

Commentary.

Implications for Research Roles in Policy Analysis and Evaluation

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I shall begin by summarizing some of the work of my office. In many respects, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) serves as a policy think tank within the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). We act as a liaison between the Secretary and the various departmental agencies (e.g., National Institutes of Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Health Care Financing Administration) by translating the work of these agencies into development and modification of programs and policies to be considered by the Secretary and the Congress. Our work is bi-directional: we also attempt to translate the broad directives and policy concepts of the Secretary into viable and practical guidelines that will help agencies develop and implement program and policy objectives. In addition, ASPE sponsors a limited program of intramural and extramural research to assess important policy issues, evaluate the effects of current policies or programs within the department, and explore the potential ramifications of proposed modifications to existing programs or policies.

It is from this perspective of policy analysis and evaluation that I offer several friendly challenges to readers conceptualizing their future research and activities concerning the relationships among stress, social conditions, and health outcomes.

First, I encourage future research to broaden the concept of “social conditions” to include changes in public policies that influence or affect the stress levels, available resources, and health outcomes of individuals, families, and communities. There are increasing indications from Congress and the American people that the policies of the status quo (particularly in the areas of welfare and health care) are no longer entirely acceptable or sustainable. Efforts to modify existing programs have already begun and are rapidly accelerating. At present, at least 33 states have received approval from DHHS to make various modifications in their state welfare programs (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) and at least 12 states have garnered approval to modify their Medicaid programs to move enrolled individuals into systems of managed care. If the prevailing sentiment in Congress is successful, changes will be even more dramatic; many of these programs would actually become block grants, with increased state discretion over how to allocate and distribute funds.

As social scientists, you have the capacity to rigorously and methodically examine the impact of these policy changes on the stress and health of affected individuals. Incorporating these variables into research efforts that seek to assess specific effects of various policy changes would further our understanding of how these policies influence important outcomes. For example, adding questions to health status surveys to identify the type of managed care plan in which an individual is enrolled (e.g., health maintenance organization, independent practitioner association, point of service plan) may indicate an important moderating effect of health care arrangement on relations between stress and health outcomes.

Another possible contribution you could make to the analysis of policy changes would be to assess directly the effects of these changes on the stress and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities through use of controlled or experimental research studies. Historically, social scientists have contributed greatly to our understanding of the impact on individuals’ physical and psychological functioning of major policy changes such as affirmative action, school desegregation, and deinstitutionalization. Similarly, careful evaluations of the effects of current policy changes in welfare and health care programs would provide a much richer understanding of how different modifications in these broad-based public programs influence various health and functioning outcomes for individuals and families.

My second challenge is to encourage you and your colleagues to engage more deeply and in new ways in the policy process. The path that leads from an idea or concept to the development of a bill, and further to enactment of legislation, is quite complex. Along the way, there are many opportunities to influence the policy-making process. For example, putting a brief summary of the preliminary results of your study into the hands of policy analysts may provide them with useful data to support or refute various legislative or policy positions. This type of brief (1- to 2- page) summary in your own words accomplishes two goals: (a) it increases the likelihood that such information will be useful to (and easily digested by) decision-makers, and (b) it combats the tendency of others to simplify, paraphrase, or otherwise misrepresent the results of your research.

Not all efforts to inform or exert influence are proactive_ in fact much of the important influence that social scientists might wield is in providing data and expert commentary in reaction to proposed legislation or policy changes. Such data and analysis can play a crucial role in helping decision-makers carefully weigh the benefits and limitations of various policy options. Efforts to make yourself and your work known to trade associations, advocacy groups, and the legislative staffs of various local, state, and federal elected representatives may provide diverse opportunities to inform these individuals or groups about how your research efforts can shed light on important issues related to different policy options. As is often the case in efforts to inform and persuade individuals, the effort to cultivate personal contacts and relationships can make a difference.

My third and final challenge is to renew your efforts to effectively use different sources to convey your ideas. Several of the workshop presenters noted the responsibility of social scientists to communicate their understanding of various problems affecting individuals, families, and communities and to provide ideas about what can be done to alleviate these problems. While scientific and professional journals are one outlet for disseminating important ideas, other vehicles may inform broader audiences of a particularly relevant message or set of findings. Some examples include the use of commentary or op-ed pieces in local newspapers, interviews on local radio or television programs, or invited speeches to local, state, or federal associations, commissions, or advocacy groups. Through these and other mechanisms, social scientists have an important opportunity to inform and educate the public about how the results of their research may improve the health and well being of themselves, their families, and their communities.

I am well aware that the challenges I have proposed are time-consuming and may not be directly rewarded within the current organization and structure of many academic institutions. However, it does not require an advanced degree to surmise that the participants in this workshop would not be studying the relationship between social conditions, stress, resources, and health if they did not believe that their research could help improve the life conditions of those they study. For this reason, I believe that if you are willing to accept the challenges I have offered-- to examine the effects of policy changes, to engage more deeply in the policy process, and to expand the communication of your ideas-- you will greatly enhance the possibility that the positive impact of your research will touch the lives of more than just the participants of your investigations.

