

Ten top tips for social scientists seeking to influence policy

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/03/15/ten-top-tips-for-social-scientists-seeking-to-influence-policy/

3/15/2017

*The complex, “wicked” problems that afflict contemporary societies pose a significant challenge to those making policy decisions. The work of social scientists can be crucial to understanding the human and social consequences of such decisions, yet little guidance exists to help them bring their influence to bear. **Nadine Marshall** and **Chris Cvitanovic** have compiled ten top tips for social scientists seeking to increase their influence in the policy arena; emphasising the importance of process, engagement, empathy and acumen.*



Responding successfully to modern day challenges represents a significant challenge to decision-makers. Contemporary – often termed “wicked” – problems are characterised by complexity, contested values, and political, social and administrative uncertainty. To respond successfully, decision-makers need knowledge of the human dimension, and of the social consequences of decision-making. Social scientists have a central role to play in this regard, but little guidance exists to help them influence decision-making processes. To overcome this, we have distilled [348 years of cumulative experience shared by 31 experts across three continents](#) into our top ten tips for social scientists seeking to increase their influence in the policy arena. While the focus of our research is in relation to environmental challenges, the advice we generate can be extended to help social scientists from any discipline. Thus, in providing these tips, we hope to empower a science-driven cultural change in science-policy relations and the routine integration of social science into decision-making processes.

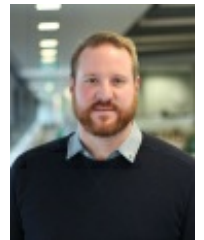




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1. **Acquire policy acumen:** decision-making is about making choices in the face of imperfect knowledge, risk, tight timeframes and complexity. Sometimes science is part of the process; sometimes not. To contribute, social scientists must develop an awareness of the policy world and understand that priorities can change quickly. They should understand that knowledge that fits within preconceived value sets has more potential to be influential and that not all knowledge gaps are equally important to decision-makers. Scientists might best acquire this acumen by developing relationships with policymakers, attending policy events and keeping abreast of policy processes and outputs.
2. **It's all about process:** influencing decision-making is an art. It is about long-term engagement to build strong relationships. This can be achieved, for example, via knowledge co-production, whereby scientists actively engage decision-makers in all aspects of the scientific process. Social scientists that set out to be part of the policy process from the beginning are more likely to be effective. The more time scientists spend with decision-makers, the more likely decision-makers will trust the scientist and assimilate information by osmosis. This can be achieved by scientists temporarily embedding themselves in a policy section through secondments or as part of a collaborative project.
3. **Sit in their seat:** decision-making processes are frequently participative. Social scientists are more likely to be invited into the process when they are empathetic to the competing goals of policy. To do so social scientists should become aware of, and acknowledge, political and policy realities, as well as the complexities and challenges of decision-making. They should help decision-makers to understand risks, uncertainties and complexities and canvass policy options without bias towards their own work.

4. **Be free to focus on strong science:** policymakers will often prefer to work with scientists that have already established themselves in their field. If the science is excellent and relevant, social scientists will gain a reputation for providing vision and insight into problems, at which point social scientists can use their authority to simplify and generalise beyond the comfort zone of a conventional scientist.
5. **Engage, educate and enable:** the relationship between scientists and the public is changing. In contemporary society, citizens often express their beliefs in, and doubts of, science. The opinion of the voting public and the media are often more influential to policy processes than the science itself. Thus, influencing these and helping the public understand social issues can be an effective way to also influence policy. In developing messages for the public, social scientists should be compelling, clear, and authoritative, and should not hide behind the science (for example, numbers and probabilities can be confusing, imprecise and overly qualified). Too much detail can alienate an audience (detail should be left for publications). It is often more compelling to use comparisons and rankings such as highest, lowest, increasing and decreasing. Turn your data in to widely accessible forms such as infographics, narratives or scenarios to be more influential.
6. **Consider brokering:** the messenger can be more influential than the message, and thus social scientists could consider engaging a knowledge broker. [Knowledge brokering is emerging as a distinct specialisation](#) and can be an effective way to influence policy.
7. **Foresee opportunity:** sometimes it is not possible to influence policy processes once they are in train. This is when scientists need to identify where and when future opportunities might emerge. These opportunities might include a change in government, minister or senior bureaucrat, as each of these represents a new policy window.
8. **Integration is the new black:** understanding and responding to contemporary issues requires an interdisciplinary approach to research. Working across disciplines helps to expose knowledge blind spots, questions assumptions, exposes trade-offs and leads to better solutions. Social scientists should engage and collaborate outside of their discipline. They should do this by sharing knowledge, focusing on process, output and outcome, and acknowledging disciplinary differences in science approaches.
9. **Know thy strengths:** social scientists should be practical and recognise what they are personally good at and where their discipline excels, and offer these to the policy problem at hand. By remaining focused in your areas of strength, you increase your credibility to policymakers.
10. **Validate and add value:** social scientists are often expected to bring about cultural and behavioural change even though this role may not quite meet the expectations of social scientists nor represent the spectrum of skills a social scientist possesses. Nevertheless, helping the public to understand the complexity associated with decision-making processes and how a decision was finally reached provides an essential service to decision-makers. Thus, our results show that social scientists that go “above and beyond” what is required of them and add value to research by assisting in its facilitation or implementation, or by validating decisions within the public arena, can achieve significant impact sooner.

More information can be found in our open access publication, details of which can be found below.

This blog post is based on the authors' co-written article, [‘Empirically derived guidance for social scientists to influence environmental policy’](#), published in PLoS ONE (DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0171950).

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