerns, your view changes.

One former president of a national political science association, who worked for 20 years in the areas of child care and teenage pregnancy, said she had “come to appreciate even people who seem radical in their views. If you get to know them, they don’t seem quite as extreme. There’s some rationale underneath it.” In general, the more contact researchers had with policymakers, the more they came to view them as “caring,” “committed,” “idealistic,” “intelligent,” and “rational.”

Because policymakers are not a homogeneous group, six researchers recommended doing some homework rather than making a “cold” contact. One 25-year veteran tries to figure out the knowledge level of the policymaker he will be dealing with: “Is this their area of expertise or are they just trying to get up to speed?” Another seeks out information on their organizational level because the higher policymakers are on the “pecking order,” the shorter your response has to be.

Two researchers provided compelling accounts of how not having insider information can render research useless to the policy process. For example, when asked to provide cost estimates of guaranteed child support, one researcher focused on why it would be good to start small because large effects had a very high cost. Unbeknown to the researcher, the request emanated from a person running for governor, who wanted to show a big effect regardless of the cost. The gubernatorial candidate decided not to make child support a main part of his campaign. The researcher still wonders what might have happened if he had framed his reply differently. He had the analytic tools to answer the policymaker’s question if he had taken the time to get more background on who was asking, what they needed to know, and for what purpose.

4. Communicate research findings in ways that meet policymakers’

information needs—Another barrier is that researchers and policymakers speak different languages. Seven researchers acknowledged language as a problem and voiced frustration about policymakers’ lack of understanding of scientific methods and the evidence it generates. Communicating effectively with policymakers requires becoming bilingual. To be effective, half of the researchers recommended being brief and delivering information “in a quick and concise way that passes the ‘so what’ test.” Ten researchers advised simplifying the message and focusing only on what is relevant: “Cut to the chase quickly” and “Distill the message without overwhelming policymakers with too much detail. You need to be able to boil down a 20-page paper into two pages or three minutes on the phone.” One researcher, who has testified before Congress 16 times, recommended that analysis be processed to the point that “the first thing out of your mouth is what we know and what it means to them.”

The researchers have also adapted by avoiding jargon and complex methodology. Yet one Extension Specialist expressed some discomfort in doing so, noting the tension between being respected by one’s academic peers and simultaneously useful to those engaged in the policy process. He deliberately strategizes about “what language can I use to flag for my academic peers that I do understand the differences, but that I’m glossing over them for the moment to give a useful response.”

Researchers mentioned several challenges in communicating with policymakers such as finding ways to package the information and explaining complex statistics. One researcher, who developed a formula used to distribute revenue to local governments in South Africa, said the more experienced he becomes, the more time he spends thinking about how to package the information. One researcher gave an example of how he was able to generate enthusiasm on a pre-marital education bill by getting policymakers to talk about their own preparation for marriage.

Researchers also need to emphasize the rigor of their research and how much confidence policymakers can have in their findings, but using statistics that are easy to understand. A common mistake, according to a fellow at a nonpartisan research firm, is putting research out in a format that is “delightful to academics, but dreadful for policymakers.” A recipient of the American Psychological Association’s award for Distinguished Contributions to Psychology in the Public Interest has developed a simple formula for writing for policymakers. He aims for policy briefs short enough to be posted with a refrigerator magnet. The ideal is one page with a picture on a single topic with (a) a question (e.g., which is better, x or y) in a 20 point headline (b) a figure (no decimal points), and (c) a paragraph that answers the question.

5. Use clear, careful language when dealing with myths about vulnerable populations—Because myths are treated as fact in policy debate, one researcher found policy work frustrating because of the stereotypes he often encountered about vulnerable populations. When testifying on welfare reform, the committee was “very polite, but it was so clear to me that their view of people on welfare was that there was something wrong with them,” and the problem was giving them a “free ride.” Similarly, a book that he co-authored was sometimes misused to stereotype single parents as being “bad for the country,” when his intent was to “point out the difficulties of single parents and how we need to help them.” Yet despite some mischaracterizations, he said the book was used as evidence in the debate of welfare reform and had “enormous” impact, in part, because the writing was clear and the statistical analyses were communicated clearly.

Researchers also offered advice on dispelling myths that policymakers may hold. One recommended being “willing to talk in a straightforward way about very complicated issues ... that you usually wouldn’t have to explain to other researchers.” According to a researcher from a nonpartisan policy research firm: “I don’t dwell on ambiguity, but I don’t fudge the ambiguity ... I try not to present things in an ideological good-guy, bad-guy kind of framework because a lot of what they think they know is wrong.” This is particularly important in overcoming myths that policymakers hold about vulnerable children and families. One researcher who has analyzed family policy in four countries advised choosing language carefully after policymakers pointed out his use of terms like *illegitimate births* inadvertently may have fed into negative stereotypes about children born to single parents. Another researcher felt her research was dismissed, not because of its quality, but because policymakers did not view youth in her state as similar to youth in their state—a misperception that she could have addressed if she had anticipated it.

6. Familiarize yourself with the policymaking process—Unfamiliarity with the context in which policy is enacted was a barrier mentioned by four researchers. For example, researchers set themselves up for disappointment when they naively believe that the world should operate according to what academics think is important and that policy should be influenced largely by empirical evidence. According to a president of a national family association:

... a democracy has to work with the political process and that process is about influence, relationships, money... often about money, and that’s the nature of the beast, and it’s important for me to not think that I’m above this process, but to understand that those are the constraints within which I have to operate.

Over time, he came to see policymakers and the policymaking process in more complex ways:

I have more of an appreciation of the contributions some of these folks make. They don’t make a lot of money, they get a lot of grief, they get called at home, [they]

have a few areas in which they want to make a difference, on which they have to work year after year, before they make a difference.

However, as perceptions changed, relationships with policymakers improved. Several researchers came to deeply respect policymakers and were “able to establish a common mission in many respects” with them.

The burden falls on the researcher to figure out how to negotiate the political culture. One researcher who began working with policymakers later in his career recommended approaching policymaking as an anthropologist. “Work on understanding the policymaking process, become fascinated by it, become a student of it, learn from these folks. Many will be happy to teach you.” One scholar, who worked on the 1997/98 federal balanced budget bill, observed one important way that the institutional cultures differ. Researchers have the luxury of focusing on “small, very well-defined issues that they can reasonably well address with the data they have available. Policymakers, by contrast, have to focus on larger questions that tend to be not nearly as well defined.” Policymakers often have an area of specialization, but they “have to vote on a large number of issues, so they tend to be broad, but not very deep on most issues.”

Learning about the policymaking cycle helped researchers understand the value of getting information to policymakers “just in time” for decisions, and the importance of budgetary and political constraints. When working on premarital education legislation, one family researcher thought that policymakers should know the bill would prevent divorce later on and eventually reduce costs for child support; nevertheless, he astutely designed the bill to be cost neutral.

7. Provide a timely response to the questions driving the policy debate—One barrier of bringing research to policymakers, mentioned by eight researchers, is that policymakers and researchers operate within different time frames. Researchers approach their work from a long-term perspective, whereas policymakers have to react to issues that often arise with little warning. Researchers can work on a small project over a long period of time, chipping away at one question and making slow, but steady progress. Conversely, policymakers deal with a myriad of issues and often are called upon to respond to the crisis of the moment in a context in which the outcomes are not guaranteed and the prospects for resolution are uncertain at best.

Given these differences, it should be no surprise that researchers complain when policymakers call for information they need in a day or two. One researcher, whose policy work over a 15-year time span helped put affordable drug therapy on the political agenda, likened these urgent requests to being an emergency room physician, “When the crisis happens, you have to be willing to drop everything else in your life and work on it if you want to have impact.” Family issues are particularly difficult for policymakers to deal with, according to one family researcher, because it often takes a long time before you see a benefit to the bottom line.

The biggest mistake researchers make is not addressing the questions policymakers face ($n = 9$). A former president of a national policy association explained that no matter how good the research techniques and technology, “If you get the question wrong, the research is useless.” A 25-year veteran concurred: “You have to think of what legislators are interested in and need, rather than what you’re interested in and need ... it’s about helping them and not you.”

One researcher explained that policy-relevant research begins by tailoring the research questions to the policy audience: “Right from the beginning of designing a study, I’m

thinking about how this can be used and how it might influence [policy] when it's done." Another researcher, whose program is being implemented in 5 countries and 359 counties in 26 states, intentionally considers how policy relevant his outcomes are; he has learned over time that behaviors or conditions are more policy relevant than scores on a paper and pencil test.

To "stay up on the politics," six researchers emphasized soliciting feedback ahead of time on what is policy-relevant from policy analysts and staff who track issues. They can provide the political context for your research and identify policymakers who specialize in and provide leadership on the issue. One researcher's way of selecting policy-relevant questions is to:

... listen to [the policymaker's] perspective ... ask them to try to project what are the big questions coming at them. Some issues will be highly politicized, and then the researcher has to think about whether they want to take that on, and some will not yet be politicized and then there is substantial opportunity for policymakers to listen to new ideas.

One researcher made time in her schedule when a Governor asked for advice; by a timely meeting with him and his cabinet, she was able to shift thinking on the value of family support. Others devised ways to deal with urgent requests without overtaxing busy schedules: "I learned to identify major issues in the policy world, economic trends, etc. I track those trend lines and catalogue them. When I get one of those forest-fire emergency calls from the policymaker, I have most of the research already organized, ready to answer the question. If I had to do all the work when I got the call, I'd never make it ... I'm usually ahead of the game on most of the issues. I have research done when most other people are just beginning to think about it."

8. Learn how to approach policy work as an educator rather than an advocate

—Six researchers said an important key to success is approaching policy work as an educator who presents policy alternatives rather than an advocate who lobbies for a single policy option. Three reasons emerged. First, a 25-year veteran explained how this factual, scientific approach can be a unique niche in policy settings: "The trade organizations are glad to send their people in, but they all come with a direction." Second, a family researcher explained that advocates may be limited in what policymakers and which political parties they can work with: "... they write good opeds, they'll never be invited to testify because one-half of the committee will love them and the other half will hate them." Another researcher, who was tapped by his Governor to improve child care quality in his state, concurred:

To be able to communicate through your interactions that you do not pretend to be a policymaker, that you're not telling them what to think or what policies to promote, but rather are a scientific staff person ... that means a willingness to be as useful for all political parties.

Finally, this same researcher explained that adopting the expert-based attitude of advocacy may be inappropriate in societies built upon the principle of democratic decision making: "... if you believe in democracy, you have to allow the majority to make up their own minds."

In keeping with the educational approach, two researchers recommended speaking in terms that are value-neutral. One researcher active in welfare reform evaluation explained that her personal values may be at odds with the policy issue on the table, but that is irrelevant: "One has to accept that values are values, we all have them. But as a researcher my values have no place in my research, but policymakers' values count and their constituents' values count."

Another researcher agreed that he would never initiate contact with a policymaker as an advocate, even when he had strong views that were data driven.

9. Show respect for policymakers' knowledge and experience—What became clear from these exemplar policy communicators is that working with policymakers takes more than the knowledge they had attained and the skills they had acquired. Success requires a sense of humility regarding what research can bring to the political fray and respect for the important role policymakers play. According to a family researcher: "It takes an appropriate degree of humility, bringing a sense that policymakers have wisdom, knowledge, and experience to bring to the table, and that is no less than [the researcher's] knowledge and experience." A researcher, now serving as a dean, advised showing respect for policymakers by checking "... your ego at the door. You can't feel that your opinion is more valuable and more important than all the other opinions." Finally, a researcher who served on a National Academy of Science panel cautioned that attitudes that are apropos in the research culture may be inappropriate in the policy culture: "If you play the same games that you play with your academic colleagues, you're going to turn off the policy folks. And when I say games I mean by trying to one-up people with the sophistication of your technique ... do any of that crap and you're dead."

10. Be patient and self rewarding in defining success—Barriers to research utilization emerged from both the academy and the policy arenas. According to seven researchers from land-grant universities that are expected to translate research for public consumption, policy work is time-consuming and too often considered "an extracurricular activity." One 27-year veteran said:

If you are an academic, there are no rewards for policy work ... public service is simply not given any respect ... it doesn't matter how important the issue is—whether you created peace in the Middle East—it's not going to mean anything to your academic colleagues.

University administrators put up barriers due to concerns that research findings could reflect adversely on the university. A researcher described his frustration with a Chancellor who wanted his comments in advance, not to censor them, but to guard against being caught in a situation where the administration might be contradicted or the university embarrassed.

Another institutional barrier noted by one researcher is professional socialization into the culture of academia. Many scholars enter the field of family science because they want to make a difference in the lives of families. However, over time that ambition takes a backseat to the immediate pressures of earning a PhD, landing a job, getting tenure, and earning merit raises.

Barriers also emerged from the institutional culture of lawmaking bodies. One frequent frustration expressed by 10 researchers is not knowing whether your efforts will pay off. One researcher explained that the research process is "grindingly slow," but it does culminate in the accumulation of a body of knowledge, whereas in the policy process the time invested does not necessarily lead to results. He likened policy work to a "crapshoot." "Doing research is like putting money in the bank at 4% interest. It isn't much, but in the policy arena, there is no guaranteed payoff. You can lose everything." No matter how promising or effective a policy might be, a random political event can stall progress or even shift a policy in the opposite direction. One researcher cited his work on the failed Clinton health care reform. Another recalled working on a marital education bill when the "Chair of the House ... literally gave [the bill] a thumb down like in a Roman Circus, and that was a year's worth of work."

Given this unpredictability, five researchers described some of their policy experiences as frustrating. One 20-year veteran said early on that he was frustrated when he would talk to policymakers and they would end up doing whatever they wanted to do anyway. He learned how seldom you can claim that a particular testimony led to legislation, but over time he came to realize that repeating the same thing eventually began to have an impact. One researcher explained that it took 15 years for affordability in drug therapy to become part of the policy agenda. These researchers cautioned that policy work can be “hard” and a “marathon race,” but “if you stick with it, you will eventually see results.”

Discussion

Drawing upon the voices of experienced social scientists, this study corroborates the basic tenets of two communities and community dissonance theories—that underutilization of research in policymaking is due to misperceptions and miscommunications between researchers and policymakers who operate in different professional and institutional cultures. Research utilization in family policymaking was perceived, not as a problem that lies with policymakers, but rather as a two-way process that requires both policy-minded researchers and research-minded policymakers. In this study that focused on the research end of the process, these exemplar social scientists identified cultural barriers they encountered when communicating family research to policymakers, but also the rewards of doing so, namely the exhilaration of making the world a better place, particularly for children and families; the excitement of seeing research applied in the real world; and the satisfaction of being respected for their expertise outside the academy.

The study replicates several dimensions of culture proposed by community dissonance theory (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2008) and extends our understanding of pragmatic strategies for communicating across these conflicting cultures and for taking research findings from the laboratory to legislative bodies. For example, consistent with the cultural dimension of *interactional preferences*, the data suggest a paradigm shift in the way we conceptualize research-policy connections. Instead of thinking about disseminating research *to* policymakers, the data suggest focusing more heavily on developing relationships *with* them. Given a long-standing oral tradition in lawmaking bodies, policymakers rely more on the spoken than written word (Smith, 1991), yet researchers have failed to capitalize on this knowledge in their attempts to engage the policy community. The efforts put into communicating directly with policymakers pale in comparison to other pursuits; instead, what has prevailed is the tradition of writing papers and policy reports. Gaining entrée may entail moving away from expert-driven models of research dissemination, and toward more collaborative relationships that validate the expertise each brings to the table.

Consistent with the cultural dimension of *targets of interests*, that is who policymakers pay attention to, researchers are not a salient stakeholder for policymakers. Thus, researchers cannot wait to be tapped on the shoulder. If researchers who move seamlessly between the research and policy communities are ever to become the rule rather than the exception, they need to take the initiative and begin building relationships with policymakers or policy intermediaries. To do so, researchers can encourage students and colleagues to present their research in policy settings and to seek out policy internships. They can also take the initiative to invite policymakers to serve as resources in campus classes and professional meetings.

These data also lend support to the cultural dimension of *cognitive frameworks*. Researchers explained the importance of learning about who the target policymaking audience is and how to communicate research findings in ways that are consistent with how they make policy decisions. Moreover, consistent with the dimension of *contextual preferences*,

researchers recommended learning about the policymaking process and how the political context shapes another dimension, *focal interests*. For example, the researchers emphasized the fast-paced nature of the policy context and the importance of providing timely responses to the questions driving policy debate. In addition, in the policymaking context, most information that policymakers receive comes with a direction, so providing research-based information free of values and stock solutions makes policymakers sit up and take notice. The data also support the dimension of *feedback loops*, specifically what the rewards are and how success is defined. With increasing exposure, researchers came to respect policymakers' knowledge and experience, and to identify common rewards they share with policymakers when collaborating to solve complex social problems. As they gained experience, researchers came to realize the importance of (a) being patient in expecting results, given the long-term nature of policymaking, and (b) self-rewarding in identifying success, given the lack of extrinsic rewards from the academy.

Theoretically, the premises of two communities and community dissonance theories are borne out in the first known study to apply these theories to family policy. Using structural family systems theory as a guide, the findings identified barriers specific to advancing family policy—the time it takes to show economic benefits on family issues, and policymakers' misperceptions of vulnerable families. The researchers offered specific recommendations about the language and approach for communicating family research. For example, researchers may be able to generate interest in family policy by drawing upon policymaker's experience in their own families. Also, researchers advised being explicit about how families in your study compare to families in the policymaker's jurisdiction, and warned against using a “good guy-bad guy” approach because some of what policymakers think they know about families, particularly vulnerable families, is often inaccurate. Researchers are well advised to carefully choose language for describing vulnerable families because these words can reinforce existing stereotypes rather than provide a new frame for thinking about vulnerable families as needing public policy to provide support or produce change. Enacting family policies, which seldom show immediate economic impact, may require strategizing about ways to provide policymakers with political cover such as estimating long-term economic benefits or finding alternative funding sources.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was small and targeted only exemplar policy communicators identified by policymakers and professionals. Given the diversity of expertise included in the sample across almost a decade, we can have some confidence that the findings apply to family policy broadly defined, rather than to a single family policy issue. Even though the researchers included developmental psychologists, economists, family researchers, pharmacists, and sociologists, further studies are needed to determine if these findings can be extrapolated to research utilization in other fields of social policy. Second, the sample was selected based on the effectiveness of presentations to state policymakers, which conceivably could limit the study's generalizability; however, most researchers had worked with policymakers in several venues, including local, national, and international jurisdictions, and through a range of communication vehicles encompassing the spoken and written word. Third, the value of research in family policymaking may be overstated, given that the sample included only researchers with previous success in this regard. Fourth, the recommendation to approach policy work as an educator, rather than as an advocate, must be interpreted with caution, given that one criterion for selecting Family Impact Seminar speakers is a nonpartisan reputation. Fifth, the field would benefit from a parallel study of policymakers.

Finally, one clear message from the study is that building relationships with policymakers is a developmental process that gradually becomes easier and more rewarding. Initial contacts were not always positive, suggesting that it takes time to develop the prerequisite

knowledge, skills, and attitudes for communicating across conflicting cultures. One researcher cautioned: "It's a mistake to think that you need to have mastered something before you start doing it. You learn by experience." Even less experienced researchers can move quickly beyond the novice stage by tapping into the 274 years of experience of these exemplar policy communicators. By building collaborative relationships with policymakers, researchers can bring the voice of families to policy decisions.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Experience, Affiliations, and Policy Credentials of the Study Respondents

Yrs. of Policy Experience	Affiliation	Impact of Their Work on Policy
20	Land-Grant University	Co-author, often-cited book on single parenting that had a significant influence on welfare policy
25	Nonpartisan policy research organization	Testified before Congress over a dozen times; currently analyzing changes in Medicaid programs and long-term care in 13 states
10	Land-Grant University	Former President, national organization for family professionals, and one of the driving forces of a grass-roots family organization
5	Independent research center	Researcher; directs a family intervention named a National Blueprint Program for Violence Prevention by the U.S. Dept. of Justice that is currently being replicated in 25 communities
16	Land-Grant University	Recipient, American Psychological Association Award for Distinguished Contributions to Psychology in the Public Interest; selected by the Governor to direct a \$2½ million initiative to improve child care quality for low-income families in his state
27	Land-Grant University	Member, the National Academy of Science panel on measuring the effect of changes in social welfare programs; organized a peer assistance network for state government officials to dialogue about welfare reform innovations across state lines
13	Land-Grant University	Member, international team analyzing family policy in the U.S., U.K., Canada, and Australia; provides commissioned research, evaluations, and policy papers for a state child support bureau
30	Land-Grant University	Work for DHHS on prescription drugs was highlighted in a report to the President
23	University	Director, home visiting program operating in 5 countries and 359 counties in 26 states; responsible, in part, for a law that used tobacco money to provide home visiting for all low-income women in the state

Yrs. of Policy Experience	Affiliation	Impact of Their Work on Policy
20	Ivy League School	Fellow, nonpartisan policy research firm; helped evaluate and disseminate the results of a welfare demonstration program for teenage parents
25	Land-Grant University	Testified before Congress 16 times and has worked with 14 countries on prescription drug issues; conducted research for the U.S. General Accounting Office, the U.S. Special Committee on Aging, and the Food and Drug Administration
20	Land-Grant University	Authored 50 referred articles, testified before three state legislatures on school funding, and developed a formula used to distribute revenue to local governments in South Africa
20	Land-Grant University	Former director of a poverty center; as Assistant Deputy Secretary for Tax Analysis at the U.S. Department of Treasury, he worked on changing the official U.S. poverty measure
20	Ivy League School	State, national, and international experience; worked with a Governor to shift thinking on the value of family support