Policy research requires a profoundly different methodology from that on which basic research relies, because policy research is always dedicated to changing the world while basic research seeks to understand it as it is. The notion that if one merely understands the world better, then one will in turn know how to better it, is not supported by the evidence.

Typical policy goals are the reduction of poverty, curbing crime, cutting pollution, or changing some other condition (Mitchell and Mitchell 1969, 393). Even those policies whose purpose is to maintain the status quo are promoting change—they aim to slow down or even reverse processes of deterioration, for instance that of natural monuments or historical documents. When no change is sought, say, when no one is concerned with changing the face of the moon, then there is no need for policy research in that particular area.

Moreover, although understanding the causes of a phenomenon, which successful basic research allows, is helpful in formulating policy, often a large amount of other information that is structured in a different manner best serves policy makers. Policy researchers draw on a large amount of information that has no

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1 The first book to deal with policy sciences and consequently often cited is Lasswell and Lerner's *The Policy Sciences* (1951). However this book does not address the methodological issues at hand. For an early treatment of these issues, see Etzioni 1971b, 1968.
2 For an example of how to structure and present policy research and analysis, see Dunn 1981, 322.
particular analytical base or theoretical background (of the kind that basic research provides). In this sense medical science, which deals with changing bodies and minds, is a prototypical policy science. It is estimated that about half of the information physicians employ has no basis in biology, chemistry, or any other science; but rather it is based on an accumulation of experience. This knowledge is passed on from one medical cohort to another, as “these are the way things are done” and “they work.”

The same holds true for other policy sciences. For instance, criminologists who inform a local government that studies show that rehabilitation works more effectively in minimum security prisons than in maximum security prisons (a fact that can be explained by sociological theoretical concepts based on basic research) know from long experience that they had better also alert the local authorities that such a reduction in security could potentially lead some inmates to escape and commit crimes in surrounding areas. Without being willing to accept such a “side effect” of the changed security policy, those governments who introduced it may well lose the next election and security in the prison will be returned to its previously high level. There is no particular sociological theoretical reason for escapes to rise when security is lowered. It is an observation based on common sense and experience; however it is hardly an observation that policy makers, let alone policy researchers should ignore. (They may though explore ways of coping with this “side effect,” for instance by either preparing the public ahead of time, introducing an alert system when inmates escape, or some other such measure.)

The examples just given seek to illustrate the difference between the information that basic research generates versus information that plays a major role in policy research. That is, there are important parts of the knowledge on which policy research draws that are based on distilled practice and are not derivable from basic research. Much of what follows deals with major differences in the ways that information and analysis are structured in sound policy research in contrast to the ways basic research is carried out.

One clarification before I can proceed: Policy research should not be confused with applied research. Applied research presumes that a policy decision has already been made and those responsible are now looking for the most efficient ways to implement it. Policy research helps to determine what the policy decision ought to be.

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3 For example many policy makers subscribe to George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson’s criminology theories because they make sense, despite the fact that they are not grounded in academic research. See Wilson and Kelling 1982. For criticisms of this approach to criminology, see Miller 2001.

4 “Much” of medicine is not scientifically supported (Inglefinger, Relman, and Findland 1966). “85 percent of the problems a doctor sees in his office are not in the book” (quoted from a physician in Schön 1983, 16).

1. **Malleability**

A major difference between basic and policy research is that malleability is a key variable for the latter though not the former (Weimer and Vining 1989: 4). Indeed for policy researchers it is arguably the single most important variable. Malleability for the purposes at hand ought to be defined as the amount of resources (including time, energy, and political capital) that would have to be expended to cause change in a given variable or variables. For policy research, malleability is a cardinal consideration because resources always fall short of what is required to implement given policy goals. Hence, to employ resources effectively requires determining the relative results to be generated from different patterns of allocation (Dunn 1981, 334–402). In contrast, basic research has no principled reason to favor some factors (or variables) over others. For basic research, it matters little if at all whether a condition under study can be modified and if it can how much it would cost. To illustrate, many sociological studies compare people by gender and age and although these variables may seem relevant, they are of limited value to policy research. Other variables used, such as the levels of income of various populations, the extent of education of various racial and ethnic groups, and the average size of cities, are somewhat more malleable but still not highly so. In contrast, perceptions are much more malleable.

One may say that basic research should reveal a preference for variables that have been less studied; however, such a consideration concerns the economics and politics of science rather than methodology. Because all scientific findings are conditional and temporary and often subject to profound revision and recasting, for basic researchers, retesting old findings can be just as valuable as covering new variables. In short, although in principle for basic research the study of all variables is legitimate, in a given period of time or amongst a given group of scientists, some may consider certain variables as more “interesting” or “promising” than others. In contrast, to reiterate, for policy research, malleability is the most important variable as it is directly related to its core reason for being: Promoting change.

Given the dominance of basic research methodology in the ways policy research is taught, it is not surprising to find that the question of which variables are more malleable than others is rarely studied in any systematic way. Due to the importance of this issue for policy research, some elaboration and illustrations are called for. Economic feasibility is a good case in point. Many policy researchers’ final reports do not include any, not even crude estimates of the costs involved in what they are recommending. Even less common is any consideration of the question of whether such changes can be made acceptable to elected representatives and the public at large; that is, political feasibility (Weimer and Vining 1989, 292–324). For instance, over the last decades several groups favored advancing their policy goals through constitutional amendments, ignoring the fact that these are extremely difficult to get passed.

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6 See for example Free Expression Project 2003; Raver 2002, 3–19.
In other cases, feasibility is treated as a secondary “applied” question to be studied later, after policy makers adopt the recommended policy. However, the issue runs much deeper than the assessments of feasibility of one kind or another. The challenge to policy research is to determine the relative resistance to change according to the different variables that are to be tackled. And this question must be tackled not on an ad hoc basis, but rather as a major part of systematic policy research. Moreover, if the variables involved are studied from this viewpoint, they themselves may be changed; that is, feasibility is enhanced rather than treated as a given.

Another example of the cardinal need to take malleability into account when conducting policy research concerns changing public attitudes. Policy makers often favor a “public education” campaign when they desire to affect people’s beliefs and conduct. Policy makers tend to assume that it is feasible to change such predispositions through a way that might be called the Madison Avenue approach, which entails running a series of commercials (or public service announcements), mounting billboards, obtaining celebrity endorsements, and so on.

For example, the United States engaged in such a campaign in 2003 and 2004 to change the hearts and minds of “the Arab street” through what has also been termed “public diplomacy.”7 The way this was carried out provides a vivid example of lack of attention to feasibility issues. American public diplomacy, developed by the State Department, included commercials, websites, and speakers programs that sought to “reconnect the world’s billion Muslims with the United States the way McDonald’s highlights its billion customers served” (Satloff 2003, 18). It was based on the premise that “blitzing Arab and Muslim countries with Britney Spears videos and Arabic-language sitcoms will earn Washington millions of new Muslim sympathizers” (Satloff 2003, 18). A study found that the results were “disastrous” (Satloff 2003, 18). Some countries declined to air the messages and many Muslims who did see the material viewed it as blatant propaganda and offensive rather than compelling.

Actually, policy researchers bent on studying feasibility report that the Madison Avenue approach works only when large amounts of money are spent to shift people from one product to another when there are next to no differences between them (e.g. two brands of toothpaste) and when there is an inclination to use the product in the first place. However, when these methods are applied to changing attitudes about matters as different as condom use,8 the United Nations,9 electoral reform, and so

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8 For instance, the Centers for Disease Control conducted a ten-year ad campaign to educate Americans about condoms and to encourage their use to prevent HIV transmission. After spending millions of dollars on these ads, a CDC study found that only 45% of sexually active high school students used a condom the last time they had sex; see Scott 1994. A recent evaluation of the program issued an unqualified “no” in answer to the question, “Has the U.S. federal government’s HIV/AIDS television [public service announcement] campaign been designed not only to make the public aware of HIV/AIDS but also to provide appropriate messages to motivate and reinforce behavior change?” See DeJong, Wolf, and Austin 2001, 256. Of the fifty-six ads reviewed, fifty were created by the CDC, the other six were created by the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

9 Star and Hughes 1950, quoted in Berelson and Steiner 1964, 530.
forth, they are much less successful. Changing people’s behavior—say to conserve energy, drive slower, cease smoking—is many hundreds of times more difficult. This is a major reason why totalitarian regimes, despite intensive public education campaigns, usually fail. The question of what is most feasible is determined by fiat by policy makers and their staffs rather than by studies that are reported to the policy makers by policy researchers. Hence decisions are often based on a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants sense of what can be changed rather than on empirical evidence. One of the few exceptions is studies of nation building in which several key policy researchers presented the reasons why such endeavors can be carried out at best only slowly while at the same time many policy makers claimed that it could be achieved in short order and at low cost.

In a preliminary stab at outlining the relative malleability of various factors, one may note that as a rule the laws of nature are not malleable; social relations, including patterns of asset distribution and power, are of limited malleability; and symbolic relations are highly malleable. Thus any policy-making body that would seek to modify the level of gravity, for example, not for a particular situation (for instance a space travel simulator) but in general, will find this task at best extremely difficult to advance. In contrast, those who seek to change a flag, a national motto, the ways people refer to one another (e.g. Ms instead of girl or bro), have a relatively easy time of doing so. Changes in the distribution of wealth among the classes or races—by public policy—are easier than changes involving the laws of nature, but more difficult than changing hearts and minds.

When policy researchers or policy makers ignore these observations and enact laws that seek grand and quick changes in power relations and economic patterns, the laws are soon reversed. A case in point is the developments that ensued when a policy researcher inserted into legislation the phrase “maximum feasible participation of the poor.” This Act was used to try to circumvent prevailing local power structures by directing federal funds to voluntary groups that included the poor on their advisory boards, which thus helped “empower the poor.” The law was nullified shortly thereafter. Similarly, when a constitutional amendment was enacted that banned the consumption of alcohol in the United States, it had some severely distorted effects on the American justice and law enforcement systems and did little actually to reduce the consumption of alcohol. It was also the only constitutional amendment ever to be repealed.

Among social changes, often legal and political reduction in inequality is relatively easier to come by than are socioeconomic changes along similar lines. Thus, African-Americans and women gained *de jure* and *de facto* voting rights long before the differences in their income and representation in the seats of power moved closer to those of whites (in the case of African-Americans) and of men (in the case of women). Nor have socioeconomic differences been reduced nearly as much as legal

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10 Indeed unlike science, Carol Weiss has argued that in the policy field it may be impossible to separate objective knowledge from ideology or interests: see Weiss 1983.
and political differences, although in both realms considerable inequalities remain. The same is true not just for the United States, but for other free societies and those that have been recently liberated.

In short, there are important differences in which dedication of resources, commitment of political capital, and public education are needed in order to bring about change. Sound policy research best makes the determination of which factors are more malleable than others, which is a major subject of study.

2. Scope of Analysis

Another particularly important difference between basic research and policy research methodology concerns the scope of factors that are best encompassed. Policy research at its best encompasses all the major facets of the social phenomenon it is trying to deal with. In contrast, basic research proceeds by fragmenting the world into abstract, analytical slices which are then studied individually.

A wit has suggested that in economics everything has a price; in sociology, nothing has a price. Policy makers and hence researchers are at a disadvantage when they formulate preferred policy alternatives without paying attention to the longer-run economic and budgetary effects—or the effect of such policy on social relations including families (e.g., tax preferences for singles), socioeconomic classes (e.g., estate taxes), and so on.

To put it in elementary terms, a basic researcher may well study only the prices of flowers (together with other economic factors); a physiologist the wilting processes; a social psychologist the symbolic meaning of flowers; and so forth. But a community that plans to grow flowers in its public gardens must deal with most, if not all of these elements and the relations between them. Flowers that are quick to wilt will not be suitable for its public gardens; the community will be willing to pay more for flowers that have a longer life or those that command a positive symbolic meaning, and so on.

Medicine provides another model of a policy science. It cannot be based only on biology, chemistry, anatomy, or any one science that studies a subset of variables relating to the body. Instead physicians draw on all these sciences and add observations of interaction effects among the variables. This forms a medical knowledge base and drives “policy” recommendations (i.e., medical prescriptions). Indeed doctors have often been chastised when they do not take into account still other variables, such as those studied by psychologists and anthropologists. Similarly, international relations is a policy science that best combines variables studied by economists, political scientists, law professors, and many others.

In short, the scope of variables that basic research encompasses can be quite legitimate and effective but also rather narrow. Policy researchers must be more

3. PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

Basic research is a public endeavor. As a rule its results are published so that others can critically assess them and piece them together with their findings and those of still others in order to build ever more encompassing and robust bodies of knowledge. Unpublished work is often not considered when scientists are evaluated for hiring and promoting, for prizes, or for some other reason, especially not if the work is kept secret for commercial or public security reasons. Historically, scientific findings were published in monographs, books, and articles in suitable journals. These served as the main outlets for the findings of basic research both because only by making scientific findings public could they become part of the cumulative scientific knowledge base and also because publication indicates that they have already passed some measure of peer review. It is only through peer review that evidence can be critically scrutinized. In recent years findings are still made public but increasingly they are often posted on websites, most of which lack peer review foundations, which is one reason why they are less trusted and not treated as a full-fledged publication. Publication is still considered an essential element of basic research.

In contrast, the findings of policy research are often not published—they are provided in private to one policy maker or another (Radin 1997, 204–18). The main purpose of policy research is not to contribute to the cumulative process of building knowledge but rather to put to service available knowledge. In that profound sense policy research is often not public but client oriented.13 Although some policy research is conducted in think tanks and public policy schools that may treat it similarly to basic research, more often than not it is conducted in specialized units in government agencies, the White House, corporate associations, and labor unions. And often tools of policy research are memos and briefings, not publications.

Often the findings of policy researchers are considered confidential or are governed by state secret acts (which is the case in many nations that have a less strong view of civil liberties than does the United States). That is, the findings are merely aimed at a specific client or a group of clients, and sharing them with the public is considered an offense.14

14 For instance, the Defense Department has prohibited a Washington think tank from publishing a complete report about the lack of government preparedness for bioterror attacks: see Miller 2004.
4. Communication

Basic researchers, as a rule, are much less concerned with communicating, especially with a larger, "secular" public than are policy researchers. This may at first seem a contradiction to the previously made point that science (in the basic research sense) is public while policy research is often "private" (even when conducted for public officials). The seeming contradiction vanishes once one notes that basic researchers are obligated to share their findings with their colleagues, often a small group, and that they seek feedback from this group for both scientific and psychological validation. However, as a rule basic researchers have little interest in the public at large. Indeed, they tend to be highly critical of those who seek to teach such an audience—as did scholars such as Jay Gould and Carl Sagan (Etzioni 2003, 57–60).

In contrast, policy researchers often recognize the need to mobilize public support for the policies that their findings favor and hence they tend to help policy makers to mobilize such support by communicating with the public. James Fishkin developed a policy idea he called "deliberative democracy," which entailed bringing together a group of people who constitute a living sample of the population for a period of time during which they are exposed to public education and presentations by public figures, and they are given a chance to have a dialogue. By measuring the changes in the views of this living sample, Fishkin found that one is able to learn how to change the public's mind. Fishkin did not just develop the concept and publish his ideas, but conducted a long and intensive campaign through radio, TV, newspapers, visits with public leaders, and much more, until his living sample was implemented in several locations (Fishkin 1997). Indeed, according to Eugene Bardach, policy researchers must prepare themselves for "a long campaign potentially involving many players, including the mass public" (Bardach 2002, 115–17).

Hence, basic researchers are more likely to use technical terms (which may sound like jargon to outsiders), mathematical notations, extensive footnotes, and other such scientific features. On the other hand, policy researchers are more likely to express themselves in the vernacular and avoid technical terms.

One can readily show numerous publications of professors at schools of public policy and even think tanks that are rather similar if not indistinguishable from those of basic researchers. But this is the case because these schools conduct mostly basic, and surprisingly little policy research. For example, on 28 April 2004 Google search found only 210 entries for "policy research methodology," the good part of which referred to university classes by that name. But on closer examination, most entries

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were referring to basic, not policy research methodology. For instance, a course titled "Cultural Policy Research Methodology" at Griffith University in Australia includes in its course description "basic research techniques, particularly survey methodologies, qualitative methods and a more in depth approach to statistics." Many other entries were for classes in policy or research methodology (usually basic). The main reasons for this are (a) because few places train people in the special methodologies that policy research requires and (b) the reward structure is closely tied to basic research. Typically, promotions (especially tenure) at public policy schools are determined by evaluations and votes by senior colleagues from the basic research departments at the same universities or at other ones. Thus the future of an economist at the Harvard Business School may depend on what her colleagues in the Harvard Economics department think of her work. More informally, being invited to become a member of a basic research department is considered a source of prestige and an opportunity to shore up one's training and research. Conversely, only being affiliated with a policy school (like other professional schools) indicates a lack of recognition, which may translate into objective disadvantages. This pecking order, which favors basic over policy (considered "applied") research, is of considerable psychological importance to researchers in practically all universities. Even in think tanks dedicated to policy research, many respect basic research more than policy research and hope to conduct it one day or regret that they are not suited to carry it out.

People who work for think tanks, which are largely dedicated to policy research, often seek to move to universities, in which tenure is more common and there is a greater sense of prestige. Hence many such researchers are keen to keep their "basic" credentials, although often they are unaware of the special methodology that policy research requires or are untutored in carrying it out in the first place because they were trained in basic research modes instead.

At annual meetings of one's discipline, in which findings are presented and evaluated, jobs are negotiated and information about them shared, and prestige scoring is rearranged, policy researchers will typically attend those dominated by their basic research colleagues. And attendance at policy research associations (such as the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management) is meager. Most prizes and other awards available to researchers go to those who conduct basic research.

In short, although the logic of policy research favors it to be more communicative than basic research, this is often not the case because the training and institutional formations in which policy research is largely conducted favor basic research.

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17 This section is based on my personal observations of organizations such as the John F. Kennedy School of Government, the American Enterprise Institute, RAND, CATO, the Heritage Foundation, and many others.
References


