

Galvanizers, Guides, Champions, and Shields: The Many Ways That Policymakers Use Public Health Researchers

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Context: Public health researchers make a limited but important contribution to policy development. Some engage with policy directly through committees, advisory boards, advocacy coalitions, ministerial briefings, intervention design consultation, and research partnerships with government, as well as by championing research-informed policy in the media. Nevertheless, the research utilization literature has paid little attention to these diverse roles and the ways that policymakers use them. This article describes how policymakers use researchers in policymaking and examines how these activities relate to models of research utilization. It also explores the extent to which policymakers' accounts of using researchers concur with the experiences of "policy-engaged" public health researchers.

Methods: We conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty-two Australian civil servants, parliamentary ministers, and ministerial advisers identified as "research-engaged" by public health researchers. We used structured and inductive coding to generate categories that we then compared with some of the major research utilization models.

Findings: Policymakers were sophisticated and multifaceted users of researchers for purposes that we describe as Galvanizing Ideas, Clarification and Advice, Persuasion, and Defense. These categories overlapped but did not wholly fit with research utilization models. Despite the negative connotation, "being used" was

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reported as reciprocal and uncompromising, although researchers and policymakers were likely to categorize these uses differently. Policymakers countered views expressed by some researchers. That is, they sought robust dialogue and creative thinking rather than compliance, and they valued expert opinion when research was insufficient for decision making. The technical/political character of policy development shaped the ways in which researchers were used.

Conclusions: Elucidating the diverse roles that public health researchers play in policymaking, and the multiple ways that policymakers use these roles, provides researchers and policymakers with a framework for negotiating and reflecting on activities that may advance the public health goals shared by both.

Keywords: Research utilization, researcher utilization, policymaking, public health.

THIRTY YEARS AGO, YIN AND GWALTNEY (1981) NOTED THAT the literature on research utilization poorly distinguished between people, as opposed to products, as the vehicles for facilitating research-informed policy. Since then, a substantial body of work has increased our knowledge of how research is (and is not) used by policymakers (e.g., Hanney et al. 2003; Innvaer et al. 2002; Mitton et al. 2007; Nutley, Walter, and Davies 2007; Weiss 1991). Much of this literature focuses on people as producers, pushers, or translators of research findings rather than as expert resources and dynamic policy actors in their own right.

The perception of researchers as cloistered in their own community of practice remains pervasive, hence the emphasis on positive relationships in bridging the research-policy “cultural divide” (Campbell et al. 2009; Caplan 1979; Innvaer et al. 2002; Kothari, MacLean, and Edwards 2009; Lomas and Brown 2009; Trostle, Bronfman, and Langer 1999). These relationships are described as facilitating mutual learning, trust, and the development of a “marketplace of ideas” (Yin and Gwaltney 1981, 56). This approach recognizes that researchers are more than mere conduits of data and that they can make a modest but nonetheless important contribution to policy (Banks 2009; Edwards 2001). Yet little attention has been paid to the manner in which these relationships are negotiated and capitalized on by researchers and policymakers.

Interpersonal dynamics are only part of the story. The messy interdependence of policy also requires a collective or structural level of intervention to influence the trajectory of policy agenda setting, development, intervention/implementation, and evaluation (Bowen and Zwi 2005; Contandriopoulos et al. 2010; Flitcroft et al. 2011; Wingens 1990). Despite researchers' putative tendency to regard the research-policy interface as amorphous and cloaked within a "black box" (Gold 2009), many researchers contribute to policy advancement through government committees, research-policy forums, policy networks, advocacy coalitions, commissioned research, and the mass media (Gold 2009; Haynes et al. 2011; Weible, Sabatier, and McQueen 2009), as well as through traditional academic publishing. The literature is largely silent, however, on how and in what circumstances policymakers encourage and facilitate these activities (or discourage and impede them, depending on the circumstances).

Our Aims

In this exploratory article, we investigate three broad questions. First, how do research-engaged policymakers use researchers? Are they adjuncts or alternatives to published research? Are they used as colleagues, informants, allies, or champions, or some mix of these roles? And are these uses contingent on positive interpersonal relationships between researchers and policymakers? Second, how do the ways in which policymakers use researchers fit with leading theories of research utilization? Third, do policymakers' views confirm or challenge the views held by the public health researchers whom we interviewed in our earlier study?

In order to address these questions, we provide some context. First, we give a brief overview of some key models of research utilization that we used as a point of departure in conceptualizing researcher utilization. Second, we provide a synopsis of the self-reported policy roles played by public health researchers in an earlier study (described in detail in Haynes et al. 2011).

Research Utilization Models

Instrumental. In instrumental models of research utilization (Pelz 1978), policymakers use research as data (Weiss 1991); that is, they

systematically seek research in order to answer questions about policy problems and solutions (Greenhalgh 2006; Weiss 1979). Instrumental uses of research dominate popular discourse about the research-policy relationship and are assumed in the premise of “evidence-based policy” (Nutley, Walter, and Davies 2007). The more recent literature, however, argues that research affects policy in a number of more diffuse and indirect ways (e.g., see all the citations in this section of this article).

Opportunistic. In contrast to the “rational” perspective just described, opportunistic approaches regard policy as a “primal soup” (Considine 1998) governed by “organized anarchy” that comprises separate streams of problems, politics, and policy (Kingdon 2003). This “policy stream” is characterized by stages and institutional processes in which research utilization takes quite different forms: when agendas are set, legislation is formulated and finished policies are implemented (Keller 2009). Policy change is generally seen as incremental, with occasional opportunities for more radical change when these streams align and create a cross-stream perceived need for a swift policy response (Kingdon 2003). Under these conditions, policymakers and advocates may “push” their agendas by using research that has been lying dormant in a “knowledge reservoir” (Hanney et al. 2003).

Rhetorical. The pluralistic, contested nature of policy is emphasized in rhetorical approaches, which describe policymaking as “the formal struggle over ideas and values” (Russell et al. 2008, 45); a “messy unfolding of collective action, achieved mostly through dialogue, argument, influence and conflict” (Greenhalgh 2006, 34). Managing ambiguity, coping with institutional constraints, and reconciling competing interests are key concerns (Waddell et al. 2005). In this environment, research is seen as value laden, like any other knowledge claim, and it is used strategically as argument (Nutley, Walter, and Davies 2007; Weiss 1991). For example, research may be used politically to buttress policy initiatives that have been predetermined by “interest, ideology, or intellect” (Weiss 1979, 429), or it may be used tactically to legitimize inaction (Weiss 1979).

Conceptual. In conceptual models, policymakers do not seek research or use it intentionally. Rather, research findings permeate the policy community in the form of ideas that help shape the knowledge and perspectives that inform problem framing, agenda setting, policy development, intervention, and evaluation (Nutley, Walter, and Davies 2007; Pelz 1978; Weiss 1991).

These usages overlap and may occur simultaneously or at different points in the policy process, often as complementary strategies (Amara, Ouimet, and Landry 2004; Weiss 1991). For example, interactive processes, in which policymakers seek information and advice from multiple experts (Bowen and Zwi 2005; Weiss 1979), include aspects of instrumental, opportunistic, rhetorical, and conceptual research utilization. Indeed, these uses are frequently inseparable because policy is inherently both technical—using research as a content-based rationale for action—and political—using research as a instrument of value-laden persuasive performance (Fischer and Forester 1993; Russell et al. 2008; Stone 1997). This interplay of political and rhetorical imperatives with technical and rational aspirations is no less evident in health services policy, which, due to its association with biomedicine, places greater emphasis on evidence-based policy tropes (Blendon and SteelFisher 2009; Shaw and Greenhalgh 2008).

Views of Influential Researchers

As described in the methods section of this article, in an earlier study we interviewed thirty-six “influential” researchers about the strategies they used to influence public health policy (Derrick et al. 2011; Haynes et al. 2011). These researchers described a variety of roles, which often echoed the models just described. For example, all the researchers attempted to facilitate the instrumental use of their research by providing scientifically rigorous papers and formal advice. Most were responsive to policy opportunities, making themselves available to policymakers for consultation and providing expedited reports and reviews when asked. They also engaged in rhetorical strategies via public health commentary and critique, framing their research to address the values base of public debate, giving policymakers data-informed “*armor*,” and acting as research “*champions*.” Finally, they brought creative and independent perspectives to their research design and routinely made recommendations to help policymakers look at policy problems and solutions through different conceptual lenses. Most researchers were proponents of interactive approaches and actively pursued positive interpersonal relationships with policymakers. Some, however, raised concerns that close relationships might compromise their work and reputation.

Methods

During 2009 we conducted a survey of Australian public health researchers identified as active in one of the fields of alcohol, illicit drugs, injury, obesity, skin cancer, and tobacco control (Derrick et al. 2011). We asked our participants to nominate Australia-based researchers whom they considered to be the most “influential in shaping any aspect of policy or programs, legislation, clinical practice, or public understanding.” Of the 211 invitees, 176 (83%) completed the survey, and the six individuals most often nominated in each of the six fields were interviewed. These interviewees, three-quarters of whom were male, worked at university-affiliated research institutes (16), non-governmental organizations (9), and universities (8), and three held health service positions with some university affiliation. The interviews included the question “*What do you see as the most significant policy decisions in your field in Australia in the last ten years?*” We used the responses to this and follow-up questions to find, first, case examples in which research or researchers had informed policy and, second, specific policymakers who had played a role in driving or facilitating that policy.

We selected case examples on the basis of the following characteristics. First, the policy was state-based, because Australia is a federation in which significant parts of its health service are managed by the state governments. Focusing on two states—Victoria and New South Wales—also enabled us to identify delimited policy communities. State governments in Australia are characterized by relative longevity, and each of the governments had been in power for at least ten years, so policy networks were likely to be stable. Second, the case involved the enactment of legislation or mandatory government policy. Third, the policymakers involved in the case were known from the public record to have drawn on research (specific papers or data sets) and/or research-informed expert advice. We selected five examples, one in each of the six fields explored in the earlier study (Haynes et al. 2011), with the exception of alcohol, for which we were unable to find a case that met these criteria.

The policymakers identified by our researcher informants were approached and interviews with them led to other significant players (see table 1). This “snowballing” process ceased when no more key players could be found and the interviewers concluded that saturation of views

TABLE 1
Categories of Study Invitees and Participants

| | Role | Invited | Participated |
|-------|---|---------|--------------|
| 1 | Civil servant | 20 | 18 |
| 2 | Ex-premier, minister, or ex-minister | 8 | 4 |
| 3 | Ministerial adviser | 5 | 4 |
| 4 | NGO officer | 5 | 4 |
| 5 | Other (community group representative, independent advocate) | 2 | 2 |
| Total | | 40 | 32 |

Note: This article discusses only categories 1, 2, and 3.

had been reached, or when the invitees declined or did not respond to invitations.

The civil servants, who make up the largest group in this study, were middle- to high-ranking career employees in state government line agencies that develop and administer health-related policies and programs. Most were in ministerial departments in which the political pressures and the influence of the minister are fairly direct. Three were from independent regulatory agencies that report directly to parliament and hence have less direct ministerial control. The ministers were elected officials, all of whom had oversight of a health or health-related portfolio. The ministerial advisers were employed by, and reported directly to, their minister. (Australia has a Westminster-based parliamentary system, similar to that in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Canada, in which the executive branch is formed out of the parliamentary majority. Consequently, it is primarily the ministers, their immediate advisers, and the civil servants who inform, shape, and implement policy rather than the legislators, who have far less independent influence than in the United States (Considine 1998; Keller 2009).

Our semi-structured interview schedule was based on a domain inquiry framework (Haynes et al. 2011). We piloted the questions and prompts with several senior civil servants who were not included in the study and revised them in accordance with the participants’ feedback and the interviewers’ observations. The interviews began with a “big picture” question: “*What are your top-of-mind thoughts about the relationship between research and policy?*” Subsequent questions focused on

how policymakers identify, assess, and use research and researchers; their views on the impact of the strategies identified by influential researchers as useful in influencing policy; the significance of the researchers' different roles and relationships; the interplay of politics and research; and broad questions about the policy with which the interviewee had been involved.

Three pairs of interviewees were interviewed together, at their request, which meant that thirty-two people participated in twenty-nine interviews. The interviews were conducted by three of this article's authors (Haynes, Derrick, and Sturk); four were by telephone; and twenty-five were in person. Most of them (22) were conducted by two interviewers, one leading and the other taking notes and checking prompts. The duration of interviews was between twenty-eight and ninety-one minutes, with an average of sixty-eight minutes.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed (with one exception, at the interviewee's request). The transcriptions were checked for errors and uploaded to NVivo 8 (QSR 2008), where they were coded broadly under the domains of inquiry (for a detailed description, see Haynes et al. 2011) and in relation to each of the specific interview questions (e.g., all responses to "*What characteristics do you look for in a researcher?*") were clustered in a single category). In a second, inductive cycle of coding, we reviewed each of these top-level categories for subcategories (e.g., overlapping roles) and emergent themes (e.g., bringing people along with you). The top-level category that forms the focus of this article—using researchers—resulted in four subcategories that we used to organize the results, using quintessential quotations to illustrate each point. We use the term *policymaker* to denote politicians (ministers and advisers) and civil servants but differentiate between these groups when appropriate.

Results

Not surprisingly, our sample of research-engaged policymaker interviewees all claimed to use research in the pursuit of policy goals, but they acknowledged that they also used researchers: "*It's not just that I use the research; I actually use the people as well.*" We classified their descriptions of these uses into "Galvanization" (stimulating ideas), "Clarification and Advice," "Persuasion," and "Defense."

Galvanization

All the politicians described occasions on which they met with researchers for an exploratory conversation. This was not intended to answer a specific question but to provide “*outside the square thinking*” to expand their horizons and to enliven and inspire them. They also wanted researchers to challenge organizational assumptions: “*You don’t want it to be so based in electoral reality that it’s just boring.*” There was a sense in which politicians recognized their limited exposure to research-informed ideas and struggled to make room for them:

I do try as much as possible to get the ideas up from the researchers and the policymakers because when you do that, you get the best ideas. So I really do try to give people as much freedom as possible to feed those ideas up.

Politicians also used researchers to shift their attention from the reactive world of managing day-to-day events (political thinking) and refocus on how they might achieve their longer-term strategic goals and policy aspirations (policy thinking):

Whatever you have as your vision . . . , something happens all the time that takes your view away and requires you to do something over here or over there. If you decide, “I’m going to stand back and think,” your brain might be empty, or it still might be buzzing with something else, so sometimes . . . getting somebody else to broaden it out a bit can be a useful way of getting that thinking process going.

The majority of civil servants also talked about using researchers as sounding boards and creative collaborators. They wanted researchers who were “*feisty*” and “*able to engage in a decent argument*” to stimulate new ideas and question organizational norms. They particularly valued this input during discussions about new policy initiatives because it could lead to innovative ways of looking at problems and of evaluating interventions:

If we want to step out on a limb and try something new, let’s talk to some researchers about “What do you think? Where shall we go with this? Do you think this is the way to go? What would be the risks? How should we test it?” That sort of thing.

Several policymakers talked about using researchers to inspire staff in their branch or ministerial office: “*I then was also going through a process of*

bringing in people to tell my staff ideas and things because I wanted to get ideas on our side."

Clarification and Advice

Nearly all the policymakers used researchers "*behind the scenes*" to provide advice. When specific research was being considered, most policymakers preferred to talk directly with the researcher rather than relying on others to "*translate*":

If your researcher's not willing to talk about what the impact of their survey or their published paper might be, having a secondary spokesperson is not as good—they're not as expert.

Consequently, when possible, researchers were used to explain research to other policymakers, too:

It may be that you'll need to go down to the minister's office and give him a brief about how we're going and he'll have questions that only the researcher can answer at this stage because it's his project.

Researchers also made presentations to committees and advisory groups: "*I will actually get those people and drag them into it and say, 'Here is a research expert independent. X, tell us about it.' And get them to give a twenty-minute presentation on the study.*"

Those researchers considered to have an extensive knowledge of the research in their field were often consulted for speedy and accurate advice:

I know where to look for it, but picking up the phone and asking a question of X or Y is far easier when they can say, "OK, this is where I can point you in the right direction," and they're willing to do that. It saves me a lot of time and a lot of grief as well.

Some politicians admitted that because they had minimal knowledge of their portfolio, they not only relied on advisers and departmental staff for guidance but also used independent experts as guides in unfamiliar territory: "*It's about educating yourself, learning more about the subject that you've been given to deal with.*" These guides were highly valued: "*You find people like that and they're like gold.*" One example concerned a new minister who was advised by her senior colleague to rely on a particular professor:

The minister at the time had given her advice: "If there's anything that you do, just listen to X." . . . He was this very trusted clinician, trusted bureaucratic adviser, who she was leaning on very heavily and he was providing the right advice at the right time.

The guidance provided by researchers was sometimes far more extensive than explaining data or advising on policy implications of research; it could extend to briefing about an entire field of public health and situating other research and researchers within it. For example, a senior NGO officer (from a government perspective, an "expert") described his input:

We spent quite a lot of time . . . educating the {ministerial} adviser on the ins and outs of this. I think also with respect to who are the key players in X. . . . We told {her} who to talk to, who to listen to and who not to. . . . She hadn't heard of anyone when she arrived. She didn't know anything about X.

Politicians also used researchers to evaluate claims made by other stakeholders:

I would very frequently phone X {a researcher and clinician} after being given a whole lot of guff and say "X, I've just been told all this stuff, what do you think?" and he'd say, "Yeah, that sounds a bit right" or "Be careful."

Civil servants described ways in which researchers provided input in all stages of policy development. This ranged from "*the genesis of an idea*" and "*the rationale design stage*" to the "*formulation of policy and projects*" and intervention design to "*evaluation frameworks*" and "*recommendations for improvements.*" Several of the civil servants particularly emphasized the value of researchers who helped with the pragmatic business of designing effective "*real-world*" interventions and evaluations. For example:

We worked with Professor X because he can absolutely come and tell you what every part of your intervention needs to look like. How many times a week they need to come, how long they need to perform, all those sorts of things. So really practical advice on the design of the intervention.

Like politicians, civil servants also used researchers as field advisers, helping them to winnow information: "*I do think that there are very strong roles for researchers and experts generally, technical experts, to bat away the ideas that will otherwise come at you.*" It also helped them triangulate advice from other experts: "*We . . . asked Professor X to come in and speak to the minister and other organizations to test what the {NGO} had said to us.*"

Most of our interviewees reported a frequent lack of relevant and usable research, which obliged them to rely on expert advice in making decisions: *"If we couldn't have a systematic review, a piece of work that could be held up to peer review, then at least we had some expert opinion."* A civil servant described how contextualized advice from an expert addressed research uncertainty in her branch:

An expert opinion is as important because it's actually as influential as the evidence itself because it puts a story around it. So while you mightn't have super conclusive evidence about something, especially for us {who} work in public health in noninfectious disease areas, there's virtually no linear evidence between cause and effect.

Policymakers also explained that *"an expert opinion that the research doesn't exist is a very valuable opinion"*; *"Have we missed anything? 'Well no, I'm an expert and I've been following the literature forever, and there just isn't any literature.' That's a very helpful thing for someone to tell you."*

In most cases, the policymakers wanted advice that was not limited to clarification about research itself but included implications for policy. Researchers were not being used simply as purveyors of the data, but as field specialists with valuable, policy-relevant expert opinions: *"I'm saying, 'We need you to assist with the policy process.' So . . . it's also to be able to stand up and say clearly, 'Do this. These are the benefits.'"* Policymakers relied on the researchers they used for advice and galvanization to be independent and *"non-ideological."*

Persuasion

Persuading Colleagues. Politicians in particular described themselves as being *"in the business of persuasion"*: *"You're not only a decision maker, you're an advocate as a politician. I mean, what's the job of a politician? It really is a sales person for ideas and policies."* Thus politicians tended to use researchers more politically (Weiss 1979) than civil servants did, to *"prosecute a case"* and *"sell ideas"* to a wide range of stakeholders. For these purposes, a researcher's independence was valued particularly for its rhetorical efficacy in asserting that policy was guided by *"objective"* science rather than expediency: *"We need independent advice that can also be perceived as independent advice."*

Politicians reported that they often needed to persuade other ministers and agencies (particularly the treasury) before they could publicly advocate for a course of action. *"Once we were convinced ourselves, we had to be able to convince cabinet colleagues that this was, in fact, going to work."* They gave examples of researchers helping in this process by presenting at cabinet subcommittees and budget committees but, more often, research was sold by the ministers themselves. To this end, ministers used researchers to supplement briefings by their advisers and civil servants, sometimes testing the researcher with likely oppositional arguments. This enabled the minister to *"own the research"*—strengthening his or her research-informed understanding and rhetorical repertoire. According to one ex-premier, the nature of politics demands that ministers have research-informed arguments at their fingertips: *"I think the political process forces politicians who are going to be sponsoring policies to have the facts to enable them to crush the opposition and win the day."*

Persuading Upward. Civil servants understandably focused more on persuading their ministers and CEOs: *"We need to be able to convince our decision makers, have them on {our} side."* In these circumstances, civil servants used researchers more often to reduce support for or "neutralize" (Banks 2009) policy proposals that ministers described as *"instinctive"* and *"common sense"*:

You'll sometimes get politicians going, "Oh, we really should pour lots of resources into X" and you go, "Oh no, not again!" . . . The research on X has shown again and again that whole strategy doesn't work very well. . . . {But} it can be hard to argue against because instinctually it sounds like it makes sense, but in practice it doesn't.

Another civil servant explained how close working relationships with researchers helped his team manage upward in a similar scenario:

We will often say {to researchers}, "You wouldn't believe what they want us to do, but can you help in some way?" . . . We're not convinced it's a good idea. What do you think? How can we try and manipulate this if we can?" . . . We've had things where X {a premier} has a particular vent on a public health issue and will constantly be saying, "The Department of Health needs to ban X." . . . No we don't! Millions of reasons why we don't need to. . . . We have to drag good public health researchers into the minister's office to try to make the case.

Civil servants were more likely to use researchers who were known and trusted in the minister's office as a ministerial advisory source: *"If that person is well respected or the politician or their advisers feel that they can have a conversation with that person, that really helps."* In fact, several civil servants explained that their own reputations would be tarnished if they used or recommended researchers who lacked credibility or trustworthiness: *"We get asked the question, 'Where did you get this information from?' or 'Who provided you with this advice?' If it's someone who's not trustworthy or well respected, our reputation goes to dust."*

Persuading Committees and Community Groups. Independent researchers with academic credentials were seen as extremely persuasive agents in committees and forums, and most of the civil servants used them to this end. As purveyors of *"superior facts,"* researchers were able to counter poorly informed stakeholder opinions: *"The particular value of having researchers on committees . . . is that they are the independent voice who will face down the community reps that will otherwise come at me with very naive suggestions as to what {we} should be doing."*

A researcher's *"apolitical"* stance was highly valued by policymakers as an antidote to ideologically driven community views in forums in which the policymaker wanted to avoid appearing partisan:

If you're going to hold a committee where you've got community reps, it's really useful to have expert researchers there as well. The community will say, "Why don't you just throw them all in jail?" and the researchers will say, "Well, for this reason." I can sit back and act like a referee instead of having to present the government position as though I'm biased anyway. That's a very powerful use.

Despite this need for political impartiality (or the appearance of it), the use of researchers in committees and stakeholder forums was often dependent on the policymakers' confidence that the researcher was *"on our side"* in the current policy debate. In these cases, the use was a strategic maneuver: *"You also ask them to be on board in committees. Certainly people like X, he can be a great plant."*

The more prestigious a researcher's academic credentials were, the more authoritative and, therefore, persuasive they could be. This might be demonstrated by the researcher's institutional affiliation and title:

{You} take them to influential meetings with you . . . because it can also be useful as a policymaker to have "Oh, here's professor so and so," and let me

just get them to say what I would have said to you, but it's far more powerful from someone from X University with the title "professor."

Alternatively, the researcher's authority might derive from the level of expertise that stakeholders assume an experienced field specialist would possess: people listen when an expert who has *"been doing the research for the last ten years says, 'This is going to change people's lives.'"*

Like policymakers, external stakeholders could also be persuaded by expert opinion in the absence of definitive research. For example, one adviser described how researchers were used at a community hearing to bolster the research basis of a minister's policy proposal:

So the three pillars were the public polling data, the softer qualitative research, and the authority of . . . Professor X and Professor Y who were prepared to stand up as people whose integrity and knowledge in this area was beyond doubt and say, "Yes, we as researchers certify that this agenda is going to be useful and that it's worth the cost that the opponents say is going to come to pass."

Such usage was dependent on the researcher's ability to talk about research clearly and persuasively, and to withstand often heated debate:

I would only feel comfortable doing that if I knew them personally, if I knew that they were persuasive, if I knew they'd stand up under pressure. . . . If they're going to wilt, then I'm going to have to stand up and push the argument for them, and I'm not going to have the independence I want from them. So if they're that kind of presenter, then I won't use them. I'll use their research, but I won't use them in the meeting.

Using researchers in committees and stakeholder forums was seen as effective and efficient. Stakeholders and researchers had the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue to clarify findings, tackle misunderstandings, and address the many "what about?" or "what if?" questions that policymakers struggled to answer:

In that case, I didn't personally present that research. I got X and Y in there and said "Here are the experts: go, half an hour, talk away" and they could charge at X and say . . . "Well what about this?" . . . X was firm saying, "No, it doesn't . . . , no, that's not how it happens, no, no" and he'll argue for it. . . . I'll go back into the room and say, "OK guys, there you are. This is why we have to do this." And it works.

Persuading through the Media. The most consistently described attribute of researchers who were effective agents of persuasion was their ability to make research-based assertions in the public sphere, especially in the media. Once again, their value lay not only in their authority as experts but also in their perceived independence: “*We have a few contacts that we use who speak to the media when we can’t. So it’s of benefit to us to have people that can speak independently and boldly.*” Policymakers relied on this to combat what they saw as profound public skepticism about political expediency and dishonesty in policymaking. For example, a ministerial adviser talked about the importance of researchers “*being known for being independent at a time when governments have decreasing levels of legitimacy in terms of being trusted.*” A civil servant put it this way:

Sometimes the researchers make the best advocates because there are very few independent voices that can persuade the community of something who are not government employees where the public has a cynicism about you’re just defending a government policy.

The value of independence was used for the following subtly different but often interrelated purposes:

Policy endorsement: To increase community support for plans that were in development or to bolster policy that had already been agreed on: “*You want them to help you by going out and arguing the case after you’ve made the decision or to help you get people on {your} side to help make a decision.*” For example, “*The important thing is for the prime minister or the premier to say, ‘This is the policy’ and then for six independent endorsements to come up and say, ‘It’ll be great.’*”

Researchers’ endorsement was often used in conjunction with backing from other key stakeholders—professional bodies, consumer stakeholder groups—in a triangulation of independent support. A ministerial adviser explained how she organized these endorsements:

As an adviser, often it is your role to call people and say, “Look, we’re going to make an announcement tomorrow; this is what we’re going to say. The premier would love if you could be interviewed. Are you supportive?” But you have to do it in a way where you suss out whether that person is going to be supportive, because now and then it backfires.

Short-circuiting ill-informed public debate: Independent researchers were used to respond to low-quality or misunderstood research that was

receiving disproportionate media coverage, and to counter industry campaigns that might also have a pseudo-research or “factoid” basis:

{T}o get some of our researchers to be able to say, “Well, hang on a second,” and their title is not {a government department}, it’s University of Wherever, is so much more in terms of credibility—it gets that message across.

This was particularly important when ill-informed views were gathering support and threatening research-informed policy proposals:

Public debate can push policy processes in directions that are contrary to the evidence and are not necessarily sensible or feasible, so often getting an academic to come out and say, “Well, these are the reasons why banning X in this particular setting with these particular people is an important thing to do.”

Reassurance about current public health policies: Experts were also used to endorse existing policies to ensure that important public health messages reached the community in a convincing manner, particularly when they were publicly or politically contested. For example, one civil servant pointed to the tremendous value in having someone “*with a white coat that is not the government saying, ‘It’s OK to drink the water’ or ‘this vaccine works.’*”

Sometimes one-off or infrequent events triggered a public crisis in confidence that experts could help alleviate. This minister gave an example of how the government used a researcher to assuage community fears that a long-standing policy provided inadequate safety measures: “*There’s some poor bastard who’s done a study that shows X, so he gets trotted out every time there’s a problem.*”

Defense

Researchers were also used in a range of adversarial political debates. Many policymakers referred to the protective value of research in justifying policy, not only for agenda setting and policy development, but also in the often highly politicized public examination of reasons for poor policy outcomes or unforeseen negative consequences. In these circumstances, policymakers sometimes used independent researchers as a “shield” or “safety net”: “*In a public sense, you often want to hide behind their advice.*” This appeared to be more than a tactical maneuver engineered after the fact because, in most examples, the policy had been informed

by researchers' advice. As one politician put it, "*We should not only be prepared to hide behind their advice, but we also want to take the advice and use it.*"

In the public arena, researchers were used to "*put counterpoints forward*" that helped combat opposition:

It helped because it was not believed to be just a cynical political ploy . . . it mitigated the response from people who didn't want X; it reduced it a bit. I don't think it was necessarily a game changer, but it did help. It gave you more armoury {sic} in a political debate if you were able to say, "It's not me saying this, it's X, Y, Z and these other clinical players."

This tactic included aggressively using researchers to counter criticism and politically motivated misinformation, which policymakers often saw as being amplified by sensationalizing media:

We had used him as a researcher and as an independent to act as a spokesperson and refute and challenge a whole lot of things that are in the media. Whether it be a stupid story run by Channel 7—they've had quite a few stupid stories for a while now.

The Role of Relationships

Even though policymakers did not explicitly refer to the research utilization literature, their descriptions of using researchers often evoked some of its major themes. The prominent issues were trust (Caplan 1979; Innvaer et al. 2002), being able to "*simplify and serve up research data in a usable form*" (Colby et al. 2008; Nutley, Walter, and Davies 2007), and, in particular, the importance of positive relationships between researchers and policymakers (Campbell et al. 2009; Caplan 1979; Innvaer et al. 2002; Kothari, MacLean, and Edwards 2009; Lomas and Brown 2009; Trostle, Bronfman, and Langer 1999). Some policymakers commented that the "*key researchers you have a relationship with*" informed their thinking more than research papers or reports did: "*They are really the most powerful influences, and their personal opinion and advice is probably the most powerful.*" Policymakers confirmed researchers' views about the importance of researchers making themselves available for informal consultation. It strengthened the relationship and supported research-informed decision making, because "*we're able to pick up the phone and say, 'What do you reckon about this?'*" Several added that they needed to listen to researchers, learn from them, and develop "*bilateral understanding*" and "*mutual respect*" in order for the relationship to flourish.

Politicians and civil servants alike valued researchers for their ability to act as conduits of intersectoral information. For example, a politician explained that he used a particular researcher for advice partly because *"{she} clearly also had good relationships with the people in X {NGO} and in the bureaucracy."* A civil servant explained that she used a researcher because of his *"profile and standing with politicians,"* which meant that he *"might be providing similar advice independently to a politician."*

But some politicians and very senior civil servants dismissed the need for close relationships. They argued that a researcher's professional credibility and reputation provided sufficient assurance: *"They don't have to be people who you know."* Friendly relations between agencies were deemed important to research-policy dialogue, but this did not depend on one-to-one interpersonal relationships. Rather, these connections were often managed through formal agreements or reinforced by institutionalized interagency regard in which branches or departments developed long-term productive relationships with particular universities, NGOs, or research centers. These relationships often spanned several generations of staff turnover in both organizations. Several politicians and civil servants noted that these relationships had few structural supports: *"I think there's probably more willingness on both sides than there are processes or mechanisms to actually have the communication."* But other policymakers argued that established policy forums provide the mechanism for relationship building and policy influence: *"Clinical forums, stakeholder forums and those sorts of things are very important. So from a researcher's point of view, if they want to influence policymaking, being engaged in things like committees and that kind of thing does make a difference. Those voices are heard."*

In accordance with Petticrew and colleagues (2004), nearly all the civil servants, and most of the politicians, emphasized the benefits of working with researchers who understood the policy environment. Policymakers also preferred researchers who were *"balanced"* in their appreciation of broader public health issues: *"Someone that has an understanding of the world outside their particular domain so that they can see, to some extent, the other side of the coin and there are other people involved."* These researchers gave realistic, contextualized advice and were less likely to succumb to frustration and disillusionment at the slow, incremental nature of policy reform and the *"ugly"* realities of political compromise. This provided a degree of insurance against researchers turning on their policymaking colleagues and becoming *"rock throwers"* who might use their insider status to *"go to a press conference and then . . . launch into an attack on the government."*

Formal Partnerships

Nearly all the civil servants had experience of working with independent researchers whom they had commissioned to undertake research, or with researchers who were employed in university-affiliated research institutes that were wholly or partly funded by the government. Most of the civil servants drew heavily on research coming out of these formal arrangements because it was tailored to their needs, often as a result of policymakers and researchers working together throughout the research project. Staff in three departmental branches had been developing increasingly collaborative relationships with researchers who were commissioned or based in part-funded institutes—contributing to research design and analysis, and writing up findings—and one branch had a policy of funding only those studies in which the researchers were prepared to work in full “*equal research partnerships*” with the policy team. Many civil servants favored using researchers from institutes that they funded because this avoided arduous (and sometimes irresolvable) contract management negotiations about intellectual property and publication time frames.

A minority of interviewees noted that formal partnerships tended to increase dialogue between researchers and civil servants which, in turn, enhanced the relationship. But in general, surprisingly little differentiation was made about the quality of relationships with researchers with whom policymakers had formal agreements compared to those who were entirely independent and pursuing investigator-driven research.

Using, Asking, and Exchanging Favors: Usage That Is “Too Close”

Researchers who are “used” can also be “misused” in the highly politicized context of policymaking, in which manipulation is said to be rife (Chapman and Carter 2003; Pawson 2006). As mentioned previously, several researchers in our earlier study raised concerns that they or their research might be misrepresented by policymakers to further Machiavellian schemes rather than to advance public health. Although specific examples of this were rare, some researchers were also concerned they might be perceived by colleagues as “*being used*” if they worked too closely with the government (Haynes et al. 2011).

Several policymakers reported that they occasionally asked researchers to speak publicly to explain or defend research and, sometimes, to support policy. This mirrors policymakers' use of on-side journalists and other commentators (Edwards 2001). But they emphasized that any action taken by the researchers was independent: "*We didn't get them to rebut it, they rebutted it themselves . . . they saw this piece of research and they said, 'Well, it's not true.'*" And

We liaise very closely with our academic colleagues; particularly if we know there's something on the policy agenda, we can call upon them to help us out with those sorts of things, speak on behalf of not the government but just the issue.

Many policymakers admitted they asked for other "*favours*" too, most of which were summed up by this civil servant:

{It might be a} favor to come to a meeting . . . to put their name to media statements or be in the media. Or come to events: be the professor standing with the minister and answer the questions that are too technical, those sorts of things. Also offering expert opinions very quickly when an issue came up and you—"Oh God, we've had a question, I have no idea!"

All the policymakers argued that these requests did not compromise researchers' independence or integrity because they were usually based on an openly shared objective to advance research-informed public health policymaking. These relationships were seen as mutually beneficial. For example, it was widely acknowledged that researchers who were "*engaged*" with government were more likely to be received positively when they asked for meetings or advocated for policy action. This gave researchers greater access to policymakers: "*We always have an open door because we knew that we'll be asking a favor of them the next week.*" As this politician put it,

They're there whenever you need them, not only when there's a crisis. So if something's gone wrong in their world and they come running saying, "Help minister, help government, help bureaucracy" and that's the only time you ever see them; it's not a very good way to build a relationship. It's probably smart to be engaged and so when opportunities come along to be of assistance, to offer advice, you know, "I thought this might be of use to you, stick it in the bottom drawer. If you need to pull it out, that's good; if not, that's fine, too." So {we} know who you are when you do come calling.

This constructive engagement and the reciprocity it engendered were seen to apply to all policy stakeholders:

Generally, you'll see stakeholders who are more constructive will get utilized by the government more; they'll get put on advisory committees; they'll get put on implementation groups because they've got a track record of working constructively. . . . No government expects advocates and stakeholders to be compliant and to rubber-stamp everything a government wants to do; nobody expects that, but they ask for advocates and stakeholders who are going to be reasonable and work in partnership to deliver the best outcome.

One civil servant acknowledged that researchers commissioned to conduct policy evaluations might feel under some pressure to modify politically unfriendly findings: *"There probably is a little bit {of pressure} . . . that it's not really smart from your perspective as a researcher to be giving that to government. Maybe as a smart operator, you soften it a bit."* And several acknowledged that researchers who work with or for the government may be seen by fellow researchers and the public as *"tarred with being compromised."* One gave an example of an *"academic researcher colleague"* whose *"credibility in the wider community is diminished because . . . of his role as a government adviser."* However, none of the interviewees admitted to overtly pressuring researchers for political ends or of observing any such pressure. In fact, without exception, they said that they wanted researchers' input to be direct and unencumbered by political *"spin"*: *"You want to know the truth . . . you want it to be frank and fearless"* and *"Give me unadulterated factual quality information. . . . Don't try and second-guess what I might want to do with it."*

Despite the frequent references made to *"using researchers,"* there appeared to be no expectation that researchers should feel obliged to support the government or to speak on policy issues in public, or even that they should necessarily offer behind-the-scenes briefings. In fact, many policymakers expressed gratitude that researchers gave their time to support policy development, often for little or no professional recognition or reward. It appeared that policymakers simply assumed that authoritative researchers would protect their independence and withstand any political pressure to endorse policies they did not believe in or to deliver *"softened"* research results or advice: *"Any researcher worth his salt would simply not do that."*

Discussion

This article reported on a series of interviews with policymakers who were identified by researchers as instrumental in developing research-informed public health policy. As experienced professionals working in an environment of interdependent collective decision making, these policymakers were sophisticated and multifaceted users of researchers. They consumed and interpreted research-informed advice for inspiration and for pragmatic operational reasons, but they also were savvy, somewhat cynical operators in a political arena who deployed researchers as champions, aggressors, and shields. How they used researchers varied depending on their role and position; the current stage of policy development in which they were engaged; the level of contention about the policy; and their assessment of the researchers' academic credentials, trustworthiness, communicative expertise, and understanding of research-to-policy processes. Policymakers sought researchers who were "*non-ideological*" and impartial, but for some uses they were required to have, and be prepared to state, a level of support for the government's current policy agenda. Although formal partnership arrangements were valued for their ability to deliver fit-for-purpose research, they appeared to have little effect on policymakers' perceptions of the quality of researcher-policymaker relationships.

Broadly speaking, politicians described using researchers as conceptual (Weiss 1979) and rhetorical (Greenhalgh 2006) contributors to policy, whereas civil servants' accounts included a more interactive and problem-solving use of researchers in the instrumental mode (Pelz 1978; Weiss 1979). But the technical/political duality was evident throughout most descriptions of researcher utilization, often making it impossible to wholly disentangle activities such as advice from persuasion, or clarification from defense. Just as research may be used complementarily as ideas, data, and argument (e.g., to inform the composition of policy and also to bludgeon opponents), researchers may be used in multiple ways. In this respect, the use of researchers is similar to that of research (Amara, Ouimet, and Landry 2004; Weiss 1991). For example, the following quotation reveals a use of researchers as behind-the-scenes advisers that was opportunistic, instrumental, and rhetorical:

There would have been cases . . . where I would have said, "That's interesting, get the person in." Sometimes it was done partly because you knew the person

was a media figure or at the very least was going to be talking about these things, and there is some value in having that person say, “I briefed the premier on it.”

Interviewees referred to the different skills and attributes required for galvanization, clarification and advice, persuasion, and defense, and they noted how these intersected with the demands of different policy tasks and climates. For example, high-profile researchers with both a “helicopter view” of their field and impressive rhetorical skills were used to persuade ministers, stakeholders, and the public during policy agenda setting and formation when there was significant debate. Researchers with a narrower expertise, such as specialists in clinical trials, were used to advise on intervention design and evaluation once overall policy directions had been agreed. So it would appear that “issue polarization,” which dictates the extent to which research is used technically or politically (Beyer and Trice 1982; Contandriopoulos et al. 2010; Stone 1997), also dictated how researchers were used. For example, they were engaged as persuaders and defenders when policy was strongly opposed and political imperatives were heightened, or used as galvanizers, advisers, and clarifiers in circumstances when there was greater accord or, at least, when shared uncertainty and technical expertise had higher currency. Yet neither use fully eclipsed the other. The political usage of researchers was underpinned by the authority of technical know-how (the power of science as discourse that gives legitimacy to decision making by conveying gravitas and good intent) (Keller 2009), while technical usage took place within a rhetorically driven political landscape. This suggests that it may be more helpful to conceptualize the technical/political distinction as a continuum of emphasis (as illustrated in figure 1) rather than a dichotomy.

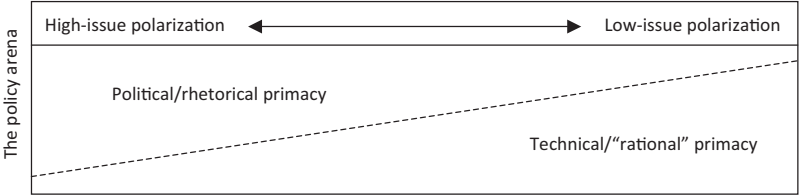


FIGURE 1. Continuum of Political and Technical Policy Dimensions Weighted by Issue Polarization

Policymakers used researchers as an adjunct or alternative to published research because this strategy made it easier to adapt policy arguments to achieve the “closest fit to an ever-changing environment” (Majone 1989, 31). Although research documents offered technical “facts” that appealed to the “rational ideal” of decision making (Stone 1997, 303), using researchers in face-to-face consultation or public forums added another layer of value: sensitive, tailored delivery and dialogue about data. Most important, the framing of data and their policy implications in research papers was useful, but the academic language and lengthy journal publication timescales often left the most pertinent message in the wake of rapidly shifting policy development. Conversely, personal dialogue enabled researchers to participate in the “crafted argument” (Stone 1997) of policy, contributing a highly responsive, contextually interpretive promotion of research’s socioethical consequentiality (Stone 1997) to politicians, civil servants, stakeholders, and the community. In short, people are more persuasive than papers.

Limitations

This study explored the behaviors of research-engaged policymakers, and so it is likely to have revealed a greater use of research and researchers than would, say, a survey of all government departments. The findings, therefore, cannot be generalized to the broader policy community. Furthermore, research by others has shown that the roles of politicians and civil servants differ across policy fields (although they appear to be stable within each field), meaning that the patterns noted in public health are not necessarily applicable to, for instance, transport or education policy (Considine 1998).

The Australian context complements other research utilization studies focusing on a particular nation, but it also has implications for the transferability of findings. For example, Australia’s comparatively small and interconnected communities of researchers and policymakers foster relationships. Our Westminster-based parliamentary system also limits role comparisons with policymakers in countries like the United States. Nevertheless, we deliberately refrained from tackling some of the more intricate institutional and contextual elements of roles and relationships and concentrated instead on the choices and preferences of particular policymakers and researchers at a broader, conceptual level that resonates across jurisdictions. A more detailed study of institutional processes

would have revealed greater granularity (Flitcroft et al. 2011) but would have also taken the analysis further into the peculiarities of the Australian case and away from common factors in researcher/policymaker interactions.

Page and Jenkins (2005) point out that self-reported accounts may be biased in many ways, both consciously and unconsciously. In our study, we suspected that a combination of factors may have influenced our findings. Specifically, the focus of our questions, the roles of the interviewees, wider social expectations of “evidence-based policy,” plus the desire to preserve positive relations with the senior academics associated with our study might have encouraged the interviewees to overemphasize their use of research and researchers and to censor examples of “*the ugly compromises*” of policymaking. The only way to assess the extent of these biases in our data was to compare our interviewees’ accounts with those in the literature and with the research team’s acquaintance with policymaking. Based on these assessments, we were generally impressed by the interviewees’ candor, and we believed that their accounts were neither unduly circumspect nor inflated.

Galvanization

Much of the data echoed themes in the literature on research usage, but the fit was not perfect. For example, comments included in the Galvanization category strongly evoke the conceptual use of *research as ideas* described at the beginning of this article. But this is incomplete because the researchers were not simply conveying the ideas that emerged from their research to passive policy recipients. Rather, they were contributing their broad field expertise and engaging in a dialogue in which curiosity, imagination, and critical thinking were drivers for all participants. Thus our findings contrast with utilization models in which research is assumed to be “translatable” or a “transferable product” and supports those models that emphasize adaptive and co-constructed processes of research utilization (Nutley, Walter, and Davies 2007) to encourage the “convergence of science and governance” (Fox 2010a). Greenhalgh (2010, 497) cites Van de Ven and Johnson’s (2006) description of this process as “engaged scholarship,” explaining that

knowledge emerges dialectically when academics and practitioners or policymakers converge to address a problem. . . . [T]his process,

necessarily involves different perceptions of what the problem is and different measures of success in solving it. Conflicts among the different parties are inevitable and should be treated as data (and as opportunities for reflection).

The use of researchers as collaborators in engaged scholarship—for “*getting ideas on our side*”—is at odds with the popularly expressed view that politicians use research primarily to bolster predetermined often politically expedient policies. It is also counter to the suggestion from one of our researcher interviewees that policymakers want to “*tell you what sort of research to do*” (Haynes et al. 2011). In fact, there was a sense that politicians in particular appreciated researchers who were robust, creative thinkers who understood the policy environment but were unadulterated by bureaucratic acculturation.

Clarification and Advice

In Clarification and Advice we saw researchers being used instrumentally as purveyors of expertise, incorporating aspects of problem-solving and interactive usages (Weiss 1979). However, some more nuanced aspects of this dynamic—such as researchers’ assistance in helping policymakers “map” new territory and evaluate advice from other sources—are not addressed in research usage models.

The data also diverged from the views of many researchers in the first phase of this study (Haynes et al. 2011). These interviewees told us that policymakers are frustrated by caveats that inevitably surround many research findings because they want results that are conclusive and have clear policy implications. Consequently, several researchers decided that when findings were ambiguous or when there was an insufficient evidence base for decision making, they had nothing to offer policymakers. As we reported, the policymakers strongly disagreed. In fact, some preferred direct advice from researchers, regardless of the status of the evidence in their field. Researchers’ “translation” of research and provision of expert opinion are addressed in interactive models of research usage, but these models conflate researcher utilization with research utilization and neglect the important point that expert advice was often used (and highly valued), especially in the absence of definitive research evidence. Moreover, this usage of researchers supports arguments that tidy role delineations into producers, intermediaries, and users of

research is problematic (Fox 2010b; Gold 2009). In many cases, researchers were used as producers to explain their own work, but they appeared to have greater value to civil servants and politicians alike as intermediaries, that is, as expert research liaisons who were able to explicate policy-salient findings and implications across a field of research.

Persuasion and Defense

The difference between explaining research and using it as a tool for persuasion concerned many of the researchers we interviewed. We discuss elsewhere their views about the distinction between research and advocacy and the appropriateness of keeping these activities separate (Haynes et al. 2011). These researchers were navigating what they saw as a “thin line” between the technical and political aspects of their policy contribution. Conversely, policymakers frequently described these uses as interwoven, separable in theory but not in practice. Using researchers to counteract cynical or idiosyncratic decision making (e.g., to dissuade ministers from pursuing policy on “*instinct*”) can be seen as an attempt by civil servants to act as technical “rationality advocates” (Schultze 1968). But it also demonstrates their engagement in the rhetorical “contest over policy” (Stone 1997, 378). Similarly, researchers were used in stakeholder forums to champion research and educate but also to counterframe the representation of research findings that had been appropriated by other interested parties. The shrewdness of this particular strategy is highlighted by Gabbay and colleagues’ (2003) alarming study of the capricious nature of knowledge utilization in advisory groups.

We did not ask policymakers about their experiences of being on the receiving end of colleagues using researchers for persuasion, but we suspect that most of them would be skeptical about the extent to which researchers represented disinterested technical advisers rather than political accomplices, particularly in policy areas with high levels of contestation and high stakes.

Much of the information presented in the Persuasion and Defense categories echoes Weiss’s (1979, 1991) tactical and political modes of *research as argument*. However this model assumes that when research is used as argument, it is “diluted,” and “data are selectively lost . . . sheared away in order to make the argument more persuasive” (Weiss 1991, 314), or they are “ripped out of context” (Beyer and Trice 1982,

601). While this may represent the way that many policymakers use research, it does not depict how researchers were used because they had more control over what was said (insofar as anyone can dictate the terms of media reporting). It seems more likely that the researchers we interviewed would see their role in instrumental terms, as educators or advocates (Orr 2010), as champions for the evidence rather than for specific political action. Many of these researchers talked about the importance of message framing, but they were universally opposed to misrepresenting data (Haynes et al. 2011). We encountered no researcher who was regarded by his or her research colleagues or by any policymaker as a political “poodle” or lapdog (Jervis 2010).

Indeed, the credibility of researchers for policymakers, stakeholders, and the public alike was contingent on their being seen as independent representatives of science and, by implication, nonpartisan, dispassionate, and thus antithetical to politics. Our policymakers seldom discussed explicitly the extent to which this archetype was accepted at face value, but they widely agreed that researchers had greater credibility than policymakers did. As one adviser put it, *“For good or for evil, people out there will trust a scientist before they trust a politician.”* Although the public perception of researchers’ independence was important when they were used for persuasive and defensive purposes, policymakers also insisted on independence for technical reasons. They wanted experts to provide innovative ideas, frank and fearless advice, scientifically accurate public education, and empirically based intervention design. Researchers’ ability to appreciate and navigate the rhetorical aspects of policy engagement was considered important in many circumstances, but not all. Those who were poorly versed in political nuance were used in situations in which galvanization, clarification, or advice had a higher priority than did persuasion or defense. Policymakers wanted researchers to assert policy opinions, particularly when they were favorable to the government’s position and could be used to bolster it. Nevertheless, in all cases, the value of researchers’ opinions was seen as contingent on their being genuinely research based and independent, untainted by party political associations or any suggestions of *“ideology”* or *“zealotry.”*

Does it matter whether researchers and policymakers see researchers’ contributions to policymaking through different lenses? Or if policymakers’ intentions are sometimes closer to the political end of the continuum than they claim? We would argue that this is inevitable given the inherent ambiguity of policy, its dependence on persuasion, and the

different interests of each party. Providing that researchers ensure that their activities accord with their values and goals and preserve their professional credibility and integrity, this concern is somewhat moot. Policymakers and researchers share a large expanse of common ground from which they can advance public health to the benefit of all. This point was illustrated by a politician who explained that both governments and public health researchers had a responsibility *"to deliver the greatest good for the greatest number of people."*

Researcher utilization could be both ad hoc and based on relationships, which indicates the limitations of strategies that focus exclusively on relationships to bridge the putative research-policy "cultural divide." If a researcher's influence is determined by the strength of his or her connection with an individual at one level of an organization, it will be subject to bureaucratic vagaries, high levels of staff turnover, and poor communication between siloed branches, departments, and organizations. Advice that informs decision making at one level may be lost at another, even when researchers sit on formal working parties and advisory committees (Flitcroft et al. 2011). In such a complex and often adversarial environment, no single relationship or activity is sufficient to advance research-informed policy. Rather, a diversity of roles is required (Gold 2009).

Policymakers use public health researchers in many ways: as contributors to advisory groups, task forces, and independent committees; as providers of discreet briefings; as presenters at conferences and research-policy forums; as government-commissioned researchers and authors of tailored reports; and as intervention experts who help civil servants design and evaluate research-informed programs. These uses are complemented by researchers working with community groups, professional associations, and advocacy coalitions, many of whom are powerful policy stakeholders, and also contributing to public debate by engaging with the media as educators and/or advocates, both in collaboration with and opposition to government, depending on the circumstances.

Conclusion

This article adds to the evolving research utilization literature by highlighting the roles of people and processes, rather than products, and exploring a hitherto overlooked area of the research-policy dynamic: researcher utilization.

Policymakers valued contextually responsive research expertise, which was frequently accessed more effectively by talking with and “deploying” researchers rather than by reading and distributing written documents. Policy-engaged researchers played a more diverse set of roles in a range of policy processes than standard models recognize. Research-engaged policymakers maximized the value of researchers by harnessing their talents judiciously for purposes that include galvanizing ideas, clarifying and giving advice, public and political persuasion, and defending policies.

The technical/political character of policy development permeated policymakers’ accounts of using researchers, but, broadly speaking, politicians described using researchers mainly as conceptual (Weiss 1979) and rhetorical (Greenhalgh 2006) contributors. In contrast, civil servants used researchers in more varied ways, which included interactive and problem-solving activities in the instrumental mode (Pelz 1978; Weiss 1979). Researcher utilization overlapped with, but did not mirror, models of research utilization.

Policymakers countered the views expressed by some researchers. Politicians and civil servants sought robust dialogue and creative thinking rather than policy compliant advice, and they valued expert opinion when research was insufficient for decision making, as it often was. Despite the negative connotations of “being used,” policymakers supported researchers’ views that, in most cases, researcher utilization was reciprocal and uncompromised. But researchers and policymakers were likely to categorize the forms of utilization differently.

Although the study was limited to Australian policy development at the state level, it is likely to be indicative of a more general tendency for politicians and civil servants to use researchers to further their policy goals. We hope that the patterns of usage that we found will give researchers and policymakers a frame of reference for negotiating and reflecting on the breadth of research utilization activities that can advance the public health goals shared by policymakers and researchers alike.

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