



SAGE Research Methods

How do I design policy focused research?

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Thank you, Naomi Jones, for sparing some time to talk to us today. I wanted to ask you how I might go about designing policy-focused research. Well, that's an excellent question. Policy-focused research can be designed, I think, with several questions in mind. Firstly, what is it that you're trying to achieve?

What are the questions that you want to answer? Who are the audiences that you want to reach? What kind of policy makers do you want to influence and how do you want them to be influenced? What are they likely to do with the research that you've produced? How are they going to use it? How are they going to translate it into policy? I think all these questions need to be answered before you start designing any research.

It's quite common, in my experience, that people get very stuck into designing a methodology and deciding how they're going to approach a particular piece of research before asking what the purpose of the research is. So that's the really crucial thing, first off, is to ask yourself what is it that I want this to achieve. And then set it out, designing something that can achieve that, realistically and pragmatically.

Very good. And typically what do people want to achieve by policy-focused research? What are the range of questions that are likely to be asked? Well, the fantastic thing about research is that, in the UK in particular, it has such a role in building an evidence base that allows policy makers to really transparently show how they're using public money.

So the pinnacle of good policy making is to say, well, let's take a range of evidence, some of which would hopefully need more research, and understand how it is that we can shape policies, answer questions based on this evidence. So I suppose the classic example that we would use at the National Centre for Social Research is evaluation where we are evaluating how a particular piece of policy is working.

So the government might set up a program directed at, I don't know, young people for example, and alongside that program would be a piece of research to evaluate how well it's actually working in practice. Now, that would serve several purposes. On the one hand, it acts as a transparency tool. It shows where the public money is going into that particular policy initiative.

But also, depending on how it's evaluated, the research that we do can throw back questions about how it's working and help those policy makers, then, to reform the policy and reshape it and develop it over time so that it becomes more and more targeted. What about, perhaps, the criticism that this is naive and that, in fact, rather than having evidence-based policy we have policy-based evidence?

Well, I think that's-- I can understand where that criticism might come from. The challenge and the reason, I think, that sometimes comes to light is because there's a translation job to be done between where researchers go out and get public views and turn that into research and then translate it into policy speak.

So things do have to sort of be changed. We do that as research organizations. We go out and say, tell us what you're thinking, public. Tell us what you think of a piece of policy. Tell us what you need. And then we translate that into a language that policy makers can understand. And I think that translation is really important but can sometimes be misinterpreted as reshaping evidence to suit policy rather than actually drawing on hard, rigorous evidence-- which it is and should be.

And it's also about how that translation is done so that evidence can be used in policy. Because research is by definition very nuanced, public opinions are very nuanced, and often what policy makers want to work with, the kind of cold, hard facts, the kind of headline findings that easily, snappily put it into kind of white papers or other kind of papers that might support policy.

And so we've got a translation job to do as researchers that takes that nuance and uses it, but turns

it into something that policy makers can understand and use and draw on. And that's where the real challenge is. And I can understand where the criticism can sometimes come from, but it does work and policy makers do draw on evidence an awful lot of the time. How do we evaluate big policy?

I mean, if we're talking about something like education policy, which may be changed by one government to another, that's an enormous thing to evaluate. What are your criteria for evaluating that? Well, I think the key thing is to be cutting it down into bite-sized chunks. So we wouldn't evaluate education policy as a whole.

We'd evaluate one section of that policy. So, for example, the government recently started rolling out free school meals program, the pilot. That's something that National Centre for Social Research is evaluating. So we're looking at how that's working in practice, what does it mean to those children that are receiving free school meals, what does it mean to the parents, and what it means in reality.

I think to do a good evaluation is to bring together a range of methods and to triangulate those methods. So qualitative methods, quantitative methods, looking at the views of lots of different stakeholders any programs. So an education program might have teachers, parents, pupils involved. Also a range of other stakeholders, including people in the government. And a good evaluation should be getting the views and perspectives from all of those people and triangulating them, and bringing them together into central messages that the policy makers can then use.

And what sort of evidence, then, do policy makers like to use? Well, as I say, policy makers like to use evidence that they can very quickly lift out and put into short briefing papers for ministers or that have hard kind of impact facts in them. So that's quite often statistical evidence, [INAUDIBLE] surveys for example.

And it can be a real challenge because although that evidence is often available, as I say, public perceptions and views are often very nuanced in a way that policy can't always afford to be. So there's a bit of a tension there. But more and more, I've found, policy makers are welcoming the more holistic type of evidence that applied research can produce, including that produced by qualitative research, which draws on people's kind of experiences and attitudes.

And it's just about how you present that and being very careful not to get bogged down in the detail of the methodology that you've used, but drawing out findings. And what policy makers really want as much as the evidence is some interpretation. So presenting the findings isn't enough on its own. What you really need to do is say, right, this is what we think the evidence means for this particular piece of policy and here's why we think it means that, so that you're helping them develop the next phase and working with them.

And the best synthesis of policy and research is where the two come together and work together and say, right, here's the evidence. Here's what we need to achieve, here's how perhaps if we work forward together, drawing all we know from the data. And again, Naomi Jones. Thank you very much. Thank you.