

11.800, Knowledge in the Public Arena: The Uses and Abuses of Research  
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**Session 7**

Communicating research knowledge in social policy: the case of Moving to Opportunity

- I. Guest Lecturer: Jeffrey Liebman
  - a. Background: Moving to Opportunity (MTO)
    - i. Dissertation on tax credits, Earned Income Tax Credit research – why people respond to some incentives and not others.
    - ii. Moving to Opportunity program: use a variety of research strategies; economists hired to measure earnings and outcomes.
      1. Spent one year observing program before setting up quantitative analysis
      2. Primary motivator was fear of random violence vs. desire for better jobs – very stressful
        - a. Families that move talked about tranquility
      3. Suggest to HUD that analysis include health outcomes
        - a. HUD initially rejected – trying to position work in terms of changes in welfare policy, eventually allows
      4. Negligible impact on income and education, strong effect on health and mental health
    - iii. Additional issues raised during research process
      1. After results published on 2-year results at Boston site, summaries of findings were produced, but the results reported in the summaries were not the actual findings
        - a. More positive effects were reported in summaries than in the findings (which saw no effect)
        - b. People so much wanted the program to be a success that they misinterpreted the findings.
      2. Challenge of whether to publicize research prior to peer review process
        - a. In economics, it is quite common for working papers to show up in the New York Times
        - b. 2-year results were published before the end of the peer-review process
        - c. For 5 year results, the work was kept out of the media until after the peer-review process
- II. Discussion Questions
  - a. How is a piece of research part of a broader conversation?
    - i. Affects the dialogue that happens
    - ii. Affects what news stories the media are interested in and how the results will be interpreted
  - b. What conversation do we want it to be a part of?
    - i. Link between MTO and the overhaul of the cash-transfer program for the poor (welfare reform 1996)
    - ii. Lots of policy was meant to connect to the welfare reform effort
    - iii. HUD looked for ways to be supportive of the administration's larger agenda

1. Importance of framing, coupling of issues by policy entrepreneurs
- c. Government as a source of demand for research
  - i. What kinds of research does government demand and why?
    1. The New Deal era didn't include an evaluation component
    2. By the 1960s the need for testing was felt
      - a. Social scientists offered methods for testing programs
  - ii. Government is a market for knowledge
  - iii. How does government respond to the results that it receives
    1. Has the window of opportunity closed?
    2. Do the results conflict with policy?
  - iv. What is the value of the results?
    1. Was there enough funding?
    2. Was the methodology good?
- d. Policy community and public at large – dealing with complexity
  - i. How the policy community and the public deal with complexity and the qualifiers that researchers are accustomed to dealing with?
    1. Information age
    2. Multiple media outlets
      - a. Where are the safeguards?
      - b. How do you ensure that the public will use research responsibly?

### III. Discussion Response

- a. Historical parallel
  - i. The negative income tax
    1. Professionals shaping policy and research are hard-pressed to see results that are different from the policy frame.
    2. 1950s frustration with welfare system because of the incentives for people not to work, and system was seen as punitive and stigmatized
      - a. Milton Friedman, Kenneth Tobin (two camps of economics) both supported the negative income tax
      - b. Moynihan convinces Nixon administration to integrate wealth redistribution into tax system through negative income tax (could not get through Congress)
      - c. Effort to push negative income tax was damaged by offer to test the impact of the tax, as well as the introduction of a third faction in Congress
    3. Policy income tax experiment taught policy researchers how to do large-scale experiments; the science wasn't strong enough to work with
- b. What are the hypotheses about why this program didn't have the anticipated impact
  - i. Were certain types of resources necessary?
    1. People didn't move from the Boston school system to the Newton school system. They moved from schools in the bottom 10<sup>th</sup> percentile to bottom 30<sup>th</sup> percentile.

- a. However, more dramatic change might have introduced new problems of isolation, etc.
    - ii. What theory was underlying the experiment:
      - 1. William Julius Wilson: concentrated poverty causes social norms to break down, and if you get people out of those concentrated poverty situations, you would see an effect.
      - 2. MTO did not support that theory
  - c. Schizophrenia of policy discussion
    - i. Poor are very different from everyone else vs. the poor are just like the rest of us.
      - 1. Many social phenomena that span different classes and groups of people within a society.
  - d. Dealing with media misinformation
    - i. How do you deal with situations where research goes into the media in ways that are contrary to the findings and misleading
      - 1. Negotiations with reporters, letters to the editor, etc. for high profile issues
      - 2. Sometimes reporters didn't ask about something that they should have and they provided misinformation
      - 3. Choosing only one or two things to be on the record.
      - 4. There is some chance to set the record straight if an article generates attention such that other media outlets call.
    - ii. The problem of agendas
      - 1. If people approach you with an agenda and their own story, you should be careful.
  - e. Final evaluation analysis is currently being designed
    - i. The evaluation is including bio-markers
      - 1. Researchers impact the client
- IV. Working with the news media
- a. Who initiates the contact?
    - i. Are you responding to media interest or are you trying to get something into the news?
      - 1. Who shapes the story?
      - 2. Is there already a story that you are being fit into?
        - a. If you are dealing with a reporter working on deadline, there is likely to be a story already in place
        - b. Feature stories – job is to go in-depth, may work weeks or months
        - c. Book project by established journalist
          - i. Different opportunity to cultivate a relationship over time
  - b. What kind of media are you dealing with?
    - i. Media is in flux
      - 1. Previously, was only print and broadcast
      - 2. Now, the internet has many blogs with almost no readers, some researchers have their own blogs
      - 3. Rules about level of control, what is the story, what are the incentives for reporters are still relevant.
        - a. Importance of narrative / stories
    - ii. Comments

1. Reporters can get facts wrong
  - a. Information handed over, reporters are busy
  - b. They don't ask about things they should ask about
2. Reporters don't always go to the right person
  - a. Referrals are important
3. Those in the market for research, especially foundations, have developed their communications mechanisms
  - a. Have developed long-term relationships with the media.