

ASSEMBLING EVIDENCE

Consider the problems confronting you as a researcher preparing an analysis of water pollution control programs for Blue Lake. You know that there is a dirty lake; that federal, state, and local legislation is directed toward the goal of cleaning up the lake (or preventing it from getting much dirtier); and that a state environmental protection office in the area has something to do with administering some or all of the relevant antipollution policies or programs. But you need to know more. You need to map the present policies and programs, their political environment, the ways in which the bureaucracies function to implement them, and the criteria by which experts and nonprofessionals evaluate them. You also need to make some decisions about how *you* will evaluate them. Then, you need to learn what data are relevant to these criteria and figure out how to obtain these data. If you are planning to recommend changes in existing programs, you must develop the evidence that will permit you to make reasonable projections of the likely outcomes. In addition, you must learn what sort of changes the present set of relevant actors may be prepared to make or are capable of making.

These are large challenges, but your resources in time, energy, money, and the goodwill of potential informants and interviewees are probably not at all large. Moreover, you would like to finish the study in no more than six months, let us say, and you do not want to waste the first five months simply getting your bearings. Where are you to begin? And having begun, how are you to proceed efficiently?

GETTING STARTED

The first step is simple: Start with what you know. This injunction may seem self-evident or trivial or both. In fact, it is common for people to act in contradiction of it. Confronted by a new and challenging research task, they expect to flounder anxiously for a few weeks or months. And, behold, they do, for feeling stupid makes you so. Rarely is this waste of time and energy necessary, however. A few facts, or even vague recollections, plus some intelligent reasoning can usually move the project onto firm footing surprisingly quickly. Suppose, for example, that you are asked to do a

policy analysis of “the future of the Wichahissic bituminous coal industry,” a subject as remote from your interest or previous experience as galactic spectroscopy. You might take stock by writing a memo to yourself as follows:

- I was probably asked to do this study because someone thinks the future of the Wichahissic bituminous coal industry is pretty bleak or else because it is looking up. If the former, the results will probably be used to justify some sort of government subsidy; if the latter, the results will be used for promotional purposes by the industry itself or by local merchants whose livelihood depends on the health of the industry.
- The future of any industry depends in part on market demand. The demand for coal has probably been declining, partly due to the availability of substitute fuels.
- Maybe high production costs imperil the health of the industry. Could it be that coal-mining technology is underdeveloped? If so, why? Perhaps the coalfields are running out and the technology has not been developed to handle poor, as opposed to rich, deposits.
- There were a lot of miners’ strikes a few years ago. Are labor–management relations better or worse now? Are wage demands forcing the companies to go under?
- Coal transportation depends on railroads. So, if the railroads are sick, could coal be sick as well?
- Coal is black and sooty, gives off a lot of smoke, and has a nasty carbon footprint. Surely this is an ecological menace. Who, if anyone, is paying attention to this problem? Or is it really a problem? Coal mining destroys the beauty, and probably the ecology, of the countryside. Is this really so? Might the Sierra Club have useful data on these questions?
- Perhaps coal is not sick, just bituminous coal. Maybe the anthracite industry is flourishing. Surely there is a trade association of coal-mining companies with data here. Call up the nearest big coal-mining company and find out its name and address from the public relations office.
- Perhaps coal is okay, but Wichahissic has a problem. But then again, Wichahissic does not seem to be as much in the news as Pokanoka, whose plight seems to be the archetype for “the depressed area.” Check Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) for unemployment figures here.

Writing memos of this kind to yourself is useful not only at the beginning of a project but also whenever you feel yourself beginning to drift toward panic

or confusion. Following this initial stocktaking, you should think of yourself as designing, executing, and periodically readjusting a research strategy that will exploit certain predictable changes in your potential for gaining and utilizing information:

- *Locating relevant sources.* Over time, you decrease your uncertainty about what is worth knowing and how to learn it.
- *Gaining and maintaining access to sources.* (1) Over time, you augment your ability to arrange interviews with busy or hostile persons and to obtain data that are not clearly in the public domain; (2) over time, you also—and unavoidably—use up your access to certain sources, and you must therefore conserve such exhaustible resources for use only when the time is propitious.
- *Accumulating background information as leverage.* Over time, you improve your capacity to interpret data and to force them out of reluctant sources, thereby increasing your background knowledge.
- *Protecting political credibility.* Over time, the research process itself creates an environment that will either help or hinder the adoption and implementation of your—or your client’s—eventual recommendations.

The optimal strategy for managing any of these problems may conflict with the optimal strategies for dealing with the others. Therefore, after each problem is discussed in a separate section, the final section of Part II is reserved for a brief treatment of the trade-offs involved in trying to meet all strategic imperatives simultaneously. We assume throughout that the reader is an inexperienced policy researcher who has had academic training in the social sciences. Hence, we go to some lengths, at various points, to allude to differences between social science research methodology and the methods of policy research. We trust that more experienced researchers will also find some profit in the arguments here, if only to conceptualize more clearly what they have already learned to do intuitively.

A further clarification about the intended audience is in order. You start your task with certain resources and constraints, some of which are derived from your own experience and personality and others from your institutional location. Although institutional location is especially important in designing an optimal research strategy, it is not discussed in this book. Suffice it to say that the resources and constraints of a legislative staff assistant are quite different from those of their counterpart in a bureaucratic setting and are even more dissimilar to those of a student working with a campus-based Public Interest Research Group (PIRG). The strategic advice offered here is intended to be sufficiently general to meet the needs of researchers in any of these circumstances, however.

LOCATING RELEVANT SOURCES

Unlike most social science research, most policy research is derivative rather than original. That is, it is produced by creative play with ideas and data already developed by others. Only occasionally does the policy researcher set out to generate new data or assume responsibility for inventing a bright policy idea from scratch. Instead, the researcher's role is preeminently discovering, collating, interpreting, criticizing, and synthesizing ideas and data that others have developed already. To be sure, social science research often works this way, too, but it also places a much higher premium on originality. In a sense, the policy researcher becomes an expert on experts—those scholars and persons of experience who are thought to be relatively sophisticated about the policy area. (See also Appendix F, “Suggestions for Incorporating ‘Big Data’ and Rigorous Scientific Evidence into Policy Analysis.”)

Consulting Both Documents and People

In policy research, almost all likely sources of information, data, and ideas fall into two general types: documents and people. By *documents* we mean anything that has to be read: websites, journal articles, books, newspapers and magazines, government reports, statistical archives, interoffice memoranda, position papers, bulletins, and so on. By *people* we mean anyone, whether a single individual or a group, who is to be consulted in person. Research on any policy problem usually entails a canvass of both types of sources.

Avoid the pitfall of overemphasizing one type at the expense of the other. Sometimes you fall into the trap out of habit: If you start out interviewing experts, experienced administrators, and other informed persons, you continue doing so until you come to define “interviewing” as what your job is all about. You forget that the experts themselves typically have obtained a good deal of their expertise by studying documents and that much of what administrators offer can also be found in agency reports, legislative hearings, published statutes and regulations, and so on.

Another reason for getting stuck in one medium and neglecting the other is an individual preference for less or more personal interaction—that is, for choosing to conduct your research via the internet or in libraries (or files, in an organizational setting) or for concentrating on fieldwork instead. But it is usually desirable not only to consult both types of sources (documents and people) but also to consult them in alternating order: a spate of interviewing followed by a retreat to the internet or the library followed by another round of interviewing, and so on. If for no other reason, there is probably a psychic economy in arranging and executing a fieldwork agenda in a consolidated time span, as there is in collecting and exploring a large body of documentary material.

In a more general way, however, one source should be used to locate another, and this branching out can just as easily lead from one medium to the other as it can from source to source of the same type. More explicitly, people lead to documents as well as to other people, and documents lead to people as well as to other documents. There are thus four basic branches on the tree of knowledge, each of which we discuss in turn.

People Leading to People

Often, one informant leads spontaneously to another by remarking during the course of an interview or a conversation, “Have you seen X yet? They’re very knowledgeable about . . .” This information can be stimulated by your asking questions such as “Who else would be a good person to talk to about . . . ?” or the more specific “Who would be a good person to see in Agency Y?” For reasons of tact, you might frame the question more tentatively: “Do you think it would be advisable to talk to X—or do you think that would not be advisable?” Sometimes it is a good idea to ask informants explicitly if their names can be used in seeking an appointment with the person they have suggested. This gives the informants an opportunity to protect themselves if they do not want their names to be used and an opportunity to encourage name-dropping if they believe it will serve their interests. (That is, A may wish B to know that A has spoken of B as “a knowledgeable person,” or words to that effect.) Make sure that the informants provide sufficient contact information for you to locate anyone they recommend seeing.

Knowing whom to stay away from is often an important by-product of inquiries such as these. If the informants are trusting and wish to be helpful, they may volunteer a cautionary aside such as “If you do go to see X, you’ll probably find X reserved if not unsympathetic.” Unless X is a very important step in the developmental sequence at that moment, this may very well be a clue not to approach X until better groundwork has been laid for such a meeting. Another important by-product of such inquiries is a file of information on who is friendly, or antagonistic, to whom. Such information will be useful in constructing a map of political and administrative feasibility for any new program that you may eventually propose.

People Leading to Documents

Just as you can ask informants whom else to see or talk to, you can also ask them what else to read and how to obtain it. In visiting informants in their offices, you can sometimes get useful hints by scanning the bookshelves and the papers on tables and desktops for titles and authors or agency names. Also, take away from the interview all the documents that the informant is willing to give you, even if you are not sure how relevant they are. The chances are good that you will turn up some interesting new material in the collection you eventually develop, and, in any case, you may avoid a trip to the library should you later wish to quote these documents or to report precise bibliographic information. Finally, put yourself on mailing lists, so as to be on the receiving end of whatever stream of reports, bulletins, newsletters, circulars, and so on are distributed by organizations operating in the policy area. Many agencies keep budgetary and other numerical information in electronic spreadsheet form; ask if the files can be sent to you or, better yet, copy the files to a USB flash drive before you leave the office.

Documents Leading to Documents

Anyone who has ever written a substantial academic research paper in history or the social sciences has probably learned how to use one document to discover another

through web links, footnotes, and bibliographies. The same procedures work in policy research. In addition, a researcher frequently uncovers references that are incomplete from a strictly academic point of view but that may still be useful for policy research. These include references to agencies or organizations (and even individuals) that have an ongoing responsibility for or interest in the policy area, some of whom can be expected to sponsor studies, reports, position papers, and so on that may prove invaluable.

Once research is under way, documents lead to documents in a relatively straightforward manner and without much difficulty. The problem is in knowing where to start when the research effort is just beginning. The easiest place to begin is the internet, where Google or some other search engine can be used to find the sites of advocacy groups putting forth their views of the problem and possible solutions. These sites probably contain valuable information and are a useful source of ideas and further leads. Because they are likely to be one-sided, however, you should try to find advocacy sites with opposing views.

But advocacy groups are just a beginning. More useful are the websites of policy think tanks, such as the Brookings Institution and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). These are relatively mainstream institutions that produce large numbers of policy-relevant papers annually in almost all policy domains. The best of these papers connect concepts from the social sciences (often by noted scholars) with applied problems, and they often provide an overview of some policy area. Brookings is sometimes said to be a “liberal” think tank and AEI “conservative.” There is some truth in these characterizations, but such labeling is not as important as the fact that each of these institutions cares about its reputation for sound analytic work. It might be fair to say that they have political “orientations” rather than “biases.” The same is generally true of the liberal Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the conservative Heritage Foundation, and the libertarian Cato Institute. In the environmental area, the leading think tank is Resources for the Future, which favors a benefit–cost approach to environmental policy.

The websites of various governmental oversight institutions can be very helpful once you have in mind a particular legislative or regulatory issue. The Congressional Budget Office (www.cbo.gov) does hundreds of studies per year and posts many online. The Government Accountability Office (www.gao.gov) does the same.

Do not be satisfied with only the sites that are accessible by means of a public-domain search engine. If you have access to the online resources of a university (or governmental) library, use it. University or government-wide libraries typically subscribe to databases that can provide access to full-text newspaper and magazine articles (LexisNexis) as well as to abstracts and full-text publications in scholarly journals (JSTOR, in particular). The *CQ Researcher Online*, published by CQ Press, provides access to feature-length journalistic articles dating back to 1991. *National Journal* is similar to the *CQ Researcher*.

Because internet sources are so accessible, it is easy to forget about books (until the day they are all online, of course). Unfortunately, electronic search procedures do not

work as well for finding good and appropriate books as they do for finding articles and relatively ephemeral materials. The best way to locate relevant book-length sources is to find out what the experts and advocates recommend. You can check the bibliographies in journal articles or—following the “people leading to documents” strategy—ask them.

Documents Leading to People

Once having read, or read about, the work done by certain experts, academic or otherwise, you may wish to consult with them face-to-face or by telephone. You should be wary, however, of mistaking the nominal author of a study for the real one, particularly when that author is a person or group in officialdom. The nominal authors of Supreme Court decisions, to take an extreme example, are the associate justices, but the real authors are usually their clerks, who in turn probably draw most of their arguments from the briefs filed by the lawyers on the case. Similarly, you should look behind the agency official whose name appears on the cover of a report, to locate the staff member(s) who did the work and may be named on the inside pages or referred to in a preface.

Seeking Secondhand Information

To find out what individual senators are doing or thinking about a policy problem, you need not necessarily ask the senators themselves. Tens or hundreds of individuals may know the answer, or at least part of the answer. Such secondhand information must be used cautiously and checked constantly for bias or error. But it is not in any a priori sense inferior to information obtained firsthand, which may have its own biases and factual errors. To use a legal analogy, one relies for “truth” on witnesses rather than on defendants, who, after all, cannot easily or prudently be asked to testify against themselves. Sometimes it makes sense to obtain firsthand information as a supplement to the other, particularly if there is reason to think that failure to do so might ultimately jeopardize the credibility of the final research product.

The use of secondhand sources is especially important in seeking political feasibility data. Suppose, for example, that you are planning to recommend that emergency ambulance services be centralized under the city police department and you want to estimate the probable reaction of the fire chief to such a recommendation. You could ask the fire chief directly, but they might not be willing to tell the truth, especially if they were going to hold out their acquiescence in return for better terms or for some reciprocal benefit. That is, the fire chief might in principle be willing to go along with the change—and might even be enthusiastic about it—but for bargaining purposes they might not be prepared to say so. On the other hand, the fire chief might really be against it but not be willing to admit that, lest people call them an obstructionist. In either case, the fire chief is not a reliable source of this information. Eventually, it might be desirable to ask for the fire chief’s opinion directly, but you could probably learn

as much or more by asking instead a variety of secondhand sources such as a veteran city hall reporter, rank-and-file firefighters, someone in the city manager's office, and someone from the police department.

Finding Multiple Sources of Firsthand Information

Suppose that you wish to know about the past relationship between the police and fire departments. Have they been relatively cooperative, antagonistic, or indifferent? If for some reason you do not wish to ask the fire chief, it is always possible to ask the police chief, since they have also been a partner to these relations. Their view or interpretation of the relationship may differ from that of the fire chief, but the police chief is as much a participant and their knowledge just as direct.

This principle has numerous applications. If you want to know what happened at a particular meeting to which you were denied admission (or to which you could not go for other reasons), there are many participants to query. If you want to know how one particular participant behaved at that meeting, you do not necessarily have to ask that participant. You can ask others who attended. If you wish to see a memorandum sent by Smith to Jones, you can ask either Smith or Jones, depending on which one you believe will be more agreeable—or you can obtain a photocopy from a third party.¹

Searching for Sources and Searching for Knowledge

At the beginning of a policy research project, you face a dual uncertainty: about what you think you ought to know and about where you can turn to learn it. These are interdependent questions, in the sense that the reduction of one type of uncertainty is both a consequence of and a condition for the reduction of the other.

Consider first what happens as you clarify your ideas about what you think you ought to know. Simultaneously, you are able to exclude certain sources you would otherwise have consulted, and because you know better what your objectives are, you are able to intensify your search for sources of greater relevance. This is the classic research model, in which ends determine means—that is, a constantly evolving set of knowledge objectives gives shape to the strategy of source selection and consultation. It is as applicable to policy research as to any other sort of social inquiry.

Its exact opposite is also applicable. Because the cost of searching for adequate sources is so high in time and energy, when you find a rich source it is wise to mine it intensively, even if that decision slightly alters your original knowledge objectives. If you wish to make recommendations to the state legislature concerning the reduction of criminal recidivism rates, for instance, the most relevant data source (recidivism in that particular state) may not be as rich—and therefore as useful—as data from the bureau of criminal statistics run by some state that does an especially good job of collecting such data.

One danger in this sort of pragmatism is that you may spend too much of your time on what appears to be a rich source, not knowing that there are much richer ones just around the corner. That is why it is wise to invest a good deal of time initially in canvassing a variety of possible sources and developing a broad overview of both the policy area and what means there are to learn about it. After this initial survey, it is possible to return to sources that look unusually rich. This procedure also guards against the second, and more important, danger in letting the sources guide you: You might lose sight of more desirable and feasible knowledge objectives. In the final analysis, there must be a balance between the classic model of ends (knowledge) dictating means (sources) and the pragmatic model of ends evolving out of the means one has at hand.

GAINING ACCESS AND ENGAGING ASSISTANCE

Gaining access can be a problem. If you wish to interview Assembly Member Jones, you must persuade Jones's appointments secretary that you are on serious business and that in any event you will not be put off. You must arrange an appointment for a not-too-distant date and persist even after Jones breaks the first appointment and fails to show up for the one made in lieu of that one. If you wish to interview Jones a second time, you must take pains to keep this possibility open and perhaps to foster it by your conduct during the first interview.

You may need to engage the active assistance of some informants, especially those who stand at the gateway to an agency's performance and budgetary data. Often these data are in a raw state—that is, the data are in the files but need to be collated and tabulated. Sometimes the data are in a semiprocessed condition; that is, they have been collated and tabulated, but they have not been put in a format intelligible to the researcher. (They are still in a format that is intelligible to the program managers, but this format does not fully reveal the meaning of the data to the researcher.) In such a case, you may wish to know about seeming inconsistencies in the classification of cases or about the meaning of certain class designations that the managers have developed for their own decision-making.

Finally, there are data that have been prepared for public use but have not been processed completely or adequately for your purposes. Suppose that the intramural evaluation staff of a state penal institution, for example, have issued their annual report on releases and recidivists, but you cannot tell from the report how reliably they have ascertained the prior arrest and conviction records of the so-called first offenders. Did they rely on probation officer reports? On prison records? Records from other states? The error structure of an agency's data is often not known to the agency, and if it is, it may not be made known to the public. In this case, as in the case of raw and semiprocessed data, interpretive assistance is needed from the agency itself. How much assistance it is willing to give may depend, in part at least, on how well you have established rapport with the agency and its personnel.

Getting an Appointment

Why should any informant grant you, a mere policy researcher, an interview? American manners and mores provide the most compelling reason—it is part of our definition of courtesy. If someone talks to you, even through your appointments secretary, you are supposed to talk back. Of course, the more powerful, busy, or politically defensive the personage besought, the less will be the force of simple courtesy. In such cases, you might try to appeal to a sense of noblesse oblige or, if you have a prestigious institutional affiliation, to a willingness to exercise your caste privileges. In addition, many people simply feel flattered by the interest of an outsider—even a policy researcher—who wants to listen to them.

More reliable than these appeals to courtesy or vanity, however, is an appeal to political self-interest. Try to indicate that the outcome of your research is likely to have a bearing on the interviewee's (or their agency's) political fortunes and ambitions. It would therefore be prudent for the interviewee to be cooperative, to arrange for you to hear their (or their agency's) point of view, and indeed to use the interview setting to assess the relevant political implications of your work. Of course, it may require some fast talking over the telephone, when you call for an appointment, in order to set the interviewee's mind thinking in these directions. In dealing with an appointments secretary, who will probably be even less sensitive to your political cues, you may have to make your points indelicately explicit. Instead of relying on the vagaries of a telephone conversation or an appointments secretary, it may be useful to write a letter requesting an interview, followed up by a telephone call.

Your informants will often be acquainted with one another and will occasionally talk among themselves about you and your work. Since you want such discussions to serve your interests rather than to work against them, you should try to develop a reputation as a competent, knowledgeable, and energetic researcher who is likely to produce something of intellectual or political significance. The best way to develop such a reputation is actually to be such a person, but, in addition, certain stratagems may prove useful. Attempt, for instance, to become a familiar face, by attending meetings and conferences that your potential informants attend and by loitering around office cafeterias or after-hours places that they frequent. Try to impress people with your ability to gain entrée to meetings that are only quasi-public in nature and by talking in public places to important personages. All this familiarity will backfire if you appear pesky or inept, so some judiciousness is in order. Also, you should appear to be learning quickly and critically while in these settings, rather than observing passively and dully. A notebook or laptop computer, in which you enter notes fast and furiously, is a good stage prop as well as useful in its own right. Likewise, animated conversation, preferably observed rather than overheard, can enhance your appearance in these settings. But do not be indiscreet by becoming a bearer of information from one interviewee to another.

Fieldwork does not proceed rapidly or smoothly. For the most part, you are a hostage to other people's schedules. You can expect delays of several days to several weeks

between the time you request an appointment and the appointment date—and even longer if your informant eventually breaks the appointment and reschedules it for a few weeks later. (Sometimes it seems that research is mainly idle waiting!) This problem is particularly acute if delay in seeing one informant becomes a bottleneck to seeing others. To minimize idleness, it is a good idea to have two or three independent streams of interviewing running simultaneously, so that a bottleneck in any single stream cannot halt your work altogether.

Cultivating Access

Securing repeated access to an individual or agency presents different problems from securing a one-time-only appointment. Courtesy is of almost no use here; the political motive, conversely, is critical. Since the political impact of your work on certain individuals and organizations will almost certainly be adverse, some doors will inevitably be closed to you. Beyond a certain point, there is nothing to be done about them, except to seek alternative means of entry. A perceived political affinity helps, but not much. Repeated access depends, instead, on building personal rapport. This takes time, especially if you are not inclined to appear more friendly and congenial than you really feel. Rapport follows most of all from simple exposure. Think of yourself as an anthropologist who has to spend several months living among the tribe you are studying before being allowed to observe certain sacred rituals and practices.

At the risk of sounding patronizing, we will nevertheless note here that the researcher should observe the basic courtesies. Be on time. Dress appropriately, which generally means with the same degree of formality as the interviewee or just a little less. Be friendly without being overly familiar or presumptuous. If you tape interviews—always a good idea, in order to preserve a record—set up your equipment with minimal fuss and explain that the tapes are for your own reference only. State that you will turn off the tape whenever the informant wishes you to do so.²

Almost invariably, whoever actually assists you in collating and interpreting agency data will see themselves as “doing you a favor,” regardless of how insistent their superiors have been that they make their services freely and generously available to you. As part of the protocol for such a favor, you must reciprocate with expressions of gratitude for this informant’s “going out of their way.” An even more cooperative informant might mail you a copy of a speech they have recently given, knowing that it will be of interest to you. Or they might see to it that you are put on the list of invitees to a banquet at which you will be able to meet a number of potential informants in an informal setting. To a certain extent, this sort of assistance can be encouraged simply by letting people know that it will be welcomed. It can be facilitated by offering telephone and fax numbers or email and postal addresses where you can be reached or where messages can be left for you. It may even be useful to have business cards printed with this information; relative to other research expenses, this one is quite small and can return high dividends.

Exhausting Access

Access can be exhausted, too, not just cultivated and built up. Whereas in some cases repeated exposure helps the researcher to build rapport, in others exposure simply tears it down. In the extreme instance, one exposure is all the relationship will bear; this commonly occurs when the informant is defensive or antagonistic or when they are extremely busy and cannot easily be imposed upon. Other instances are intermediate: The informant is willing to grant two but not three interviews—or three but not four. When you suspect that access to an informant may be exhausted relatively quickly, defer interviewing them until later in the research process, principally because your accumulated knowledge will then support a more productive interview.

Usually, deferring interviews with such informants inflicts no hardship on the researcher, since in the earliest stages, research can be conducted by talking with the legion of lower-level officials and administrative assistants, public relations officers, and so on. Potentially useful information sources are to be found among retired officials and among agency officials who are part of a dissident faction.³ These are rich sources at any time, but they are especially valuable in the early stages of research when it seems advantageous to defer your approach to more highly placed figures in the political establishment.

The researcher's reputation is also susceptible to being exhausted. It is perhaps not in danger of being lost, strictly speaking, so much as it is vulnerable to being transformed into a liability. Instead of being thought of as fair minded, discreet, intelligent, and self-possessed, you may begin to be regarded as a partisan, a talebearer, a dope, or a dupe. The best way to avoid acquiring such an undesirable reputation is to eschew partisanship and indiscretion and, as we have already indicated, to actually be intelligent and self-possessed.

CONDUCTING A POLICY RESEARCH INTERVIEW

Policy research, in its completed form, becomes a political resource. Whatever its merits or demerits as a piece of rational analysis, it amounts to more than that. It may become a justification for certain parties to attack others or to defend themselves against attack and, hence, can be a weapon of persuasion in a war of propaganda. Although the tone and format of published policy research are typically neutral and disinterested, everyone recognizes that the research may be and often is used for political purposes, either by the author or by others. As a result, informants are highly sensitive to the political implications of whatever they tell you. How an informant treats you depends in large part on how they think your work will be brought to bear on their personal or political interests.

Being wary of the possible political implications of what they might reveal, informants may be reluctant to talk freely and honestly. You should assume that all

interviewees confront this problem, even though you may not know to what degree. In more extreme cases, it may be necessary to use various subtle kinds of leverage against the interviewee. Before turning to the problem in its most severe forms, though, we will sketch a basic strategy for conducting policy research interviews in general.

Energizing and Steering the Conversation

The interview process is an interaction carried on between the informant and yourself. In this process, the principal source of energy should be the informant. Your tasks are, first, to encourage the informant to talk and to keep on talking and, once a suitable momentum has been attained, to steer, to redirect, to slow down, or to cross-examine.

In addition to the political motivation, informants will talk because they have a story to tell. It is safe to say that many politicians, administrators, and important staff feel (correctly) that much of their best and most valuable work, which is being done behind the scenes, is unnoticed and underappreciated. They will be surprisingly eager to use you as their conduit to the outside world. Some also want to make their “side of the story” better understood than they think it is—and, if you haven’t heard it from others yet, you may be surprised at how interesting it is.

In most social science research involving interviews, it is assumed that the interviewer is, as much as possible, a neutral instrument for recording data emitted by the respondent. However, this is generally an inappropriate model for policy research interviews. Here the informant assumes that you as an interviewer are anything but a neutral instrument—and it would be foolish for you to try to appear in such an ill-fitting disguise—since the whole object of your research is to arrive at some policy recommendations. Thus, you need not fear probing the informant with provocative and even argumentative questions or comments—or to answer such questions in return. Such exchanges can cause an informant to sharpen their wits and tone up their memory, and may raise their psychic metabolism sufficiently to infuse energy into the whole interview process. If this is done with proper finesse, the informant will appreciate the stimulation. Your finesse as an interviewer, of course, consists of being argumentative without sounding (or being) closed-minded or hostile. It is a good idea to introduce contentious remarks in such a way that the informant, should they wish to do so, can retreat gracefully from the matter at hand into another topic—thus keeping their energy level up rather than dropping into an embarrassed reticence.

Most interviews are conducted at the informant’s place of work. Sometimes, however, a more informal public setting, such as a restaurant or café, should be chosen. Your method of note-taking should be compatible with such an informal setting—perhaps on the back of an envelope handily stored in your pocket for just such occasions.

Apart from energizing the informant, your other main function in the interview process is to steer them onto topics of interest to you. How can this be done?

Sometimes you must interfere in the informant’s conversation stream simply to reestablish your right to speak, temporarily slowing down the informant without

making them lose too much momentum. This can be done by interrupting with a short string of easily answered factual questions pertaining to the subject matter the informant has been discussing. The content of these questions, or at least the last one in the string, should be suitable to work as a transition to the next topic you have in mind. Suppose, for example, that you are interviewing the integrated-social-services coordinator in your county, who is telling you about agency relations with the county's chief administrative officer (CAO). Having heard enough on this subject, you now want to steer the informant onto the agency's current budget request to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The conversation might go like this:

Informant: So you see we've had a devil of a fight with the CAO all the way.

Maybe it's not their fault, of course, the Board of Supervisors being so conservative and the CAO needing support for reappointment—

Researcher: [Interrupting] Yes, the CAO is up for reappointment this year, aren't they?

Informant: Yes.

Researcher: Well, at least the CAO doesn't control your budget, do they?

Informant: True enough.

Researcher: But HUD does—and how are your relations with them? Do you get pretty much what you ask for from them, in the way of a budget, I mean?

The point is not to disguise from the informant the fact that you are trying to steer them away from one topic and onto another, although sometimes this is desirable and should be attempted. The point is really to help the informant move from one topic to another without having to lose momentum or to feel awkward. Indeed, informants will sometimes feel trapped on a topic that they themselves would prefer to leave, and your job at such moments is to help them maneuver off the subject. If you cannot think of where you wish to lead them next, just think of a subject that is not implausible and that is not too demanding emotionally or intellectually. While you go in slow motion through that topic, both you and the informant will have a chance to collect your thoughts and feelings preparatory to moving to the next matter of serious concern.

Involving an informant in discussions of personalities is a delicate matter. The informant must be reassured that you are not turning the interview into a gossip session, that they are not a purveyor of gossip, and that you are not a seeker of it. This can be done by first introducing the name of the personality in a neutral, usually factual, context:

Researcher: A few moments ago you mentioned the Southside Community Health League. Dr. Green has been head of that for about a year now—or is it two?

Informant: Probably closer to two.

Researcher: Maybe it just seems shorter because I remember Dr. Black, Green’s predecessor, so vividly.

Informant: Yes, Black was quite a leader there.

Researcher: Seems people have been more critical of Green—though I have heard quite complimentary things from some sources.

Informant: Yes, Green is pretty controversial, but certainly a competent administrator who has been pretty nice to us—though we deal mainly with the deputy administrator, Dr. White.

Researcher: How come?

Thus, the conversation is turned to personalities by a sequence of small steps, in which each participant encourages the other and in which both assume responsibility for whatever gossipy quality may eventually threaten to intrude. Since personalities are such a sensitive topic, it is even a good idea to sprinkle your conversation with allusions to people about whom you may have no desire to question the informant. When you do want to pursue a discussion of a particular personality, this procedure makes the discussion seem less of a departure from the normal course of topics.

If the informant has unpleasant things to say about the personality under discussion, you may want to take pains to establish your own social, personal, and political distance from that individual. In the example just given, for example, the researcher has referred to “Dr. Green” rather than “Bill Green” and has indicated their distance by suggesting that they are unfamiliar with certain particulars of Green’s career. If the informant has flattering things to say about the individual in question, you may choose to follow a contrary course, though it is always a little risky to appear very close to anybody, lest it arouse suspicions of partiality.

Leveraging the Defensive Informant

Occasionally, you encounter an informant who is irrevocably committed to a defensive posture, for whom “No comment” is the primary safeguard and calculated evasion is the fallback position. Try to diagnose this problem very early in the interview and then reassess your goals for the interview in light of it. Concentrate on gaining information about specific questions that this informant is able to answer but that are probably not answerable by any other source. Since so much of your energy will have to go into cracking the informant’s defenses, focus on some very specific objectives and begin to probe for them right away.

Once these preliminary assessments are out of the way and the interview has turned to specifics, the use of leverage is in order. First, let the informant understand that you are aware of their defensive posture, and signal that you do not intend to be put off by it. You might try to communicate that their defensiveness will not help them, that you know too much already to be shunted aside, and that you have access to other sources who have already told you much and to still others who will be willing to tell you more. Indicate that information from these sources may be more prejudicial to the

informant's interests than their own revelations will be and that they therefore have nothing to lose, but perhaps something to gain, by giving honest answers. A certain amount of bluffing may sometimes be necessary, though this tactic carries obvious risks. It is always better to actually know as much as you pretend to know, and to have access to the sources you claim to have access to, than merely to bluff.

Here is a sample of such an interview, with the head of a prominent local insurance company whom the researcher is pressing hard:

Researcher: One thing I'd like to get more information about is the problem insurance companies have writing policies for merchants in economically marginalized areas.

Informant: [Silence. Pause.]

Researcher: I mean, there may be problems because these policies are risky business propositions.

Informant: [Silence. Pause.]

Researcher: People say they are risky, anyway. Do underwriters in this area consider them risky?

Informant: I can't really say for sure.

Researcher: Well, some people in the Black Merchants Association claim that insurance companies won't write policies for them at all, that they've been classed as "unacceptable risks."

Informant: I don't really know—insurance underwriting is the science of risks, isn't it?

Researcher: [Decides that informant will provide no information on insurance industry doctrines or practices in general, or on the local underwriters in particular. Guesses that informant will be unwilling to discuss the doctrines or rules applied by their own company and decides therefore to concentrate solely on gathering information about the practices of the informant's company.] Perhaps I can clarify my question by being more concrete. In your own Bedrock Casualty Company, are applicants ever turned down because they are thought to be unacceptable risks?

Informant: I can't say for sure. I'm not that close to the operating details of our very large company.

Researcher: Of course. [Signaling they will not be put off] You, or perhaps your secretary, could arrange for me to talk to someone at that level, though, couldn't you? [Seeking a different leverage point] But tell me about the category of "unacceptable risks." Does Bedrock Casualty tell its salespeople that the company will insure any premises provided the insured pays a high enough premium? [Shifting the terms of the question to throw informant off guard] Or is there a limit on how high a premium the company will set?

Informant: Well, we do not like to charge exorbitant premiums, of course—

Researcher: [Interrupting] So within the existing limits on premiums, there might in fact be businesses too risky to insure—hence “unacceptable”? [Holding to offensive] How about cancellations? Has Bedrock canceled or refused to renew any policies of merchants in economically marginalized areas even though they have not filed any claims recently? This is another thing the Black Merchants Association has been complaining about.

Informant: [Deciding researcher knows more than they had thought and seeking preemptive protection against the Black Merchants Association’s allegations] Well, yes, we have canceled a few, in the more riot-prone areas, and refused to renew other policies in that area. We had no choice; we stood to lose a lot of money in case of any trouble.

Researcher: [Graciously ignoring this “confession,” and trying to induce the informant to tell their side of the story] Of course, that’s quite understandable. I think most people recognize this problem. [Now taking aim on a single statistic, the proportion of all Bedrock policies in economically marginalized neighborhoods canceled or not renewed in the last two years] In the past, have you written many policies in that area?

Informant: Yes, we’ve done quite a bit, in the past anyway.

Researcher: You still do insure some business over there, don’t you?

Informant: Yes, we do, though as I say, I’m not too close to the operating details—

Researcher: [Interrupting] Could you estimate what proportion of your policy holders from, say, two years ago you continue to insure? Is it 80 percent, 20 percent? Just to give me some rough idea.

Informant: Well, it would certainly be a lot closer to 80 than 20, but I really don’t know.

Researcher: [Deciding that this would be an interesting datum and that it is worth pursuing vigorously] Can we find out?

Informant: Not easily. It’s not in any files anywhere in that form, and it would be awfully difficult to find out.

Researcher: [Not believing that it would be very difficult, deciding to contribute their own labor to searching the files, if necessary, and resorting to a bluff] People have the impression that Bedrock is less inclined to write policies for merchants in economically marginalized neighborhoods than other companies in this area. I don’t know where the facts come from—but I think some lawyers connected with the Black Merchants Association have been looking into legal aspects . . .

Informant: What? I’m sure we are no worse than, or different from, any other company in town! I’d like to see these so-called facts!

Researcher: If I get any further clarification on that, I’ll be happy to let you know. Meanwhile, I’m willing to help out in whatever way you like in getting this information together concerning your own company’s record in this field.

Let us interrupt this scene without a conclusion because, however it turns out, the researcher has done the best they could. The president of Bedrock Casualty may deliver the information sought, or they may not. Good interviewing strategy and tactics do not guarantee success, especially when the odds are weighted against the researcher to begin with.⁴

One common ploy used by a defensive informant is to reel off masses of irrelevant statistics and facts, which can easily swamp a naively data-worshipping researcher. Another ploy is to ramble garrulously about side issues, while running out the clock on whatever time limit has been set for the interview. Your best defense against these evasive tactics is to be able to recognize them for what they are.

If your own leverage fails—and if the elusive information is sufficiently important to you—you may be able to use someone else’s. A graduate student researcher may have little leverage with determinedly defensive bureaucrats, for instance, but a legislator or staff assistant will almost certainly have more. Hence, as a last resort, you might persuade a sympathetic legislator to help out. Sometimes a newspaper reporter or an established group can be of assistance. The local medical society, for example, may be able to get information from the county hospital administrator about hospital policies that no academic researcher—and perhaps not even a county supervisor—could get.

A significant constraint on using leverage is the desirability of maintaining cordial relations with whatever agency or individual is being pressured, for you run a clear risk of alienating the objects of your leveraging tactics. With respect to a given study, this problem can be mitigated by postponing the more offensive tactics until relatively late, when the study is less vulnerable to being undermined by the offended party. The problem is more difficult, however, when you envision a long-term relationship—lasting well beyond the conclusion of the present research effort—with the agency or individual under scrutiny. Certain information may have to be sacrificed in order to preserve a modicum of goodwill for the future.

USING LANGUAGE TO CHARACTERIZE AND CALIBRATE

The basic medium of the interview is spoken language embedded in a conversational context. Such a medium, when used as a representational device, presents reliability and validity issues (in psychometric terms).

Semantic Tip The simplest issue—to see, though not necessarily to resolve—involves the language of characterization. If an informant says, “Yes, this is a frustrating job,” you have to interpret both the nature and intensity of the word *frustrating* and do so in a way that permits you to calibrate the result against some larger frame or benchmark. This can be done by asking a series of questions designed to do the calibrating. One shortcut is to start by offering up your own characterization and see how the informant reacts to it: “If I had this job, I would find it awfully frustrating, I think.” This quickly establishes a benchmark of some kind—“awfully frustrating”—for you and the informant to use. Of course, there is the problem of knowing whether you and

your informant mean the same thing by the expression, since your frustration thresholds may differ. But you're off to a good start.

An improvement on the previous example would be to create two such benchmarks—that is, to describe a whole continuum with anchors at both ends and perhaps a verbal midpoint. For example, you might ask, “Would you say that your reaction to Proposal X was extremely skeptical—as I’ve inferred from what you already have said—or was it relatively favorable . . . or maybe ‘wait-and-see?’” This approach has the added advantage of respecting virtually any position your informant holds and of communicating your willingness to find anchoring words based in the informant’s own history. Or you could anchor one or both ends in what “other people” have supposedly been saying.

To be sure, by characterizing the available options in this way, you are putting words into other people’s heads and sometimes into their mouths. Before you proposed “X was extremely skeptical,” your informant may never have thought of the proposal in this way, and so you run the risk, by asking the question, of having created such a thought out of thin air. But that risk comes from using language as a medium; it can’t be avoided. Even when you use the ostensibly neutral and clinical language that survey researchers and reporters use, you are putting words into people’s heads and mouths. More provocative characterizations, when used as benchmarks, are on a logical par with the more neutral alternatives offered by survey instruments and professional journalists.

PROTECTING CREDIBILITY

Like social science research, policy research is eventually subject to criticism on intellectual grounds. But unlike social science research, it is even more vulnerable on political grounds and, indeed, is vulnerable to attack by the very subjects of the study. In social science research, the subjects rarely become significant critics of the product, but in policy research their criticism is inevitable. Therefore, the researchers should take steps to protect the ultimate political credibility of their work from politically motivated as well as strictly intellectual attack.

Defending Against Politically Inspired Criticism

In contrast to that of social science research, the primary goal of policy research is not intellectual enlightenment (either yours or that of your professional colleagues), although enlightenment is inevitably a by-product. Instead, the goal is to improve your understanding of a policy problem, and of possible means of coping with it, to the point at which it becomes possible to advocate a responsible course of action. Thus, policy research takes aim at broad and complex phenomena, and so it is typically satisfied with very gross approximations of “truth,” in contrast to social science research, which typically seeks more refined interpretations of narrowly circumscribed problems. The gross and approximate character of policy research is an open invitation to politically inspired criticism. How can you, as the researcher, protect yourself?

For one thing, you should attempt to touch base with any party (or any institutional interest) who might later try to undermine the report by claiming to have been ignored. Indeed, it is a good idea to preempt such claims by quoting that party in the report, as evidence of a sort that the party's views were taken into account. For instance, if you are going to recommend alterations in the way superintendents are selected in a given school district, it will be best to interview representatives from the local association of school administrators and from the local chapters of the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers. Spokespersons for these groups may have interesting opinions to contribute to the research project, but even if they do not, by consulting them you gain protection against their criticisms should they decide to oppose the recommendations in your report. It may even be useful to send out a preliminary copy of the report to these interests for reviews.

Second, you should seek out "experts" or others with political or intellectual authority to whom you can attribute views, opinions, estimates, and so on, about which you feel especially uncertain. Quoting published sources is one way of making such attributions, and including quotations from interviews is another. In addition, you should line up experts who will be willing to speak up in support of your work once it becomes public. Sources who are quoted in the report as having a view on this or that subject become natural targets for inquiring journalists or political decision-makers; these sources have an incentive to defend their quoted views when questioned.

Third, you should pay special attention to potential opponents and identify which propositions they are likely to attack. These target points should be bolstered in advance by expert quotations, and some polite reference should be made to the existence of counterarguments—without giving them too much space or prominence. The very opponents who can be expected to raise objections later should be quoted, to defuse any claims that their arguments or positions were ignored. (There may be additional psychological advantages to the balanced or two-sided presentation, simply as a subtly persuasive form of propaganda directed at the reader.)

Statistics can be useful for buttressing credibility. Employed for this purpose, they play a documentary rather than an informational role. Statistics can document the validity of generalizations that political opponents might otherwise challenge, even though their truth is abundantly evident through more impressionistic sources.

Preparing for Premature Exposure

Politicians and policy researchers work on different timetables. The former often call for "results" well before the research is in any sense finished. Even when no one demands it, however, unexpected opportunities often do present themselves before your research work is close enough to being finished that you can seize the auspicious moment to present your results.

One possible strategy is to map out (as much as possible) the timetable of potential political demands and to arrange your research timetable in at least partial correspondence.

Another strategy is to prepare yourself as soon as possible with answers to the crudest kinds of questions that might be asked of you. Since these are generally the kinds of answers politicians need and want anyway, you may as well formulate them early in the course of your research. Finally, it is important, early on, to line up your supporting experts, as well as to touch base with potential opponents. Since, once again, these contacts must be made eventually, there is good reason to make them sooner rather than later.

STRATEGIC DILEMMAS OF POLICY RESEARCH

By way of summary and conclusion, let us consider a question: Which informants should be approached when? Answering this question forces a useful review of most of the issues discussed earlier.

We may divide the “when” part of the question into “relatively early” and “relatively late” in the course of the research project. Approach the following informants relatively early:

- Persons who are likely to facilitate your search for rich information sources
- Powerful persons who directly or by your reputed connection with them will facilitate your access to sources
- Knowledgeable persons who will provide you with the information you need to hedge against premature political exposure of your work and whose information will contribute to your capacity to exert leverage against defensive interviewees
- Friendly experts who will contribute to your political credibility in case of premature political exposure
- Potential opponents with whom you touch base in order to hedge against premature political exposure

Approach these informants relatively late:

- Hostile or defensive informants against whose tactics a prior buildup of leverage is desirable
- Busy informants to whom you might lose access permanently once you have seen them, or about whom you are not sufficiently informed to interview early
- Potential opponents, especially if powerful, who might try to forestall your access to others and thereby cripple your research efforts
- Administrators who have knowledge of potential trouble spots but who will be unwilling to point them out until it appears to be in their self-interest

There is one obvious contradiction between these two lists—approach potential opponents early and late—and several others that are not quite so obvious. Often the busy and the defensive informants are also in the best position to facilitate the search for sources, open doors, and provide useful information. Top agency administrators, for instance, may have plentiful experience with the policy problem under investigation and may be able to provide easy access to sources, but they also have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo or something very close to it. In any event, they may not take kindly to having their activities scrutinized too carefully by an outsider. Other similar examples can easily be called to mind. There is in principle no way to reconcile these incompatible prescriptions of whom to approach early and whom late. You will have to consider the full details of your particular situation and then balance the risks and rewards inherent in any given choice. There is no way of avoiding such trade-offs; you should simply make them consciously rather than inadvertently.

NOTES

1. The notion of systematically using secondhand sources and the notion of finding multiple sources for firsthand information are foreign to the spirit and practice of much social science research, which typically assumes that when you want to know the mental states or the conduct of a given individual, the best source is that individual. Such a researcher then worries about how to devise measuring instruments and interviews that will register these facts about the individual with the least distortion. Often, this is quite appropriate for the questions requiring basic and original research, when the object is to get pure data for pure understanding. But in policy research, the problem is to get a sufficient understanding of the world to be able to make estimates about alternative courses of action. Since there is much uncertainty about the future, and so many uncontrollable variables that will enter into future action, too much precision about the past and present frequently gets in the way.
2. If you come to sensitive material in the interview, remind the interviewee of your earlier offer to turn off the tape recorder.
3. Former Goldman School colleague William Niskanen observed that colonels twice passed over for promotion to general were a favored source for civilian policy analysts like himself in the US Department of Defense.
4. The researcher's bluffing tactic in this scene is of debatable morality. Although we believe it would be unethical in most circumstances, there are occasions when it can be justified. This is one of them. In this case, the Bedrock president seeks to withhold proprietary information. Do they have a right to do so? Normally, yes. But this right has to be weighed against the injustice of depriving merchants in economically marginalized areas of a nearly essential prerequisite for doing business when they might be perfectly willing to meet reasonable price terms for acquiring the insurance (perhaps with government or philanthropic assistance). The researcher here has an arguable right to try to combat this injustice. Given that right, does the researcher also have the right to use deception? The use of explicit deception on the part of the researcher is balanced by the use of implicit (covert) deception on the part of the insurance company's president.