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Mind the gap between research findings and policy change

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Abstract

This discursive article is intended as an advisory to novice scholar-researchers working in the field of policy change. It defines key policy change terms, presents a matrix of fifteen key theories of policy change, and explains the roles of policy advocate/entrepreneur and political entrepreneur in the process.

1. Introduction

Policy change and policy reform literature contains a complicated mix of framework theories and models. Most theories evolved separately and were not designed with comparability or synthesis in mind. Different theories use relatively different worldviews, frames of references, foci and conceptual definitions. Their assumptions and features may either complement or contradict each other, and they may even attach different meanings to the same concepts. So, how does the scholar-researcher select coherent and conceptually sustainable policy change theory to underpin their research paradigm, research design and analytical framework so that there may be a policy change impact as a result? How does the policy researcher transition to policy change agent?

Heikkila and Cairney (2017) argue that any theory, including policy change theory, should have specific features or basic elements which can be measured against a set of criteria, and that scholar-researchers should be able to satisfy themselves that their chosen theory can satisfy the following test:

- The extent to which the theory has a defined scope and level of analysis
- That it has a shared vocabulary without ambiguity
- That it has clearly defined concepts

- That it acknowledges explicit assumptions
- That there is an identifiable vocabulary across key concepts and variables.

How helpful this test of a theory actually is in helping the novice researcher to understand the processes of policy change and how to work within those processes is open to question. In any case, the literature on policy change theory concurs on the opinion that, because policy change is complex and 'messy' (Smith and Katikireddi, 2013) there can be no single, adequate general theory to apply in all contexts.

So, given that policy change theory is complex and often contradictory, and given that the policy change process is likewise non-linear, unpredictable and sometimes irrational, how does the scholar-researcher choose a sustainable theoretical framework to design the research exercise and to analyse the data arising? How can researchers ensure that their research paradigm produces data that are readily understood by policy change stakeholders to whom they are addressed?

The OECD review (Cerna, 2013) of policy change theories argues that much social and educational research projects use 'untheoretical' approaches and chose to focus on 'what works' in implementation. The review argues that there is a considerable gap between what researchers *do* and what they *should know* with regard to the dynamics of policy change, particularly in education. What researchers cannot allow for within a policy change paradigm is whether or not the recommended policy changes or reforms actually get implemented. Fullan (2000) notes that reform as an intentional intervention through policy may or may not generate change, particularly in education.

So, where does this leave the novice scholar-researcher working towards policy change recommendations based on their research data? How wide is the gap between the scholarly research project and the complex and multi-faceted world of policy change? Roberts and King (1987 and 1991), Smith and Katikireddi (2013), Stachowiak (2013) and Heikkila and Cairney (2017) suggest that the gap could be narrower if the researcher has a good understanding of policy change theories and how they may or may not facilitate policy change 'actors' to use research data to negotiate the precarious path to policy change or policy reform that is

accompanied by enabling directives or legal frameworks and by the resources to implement them.

With this in mind, the remainder of this article defines key policy change terms, presents a matrix of fifteen key theories of policy change, and explains the roles of policy advocate/entrepreneur and political entrepreneur in the process.

2. Definitions of key terms

The purpose of the definitions below is to reduce ambiguity and to aid conceptual clarity for the novice policy researcher, though they do not fully capture the nuances of language and the various interpretations of concepts possible in the policy field.

A **policy** is a deliberate course of action, or a set of principled decisions, leading to a particular course of action with a set of procedures and/or protocols to achieve rational outcomes for a group, an organisation, a system, or a government. A policy is generally expressed as a statement of intent for implementation. Policies differ from sets of rules or laws, but often lead to sets of rules and/or enactment of laws.

Policy innovations are relatively large-scale phenomena, highly visible to potential actors and observers that represent a break with preceding governmental or organisational responses to the range of problems to which they are addressed. Policy innovations may be a response to a crisis, or may be more evolutionary/incremental, but they all tend to have institutional or societal impacts that are likely to last for some time. Policy innovations generally follow a sequence of three phases: initiation, enactment, and implementation.

Policy change or **policy reform?** Policy change refers to incremental shifts in existing structures, or new and innovatory practices. Policy reform usually refers to a major policy change. Reform as an intentional intervention through policy may or may not generate change, because large organisations/systems tend to be 'sticky' and resistant to change.

Policy change agent/change advocate/change champion is an individual, or individuals, from inside or outside an organisation who promote and supports a new way of doing something within an organisation, within a system, or at state level. The change could be a new process or procedure, a new operational structure, or a cultural shift in practices. Such a change agent could be described as a catalyst for change where he/she/they inspire or influence key leaders to initiate change to either *re*form or *trans*form policies. A change champion usually has a visible presence and may be a figurehead or thought leader who inspires others, whereas a change agent may sometimes work behind the scenes to achieve implementation of change. A change agent may variously promote, champion, enable and/or support changes. Roberts and King (1991) drawing on Schon (1971) define successful policy innovators as groups of individuals who challenge the system, are irrationally committed to the inventions they champion, operate informally and sometimes subversively, exploit networks and mobilise outside pressure, sometimes becoming heroes or martyrs to the cause. However, they are also strategic, are important sources of innovatory ideas, are critical lynchpins to galvanise a network of support for their ideas, and are successful advocates to push an idea into the arena

of debate for legitimation, adoption and implementation. Roberts and King chose the term 'policy entrepreneur' to describe this category of change agents (*ibid*). The term has sustained since and permeates contemporary literature on the subject.

3. Theories of policy change

The OECD review (Cerna, 2013) of theoretical approaches to understanding how policy change happens in education argues that there is frequently an 'untheoretical approach' and a preference for pragmatism, for 'what works'. They further argue that policy change may not lead to desired results if the process of implementation is omitted from consideration. To address this lacuna in the literature on policy change and change management, their review discusses the strengths and weaknesses of ten theories and models of policy change: path dependence; advocacy coalition framework; policy learning; policy diffusion; punctuated equilibrium/crisis/shock; institutional change; multi-level governance; policy networks; disruptive innovation; and the politics of change and reform. The review also critiques the policy implementation concepts of top-down/bottom-up policy development, rational choice theory, and game theory.

For the purposes of this article, fifteen of the most relevant policy change theories across the literature (Sabatier,1988; Baumgartner and Jones, 1991; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Streeck and Thelen, 2005; Shipan and Volden, 2008; Cerna, 2013; Smith and Katikireddi, 2013; Stachowiak, 2013; Heikkila and Cairney, 2017) have been selected for analysis in a basic matrix as follows: path dependence; advocacy coalition formwork; policy diffusion and policy learning; punctuated equilibrium/crisis/shock; institutional change; multi-level governance; policy networks; disruptive innovations; policy window/agenda setting; power elites/power politics; regime theory; messaging theory and media influence; grassroots mobilisation; single-issue groups; diffusion to a critical mass. In each case the theory is defined, followed by a brief outline of its strengths and weaknesses, and when the theory may be useful to the policy researcher-scholar.

Matrix of Policy Change Theories

Theory	Definition/Key features/How change happens	Strengths & Weaknesses	When this theory may be useful
Path dependence Historical institutionalisation Shared heuristics and cognitive bias Policy inertia	Institutional systems are 'sticky' and self-preserving with shared heuristics. Once a path is decided, the costs of reversal would be prohibitive. Past decisions encourage policy continuity and/or resistance to change. Policy-makers would have to wait for a critical juncture or crisis to make a new change. Inertia/deliberate inaction is a common feature of institutionalisation.	Policy continuity is likely. Policy change unlikely Policy actors become institutionalised. Prevention of cross cutting policies. Difficult to show if costs and dynamics of current policy would improve by change. Key actors may not know how to choose options for reform in times of crisis.	Understanding of this theory is essential when cross-institutional or multi-departmental policy change is being sought.
Advocacy coalition framework (elected and agency officials, interest groups, researchers, NGOs, think-tanks, professional bodies, practitioner-researchers)	Key advocates link around sets of core ideas and beliefs about causation and value in public policy, seeking consensus on ideas that can be operationalised. When a crisis or shock happens, these ideas are acted on by related networks in different sub-systems.	Consensus around policies in times of crisis reduce conflicts and tend to facilitate solutions to common problems. Coalitions can influence government programmes and thus influence policy instruments, policy outputs and policy impact. A coalition of elite interests can maintain existing strata/tiers of power through policy influence, cultural norms and political influence, particularly in education. Can romanticise causes and demonise opponents	Useful when there is a sympathetic administration in office. Useful when there is a strong group of allies with a 'battle of beliefs' a similar goal.
Policy diffusion	Policy innovations spreading from one state to another regarding policy instruments, administrative	Clarity across learning about organisations, programmes and policies.	Useful when using comparative case studies to support policy change.

and policy learning	arrangements, recording and reporting, such as in the EU	Difficult to localise learning across national systems. Not easy to identify the locus, form, or learning involved not clear if learning is at government level, operational level or individual learning.	
'Large leaps' Punctuation equilibrium/crisis/shock	Once a particular 'disruptive' idea among competing ideas attracts popular positive attention it will expand rapidly and can become unstoppable. It is a combination of shared beliefs and values (images) on a particular issue that has a political locus (policy venue)	Policy makers need to think carefully about policy image and venues for action so as to keep coalitions on board. The model can grow so fast it loses shape/focus. Different 'venues' can create different cultures and power dynamics with differing potential for policy influence. As the venue changes, so can the image. As the image of policy changes so does the decisional venue. Policymakers may ignore evidence for years.	Large-scale policy change in times of crisis or shock may be essential to apply new solutions immediately. Bursts of global priority development for example COVID vaccines Shock/crisis changes may have budget implications. Large scale policy change will require large media-related capacity.
Institutional change	Policy change and institutional change sometimes overlap. Both institutional and policy changes within responsible bodies may be incremental or abrupt. They can be monitored indirectly for the public interest on behalf of society.	Fullan (2000) argues that change in education needs to be managed through discrete theories beyond institutional change. It is not always clear where the dividing line between institutional change and policy change actually lies.	Focus on context, actors and institutions and implicitly on ideas, networks and subsystems
Multi-level governance	Policy change processes can involve several government layers and dimensions with authority dispersed	Levels of governance can be both a policy response to change and a source of policy change.	When trying to find propose and adopt solutions for context specific policy problems. Key sources of context

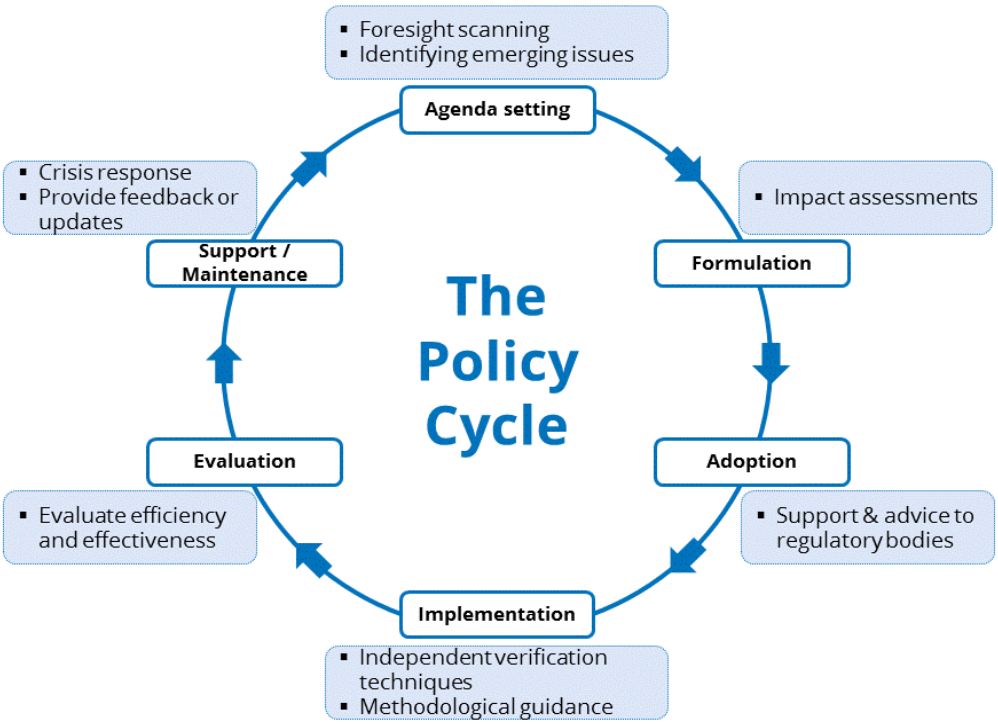
	across multiple tiers and a variety of actors (such as policy entrepreneurs)	Complexity of negotiating across multiple layers and multiple actors requires careful co-ordination. Decision-making can become too diffuse for efficiency.	include the 'national mood' and how it is interpreted.
Policy networks Knowledge brokers	A cluster or complex of organisations connected to each other by resource dependencies. Distinguished from other clusters by breaks in the structure or resource dependencies.	Social networks and professional practice networks can become collective policy networks to achieve shared aims. Can become institutionalised. Can be regarded as a metaphor only. Often disperse after the initial external policy shock. Defined by decisions and actions only rather than relationships and process	Useful for examining complex interactions between a large number of stakeholders in both the public and private sector (broad focus on actors, networks and ideas).
Disruptive innovation	Policy decision to provide an alternative service or solution to a problem that appears to be disruptive of, and lesser than, existing arrangements.	Useful for policies around alternative systems and instruments, such as access routes to education. May indicate a policy of budget reduction. May not attract political consensus.	Useful in times of challenge and reform e.g. online learning in a pandemic.
Policy window or Agenda-setting	Policy can be changed during a window of opportunity when successful advocates can connect two or more components of the policy process including how the problem is defined, and possible policy solutions in the immediate context	The redistribution of 'gatekeeper' power Shaping reality and increased media coverage of issues Increased visibility may help issues to move higher up the policy agenda Problem with bias, credibility and neutrality	Useful when multiple streams of a problem definition, policy solution and implementation can be addressed simultaneously. Useful when there is sufficient capacity to immediately act on a policy initiative.
Power elites/ Power politics	Policy change is made when working directly with those who have the power to both influence and change policy	Political system stratification Some people have more power than others Elites can be members of specific organisations	You have at least one major power-holder supporting the cause. The focus may be on incremental administrative or rule change.

Regime theory	Policy change happens when a powerful, close-knit body of influential individuals support it	Team members bring resources such as strategic knowledge, capacity to act, relationships with other allies and financial control. Run effectively regimes attract new allies. Regimes are stable however; the costs of changing or starting a new regime are high.	Useful when a strong group of non-politicians is deeply involved in policy-making, such as professional bodies. Useful when you can have access to such groups to become part of the policy decision-making.
Messaging theory	How a message for policy change is presented in made media can determine its success	Choices and issues can be framed in multiple ways	Useful when the issue, problem and solution are clearly refined as part of a larger message.
Grassroots mobilisation	Changes determined by activities of organised local communities around a particularly important issue	Power bases can be shifted through events Builds the capacity of those affected by issues to address them	Useful to win support of groups of individuals directly affected by the issue. Useful when acting as 'convenor' or 'capacity-builder' rather than 'driver'.
Single-issue groups	Single issue groups focus on one unified issue sometimes driven by can be ideologically concerns	Mobilisation of single-issue groups to pressurise politicians and policy makers Difficult to determine one single idea for the public good in society	Useful to generate mass support to lobby for policy change.
Diffusion to a critical mass	Policy makers often look to other neighbouring authorities for perceived benefits of adopted policies. Communication of a policy change to a critical mass who perceive it as better than the preceding policy	Helps the spread of ideas. Ideas can feel familiar if • they are compatible with policies already in place and; • they are attuned to beliefs, needs and values of potential adopters. Importation without gathering enough in depth evidence of its perceived success The need to 'keep up' with international norms.	Trusted experts, advocates or champions to model or communicate the desired policy change.

5. From researcher to policy advocate?

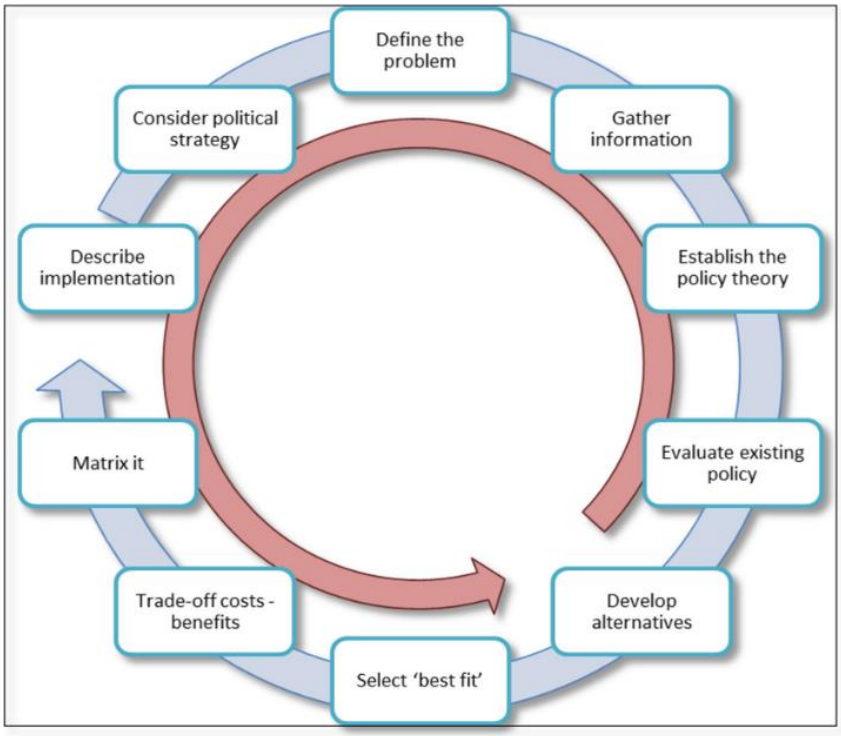
Literature from political science, organisational behaviour and social sciences are replete with guidelines, frameworks and models of the policy change cycle. The 'ideal' cycle works through a logical sequence of agenda setting or problem identification, formulation of policy change/reform, adoption of policy, implementation, evaluation and maintenance., broadly as presented in the Figure 1 below. Presumably the policy researcher contributes to the 'outer' associated steps as the objective, supportive 'external' analyst. Presumably the researcher is not intimately involved in the inner circle, which appears in the ideal cycle to have the competence to successfully negotiate each step from its own capacities.

Figure 1: Science and the Policy Cycle (Connors, 2016)



The role of the researcher in the policy change cycle is perhaps better illustrated in Figure 2 below, where the researcher maintains a coherent path of external expert/consultant at a distance from the policy action.

Figure 2: Health in All Policy Cycle (de Leeuw, Clavier, and Breton, 2014)

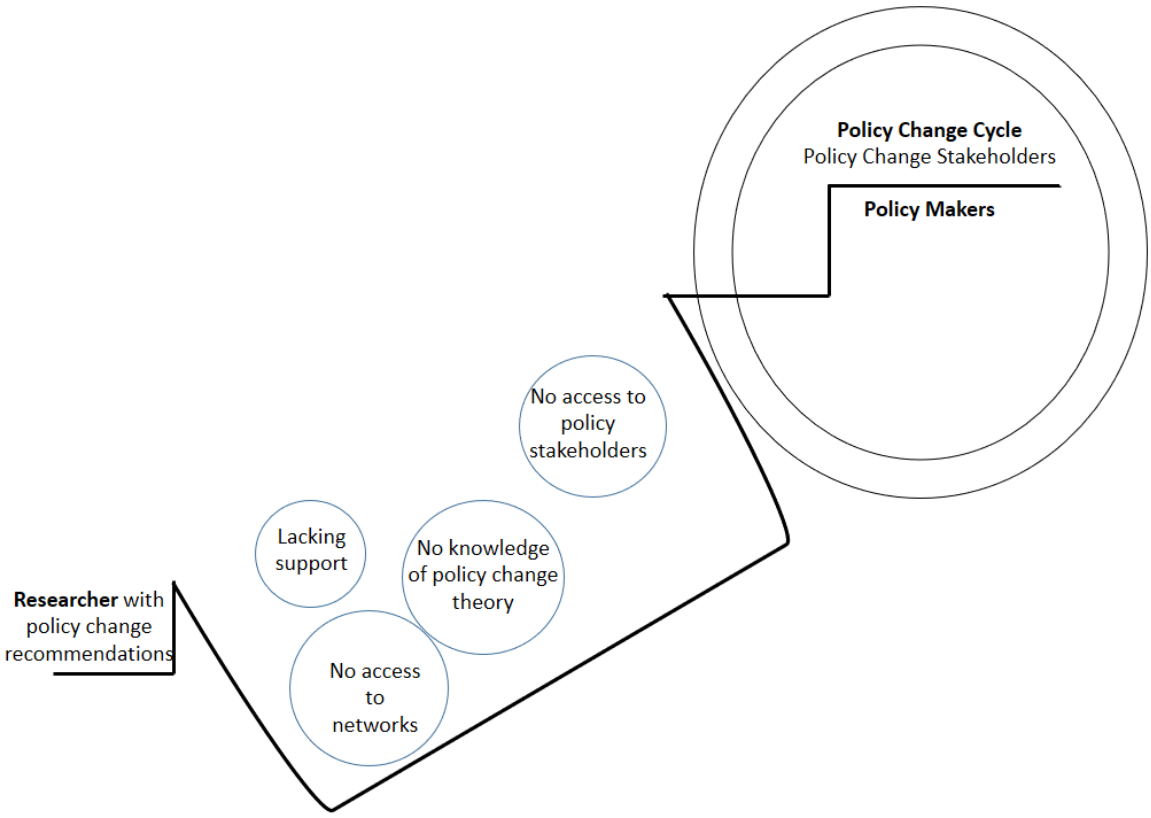


Stachowiak (2013), Smith and Katikireddi (2013) and (Cerna, 2013) argue that most researchers are inadequately skilled at connecting ideal theories and models of policy change to the reality of how such change actually happens. Thus, in Figure 2 above the researcher's role starts at definition of the problem and ends at 'Matrix it' without necessarily having an input into how the policy change is selected from among the alternatives suggested, how such change could be implemented, or what political strategy might best achieve it. So, in this scenario, the researcher is standing in gaps! If the researcher desires a more pro-active role in implementation of policy change, how can the gap be bridged? Is a role as policy change advocate/policy entrepreneur possible for a researcher who is perhaps 'outside' the policy change interest group or coalition? What might that outsider-insider policy advocate/entrepreneur role look like?

Stachowiak (2013 p.1) posits that the remit of the advocate is to 'seek changes in policy as a way to achieve impact at a scale and degree of sustainability that differs from what can be achieved through direct services or programs alone', and that all advocates come to policy work 'with a set of beliefs and assumptions about how change will happen', with these beliefs shaping their thinking about the conditions necessary for success, the tactics to be used, and what changes need to be achieved along the way. She further advises that all advocates

should be critically aware of the range of possible policy change theories and be able to 'untangle beliefs and assumptions about the inner workings of the policy-making process'. She urges advocates to operate within one theoretical framework of policy-change rather than across several simultaneously in any given context of policy change. Using policy framework theory can help to situate the evidence within the complex policy making system (Cairney, 2014). Figure 3 illustrates the gap between the researcher who is making policy change recommendations but who is unfamiliar with the 'science' of policymaking. Being inexperienced in key elements of the policy development and implementation process, and being limited in knowledge of policy change theory, make it difficult for the novice researcher to recommend any policy changes or to offer solutions to actual policy-makers in a meaningful way. The researcher may have little or no power to influence the layers of actors and/or stakeholders between the research data and its actual impact on policy change or policy reform. So how does the researcher bridge that gap?

Figure 3: The gap between research finding and policy change



6. Enter the policy advocate

Roberts and King (1991) following Kingdon (1984) describe the policy advocate as one of the strata of actors essential to the process of policy-making whose role is to act as 'public entrepreneurs, who, from outside the formal positions of government, introduce, translate, and help implement new ideas into public practice.' Their 1987 and 1991 article posits that the activities of the policy-change advocate/entrepreneur fall into four broad categories: intellectual activities (ideas creation and problem framing), strategic activities, activist/mobilisation activities, and administrative and evaluation activities, placing the advocate/entrepreneur at the nexus of policy-change functions, summarised in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Activities of a policy-change advocate/entrepreneur (modified from Roberts and King 1991)

Creative/Intellectual Activities	1. Generate ideas - Invent new policy ideas Define problem and select solutions 2. Disseminate ideas
Strategic Activities	1. Formulate grand strategy and vision 2. Evolve political strategy 3. Develop heuristics for action
Activist/mobilisation activities	1. Establish demonstration projects 2. Cultivate bureaucratic insiders and other advocates 3. Collaborate with high profile individuals/elite groups 4. Enlist elected officials 5. Form lobby groups and co-ordinate efforts 6. Cultivate media attention and support
Administrative and evaluation activities	1. Facilitate programme administration 2. Participate in programme evaluation

In this scenario, the experienced researcher may play a role as policy advocate and use research data to support the advocated policy change or policy reform. However, this may not bring the advocated policy change all the way to the political space where enabling

regulation, directive or legislative framework may be required. So, how does the researcher/advocate negotiate the next step across the gap?

7. Enter the policy-change *political* entrepreneur in critical juncture gaps

'The supporter of the evidence may be as, or more, important than the evidence itself' (Cairney, 2014).

Policy change literature more-or-less concurs on the view that both policy advocates and policy entrepreneurs play vital roles in moving the process from problem identification through research to engagement with relevant power holders. What is less clear is at what juncture the power and influence of the advocate/policy entrepreneur begins to wane and the process gets finished out to policy change or reform. Hogan (2019), Hogan and Donnelly (2012) and Hogan and Feeney (2012, 2017) make strong arguments for the pivotal role of the *political entrepreneur* and of *critical junctures* in the final achievement of change or reform, particularly in times of crisis when rapid policy change may be essential. The central hypothesis forwarded and defended by Hogan *et alia* is that:

'*…in times of crisis, new ideas emanate from a number of change agents, but in order for any of these ideas to enter the institutional environment, one specific agent of change must be present: the political entrepreneur. Without political entrepreneurs, ideational change, and subsequent policy change, would not occur'* (Hogan and Feeney 2012).

Within this hypothesis, the authors argue that policy change agents of every level need to be able to rapidly identify critical junctures in both 'normal times' and times of crisis, even within path-dependence theory, and know how to act within those junctures. The authors concur on the view that crises and exogeneous shocks do not necessarily result in policy change of any kind, and that the powerful interests that presided over past policy failures may be the same interests who will need to embrace sudden or incremental policy change. So, which policy actor can effectively insert new ideas into the realm of power interests and have expectations of success?

So, enter the *political* entrepreneur!

The political entrepreneur picks and chooses from among ideas put forward by researchers, policy entrepreneurs, civil servants, technocrats, academics, economists and interest group

advocates at times of crisis and 'shapes the terms of political debate by influencing agendas and constructing cultural frames' (ibid).

A further element of the hypothesis put forward by Hogan *et alia* is that there are three essential conditions required for a political entrepreneur to insert him/herself into the policy change process, as follows:

i. A crisis or policy failure
ii. Ideational change and/or critical review of extant policies
iii. Receptiveness to the entry of a political entrepreneur.

The change process might result in a change of a policy instrument proposed by the entrepreneur with the tacit support of politicians; thought the overall goal of the policy itself may not change.

If a policy failure is identified and articulated in the public domain, the political entrepreneur might cast this as a policy crisis, frame possible immediate solutions and lead the agenda for change. If *ideational* change is required, the political entrepreneur can garner support from a coalition of like-minded policy entrepreneur interests and networks to 'legitimise' the proposed policy changes.

> *'Such ideas determine the path of subsequent policy, as policymakers work within a framework of ideas and standards that specify not only the goal of policy, but the instruments to be used to achieve those goals, and the nature of the problem they are meant to address'* (Hall 1993 in Hogan and Feeney 2012).

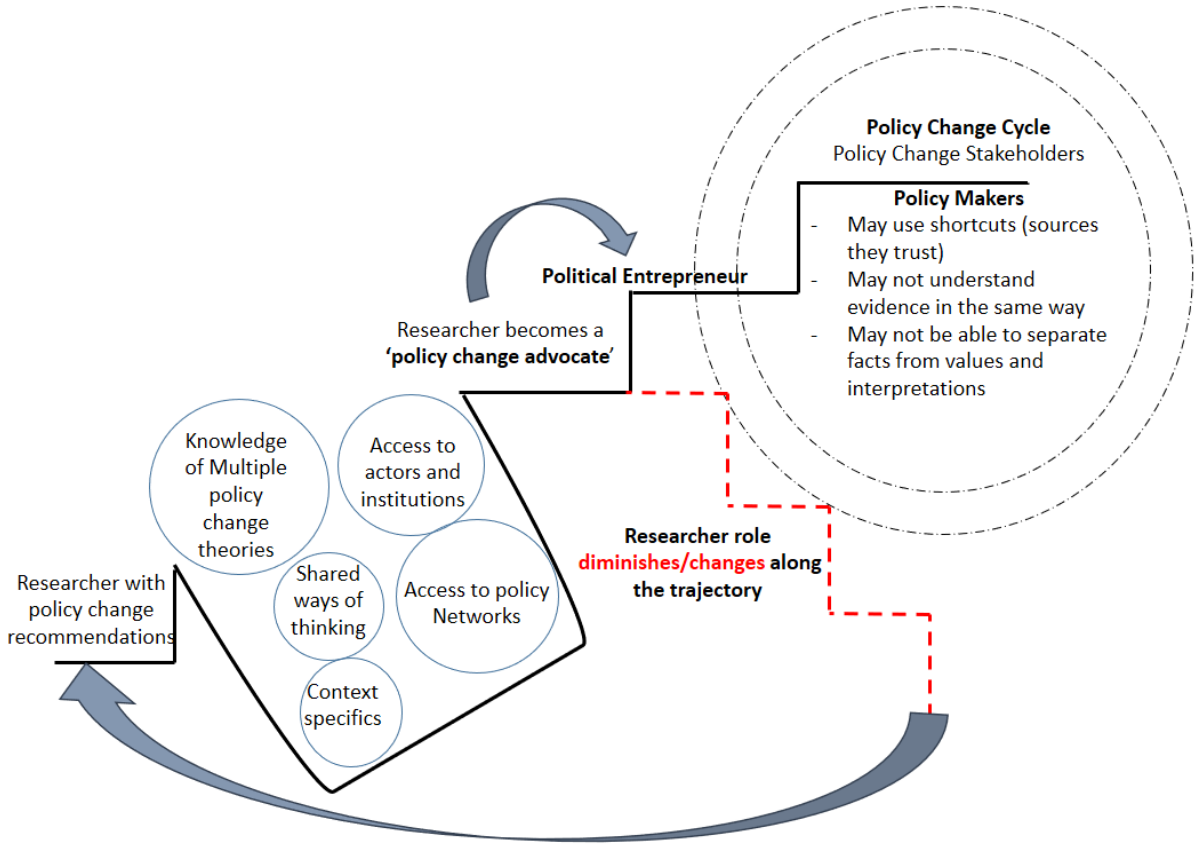
So, if we pause consideration of the policy change process at this point in its trajectory, can we identify the precise junctures where the scholar-researcher contributes in a powerful way? If we follow the hypotheses of Hogan *et alia* then the scholar-researcher is just one actor within the general collective of 'non-political' stakeholders who serve the purposes of the political policy-change entrepreneur! While this may be a disingenuous conclusion, it has elements of real-world politics in the policy-change conundrum of which researchers should be acutely aware.

> *'.. people seeking to inject more scientific evidence into policymaking may not pay attention to the science of policymaking'* (Cairney, 2014).

What researchers can do, perhaps, is pay critical attention to their role at the outset of the policy change process in gathering really useful evidence from key informants and interest groups, framing the problem or crisis honestly, contextualising the problem or crisis against extant policy successes and policy failure, and setting out policy options that serve the best interests of the likely recipients of a policy change. Evidence alone cannot speak for itself nor does the researcher have control over how their ideas are interpreted, modified, changed or used by others (Cairney, 2014).

Figure 4 shows how the gap between research findings and policy change could be closed alongside the diminishing/changing role of the researcher in the process.

Figure 4: Closing the gap between the researcher and policy change



Whether researchers should/can insert themselves as 'bridges' at multiple stages in the policy change cycle is context dependent: it may be justified to be both outsider and insider! In any case the policy change oriented researcher needs to be critically aware of the theories, dynamics and nuances of the policy change process in all its messiness, and know that

researchers try to influence policy both by empirically-based evidence and by value-based moral argument.

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