Speech delivered by Professor Adam Graycar, Social Research Centre, University of New South Wales:

"An agenda for Australian social policy research"

at the policy seminar "Identifying social policy research agendas for the 80's: Australian and Queensland perspectives", Department of Social Work, University of Queensland, 9 October 1981

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IDENTIFYING SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH AGENDAS
FOR THE 80's:
AUSTRALIAN AND QUEENSLAND PERSPECTIVES

PAPERS PRESENTED AT AN OCCASIONAL POLICY SEMINAR
ON OCTOBER 9, 1981 BY

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AN AGENDA FOR AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH

Adam Graycar¹

INTRODUCTION

For the last eighteen months I have been working in the Social Welfare Research Centre at the University of New South Wales. It is interesting to try to work out how much academic work contributes to hard research and how that feeds into the policy process. Unlike the previous two speakers who are located in the policy hierarchy, we are a long way outside in a nice little ivory tower - not really ivory as it has crumbling paint, but nevertheless in a pretty little building on the fringe of the university. We are not located centrally within the university. We are nowhere near any government departments and even our phones don't work very well! Nevertheless, somehow or another, we are trying to contribute to the processes of policy making.

RESEARCH AND POLICY

There are two ways of talking about research and how research fits into a policy agenda. First of all, we can talk about where research fits into policy generally, and secondly, how in the research centre where I work we have identified the policy issues. We don't report to any authoritative body. That does create some difficulties when it comes to identifying general policy agendas, but we do have the good sense to identify what the issues are. Other people may not agree with us, but we are an academic research body, not a policy body. All the people in our Centre came from academia, at least all the people who hold senior positions. A couple of the junior people have held junior positions in government departments.

We are involved in a research task and we have to try to define research. An academic definition is that research is some form of investigation that is undertaken with standardised procedures to obtain information which is going to add to a shared body of knowledge. Research is systematic. It is essentially communicable, and hopefully repeatable, but that can depend on what the agenda is.

Immediately, if we are looking to add to our shared body of knowledge, we get into the divisions that we heard about before, those of pure research and applied research. Our work straddles these two. Tim Eltham said earlier that he didn't think that one should draw a sharp line between them. While I agree that one shouldn't draw a sharp line, they are in fact two different entities. Pure research essentially is designed to expand our

¹ The text of this paper was prepared from the tape recording of Dr. Graycar's talk.
understanding of social processes, to learn more about what is happening. Applied research essentially is designed to influence those processes. Hence policy research is about influencing; it is about taking a position, it is about identifying winners and losers. If we look at pure research, which has as its objective the attainment of knowledge, those of us in universities are inclined to agree that that is what we are about - trying to obtain knowledge. Policy research is essentially about altering outcomes. Now, there may not necessarily be a direct relationship between trying to attain knowledge and to alter an outcome. The person who attains the knowledge may not be the one to alter an outcome.

Perhaps what I should do is go back and consider what social policy is about. The speakers this morning did not want to define social policy, and it is customary for most textbooks in the field to spend the first eleven pages going through the definitions and then to say why they don't have a definition themselves. Basically, social policy is about intervention, trying to alter life chances. The method of intervention is debatable; the style of intervention and the purpose of intervention are all debatable. Whether life chances are altered for the better or for the worse is often a value judgement. Nevertheless, in talking about social policy, we are talking about substantial resources, both collective and private, that are used in an inventionist manner to alter some sort of status quo. Thus, there is a range of political issues and knowledge issues that contribute to a definition of social policy.

I said a moment ago that pure research is about the attainment of knowledge. Policy research, however, begins rather than ends with the attainment of knowledge. Policy research goes one step further, and it cannot ever, I suppose, be separated from the political environment. Our Centre produced a short paper in which we tried to identify the different uses of knowledge, of information, and of data. They are all differently developed; they are all differently brokered in our society. The writer was sure that the way in which the ABS data had been used in the argument he examined was not to make decisions, but rather to decorate decisions.

If one is making decisions or decorating decisions, I think there are certain important questions to ask. Depending on where we sit, we come up with different answers. What do we want our research to tell us? Do we want our research to tell us about equality? Do we want it to tell us about inequality, about stability, about change? The more our research is geared to looking at questions of inequality and inequity, the more our research deals with potentials for change, the more we are going to find demands made on those who are allocating resources to intervene on the basis of that research. So whereas Tim Eltham was saying earlier this morning that the research that is likely to take place in the Welfare Services Department will have to be geared to declining resources, or at least stable resources, one
could argue that most research, if it is going to identify need, if it is going to identify inequities and/or inequalities, will provide a base for future demands and will generate future demands.

So, inherently, any political activity that is geared to maintaining the status quo and maintaining expenditure control, cannot, by and large, have much faith or much interest in research. It can have a great deal of faith and interest in evaluation, but evaluation and research are two very different ball games. One can argue ideologically about the extent to which evaluation is purely a management tool, and a management tool which can fit very clearly into an identification of cost-effective programs; but that, I believe, is very, very different from research. Research, whether it be pure or applied or policy oriented - but particularly policy research - essentially deals with values because that is the starting point. It seems to clarify goals and relationships among them. Therefore, an awkward situation arises when you get academics involved in research that might in the long term be used to alter outcomes. The tension that exists is that academics don't have a legitimate role as people who determine political agendas or even respond to political agendas. Jill Brown this morning talked about how researchers in government departments have some sort of methodological and spiritual allegiance to an academic approach, but the resources and the skills that academics have don't always fit easily into the work environment. There is tension because people involved in daily political activity, daily bureaucratic activity, know what the issues are. They know that when the Minister says, "I want it by 3.00 o'clock this afternoon", they can't turn around and design a ten year study.

So, while we have academic researchers who are maybe able to develop theory, provide data, provide options and solutions to issues, that is very different from the political process. Yet, very often people in government departments, and politicians in particular, don't understand research. They confuse data gathering, head counting, dollar counting, and evaluation with research. If we think of research as some sort of investigation that is undertaken in a systematic way to augment a shared body of knowledge, these activities are not research; data gathering is only part of the process, just as head counts are only part of the process.

POLICY RESEARCH AT THE SOCIAL WELFARE RESEARCH CENTRE

We have to work out some definition of what the task is. We have also to answer a fairly important set of operational questions that were raised before and are particularly relevant to us working in the university. I might mention that our research centre in the university came about as a result of an agreement between the University of New South Wales and Common-
wealth Government. We are funded outside the regular teaching and research budget of the university. We have a special budget that, while it goes directly to the university, is used by the university for research on important matters of social welfare. That arrangement raises questions that are relevant to us, relevant to the speakers this morning, and relevant to academics who get general grants. We need to know who sets the research questions, who determines the methods, and who disseminates the results. In our situation we have terms of reference, but we set the questions and determine the methods. We disseminate the results and sometimes people like them and sometimes people don't. Obviously there are sometimes misunderstandings between academics and departmental people and political people. That's because, as I said a moment ago, we have different goals from people who are required to act, to perform a service, or to develop policy, often, too, within very tight political and bureaucratic guidelines.

When we examine our position at the Social Welfare Research Centre we see it as a sort of straddling position. We have our academic colleagues who do pure research to a very large extent. We say that our research borders on policy research but we don't have a policy role. We know policy research does not pretend to be neutral in values, yet the ethics of pure research assume some sort of value neutrality. Policy research is essentially goal oriented - but whose goals? Policy research, too, has a system perspective which cuts across boundaries. A system perspective is essentially focused on action, and this creates a lot of tensions between academic bodies and government bodies. Policy research also often deals with variables which can be manipulated; you can hold variables constant, move organisations, structures and people around and try to determine effects and causes. Policy research, if it is dealing with interventions that try to alter total life chances, essentially strives to be comprehensive and it strives also to be multidisciplinary. However, our position in a multidisciplinary research centre, that of straddling, is very difficult because our university is structured in disciplines. Different methods seem to apply to different disciplines, as do different theoretical approaches and different backgrounds. So we are straddling both the pure and the policy oriented researchers, and somehow or other we try to bring ourselves to develop an agenda that has some relevance for actual political events. Yet we can claim that we are just academics, just doing what has to be done and passing it along.

There are tensions all the way. The pure researcher, the basic researcher, may conclude that the data on hand just isn't enough to warrant drawing conclusions. That happens all the time and it reflects the luxury of an academic environment which doesn't deal with deadlines. It reflects a scholarly interest. You could also spend another six months on a project and re-examine the data again and again. As academics we always want to add more, but for the policy research to keep on going indefinitely is an abrogation of responsibility; the policy maker has
to make a decision. The decision is going to be made at the
cabinet meeting tomorrow, or before the election, or whatever.
It is no good to say, "Well, give us the job and we'll spend the
next ten years sharpening our tools to answer the question that
we are on about." The essential difference is that a policy
maker, the decision maker, is anxious to arrive at a decision
on the basis of the information that is available, while the
scholar, the researcher in an academic environment, is
essentially concerned to find out the information that is
necessary to make the decision.

Let me illustrate. Both speakers this morning said the
field of care for the aged requires more research. We could
spend an infinite amount of time making demographic profiles,
understanding care, understanding health issues, understanding
income, understanding housing. The information we need will al­
ways be more than we can ever get together, and all the while
the politician in the middle of it all, where the buck eventu­
ally stops, is in a dreadful and difficult position. When Alec
Douglas Hume was Prime Minister of Britain, he threw his hands
up in despair and said: "I am faced with two sorts of problems;
the economic problems are incomprehensible and the political
problems are insurmountable". Against that background, we have
to try to work out what data, what information, what theory is
important.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF RESEARCH TO POLICY

In trying to discuss the contribution that research can make
to policy, in thinking about the place where I work, there are
four questions that I want to canvass. The first question, and
this applies universally, is how do we know what research we
ought to do? The second question is how do we actually do the
research? The third one is how do we communicate the research?
And the fourth one - I suppose the jackpot - is how does the
research that we have done (and done well, and communicated),
how does that research have maximum policy influence?

What research to Undertake

Firstly, how do we know what research to do? If we were
scholars, and only scholars, dealing with matters of intellectual
curiosity, it would be like a piece of string: if a piece of
string has one end, then it has another end, and so you hunt for
the other end. It is not as simple as that, however, because
research happens in a political and economic environment. Some­
how we have to blend our academic and intellectual interests with
the policy process. If we as academics responded only to the
political process and had our questions set for us, that would be
not only a compromise of our methods, because we would then be
no more than measurement technicians measuring what somebody else
had said to measure. Government people who have to arrive at
decisions quickly have an impression that research is very much
a measurement exercise. If that were so, we would be little
more than market researchers testing opinions, the market researchers of the welfare state. Our work, too, would be in danger of trivialisation and of conceptual vacuousness.

It is important, I think, to respond to political knowledge, to respond to our own academic experience and understanding of the issues, and therefore (and we have been criticised for this), to see ourselves not as problem solvers in a research sense but essentially as problem seekers. Raising questions is important. Seeking out the questions is uncomfortable because it raises more demands, generates more claims, and changes the equilibrium. People get upset.

It is also important to be collaborators with different types of actors: with policy makers, with consumers, with administrators, with other researchers in all sorts of fields. We find that much of our activity is consultative, problem seeking, and theory developing; it is a public relations exercise to try to identify the issues.

I will tell you more about our Centre. We were set up on January 1st 1980 with terms of reference that says things like: the Social Welfare Research Centre will do research on important matters of Australian social welfare, communicate the findings, hold seminars and provide opportunities for postgraduate research. We were given a completely free hand to work out an agenda. Trying to set a policy agenda thus became for me a very important theoretical task. It would have been easy to identify a few and set teams to work on these problems. There was certainly no shortage of problems. Because we weren't a government department and because our constituency was not defined, as I travelled and met people and as people came to see me, rarely did a day go by without somebody saying: "Hey, you ought to be doing a project on such and such. You ought to be doing this. You ought to be doing ..." It wasn't as blunt as that, but people were eager to convince me that their pet project was really terribly important, and invariably it was terribly important. The hard part was to work out which projects were more important than others.

A second dilemma was whether to set the projects and recruit the staff, or recruit the staff and get them to do what they do.

We tried overall to work out what the issues were. We made several observations. We noted that in Australia there was some considerable rhetoric about a resources boom. At the same time we saw something like two million people deemed to be in poverty and almost another two million people who suffer from disabilities. We have an ageing population. There are changes in population patterns; spatial inequalities; access to employment is diminishing or becoming highly stratified. Taking all these things together, it seemed that the 1980s would see a scramble for resources. In this wealthy industrial society some people do very well and some do not so well at all. A political process in which some people are going to be included in the outputs of a wealthy
industrial society will, if one takes a zero-sum view of the world, ensure that some people are going to be excluded. It seemed to us fairly important to understand the patterns of inclusions and exclusions, the processes by which people in our society have rights, have shares of our industrial output and make claims on the system. We were influenced by our desire to understand the processes and the magnitude of interventionist activities - activities which can be measured in dollars, or measured in services, or measured in allocation or processes or power.

The claims process took on special significance. One could argue that everyone makes claims on the State, on their families, on their communities and on their employers. At the moment we are seeing a very interesting ideological shift from the argument that it is legitimate to make claims on the State for well-being to an argument that says that the State is not the be-all and end-all, the State is not the provider of all services and a protection against all risks. It is now argued that it is more appropriate to make claims on the family, on employers, and on local communities, through non-government and voluntary organisations.

Out of this jumble of issues of inclusion, exclusion, claims, changing resources, changing technology, changing employment patterns, demographic change, we tried to work out a research agenda. Our research centre does have an advisory committee and the advisory committee meets from time to time to talk about progress and directions. From this context and analysis we decided that, rather than address specific problems, we would follow a life cycle approach. So we have established teams to cover the life cycle. One team deals with the welfare of young children. Another team deals with the welfare of families. A third team deals with the welfare of the workforce, and a fourth with the welfare of elderly people. In addition, we are dealing with a number of other issues that cut across all of those population groups. We have a team that deals with quantitative servicing and evaluation, people who do our statistics and computing, because there are statistical, methodological computing requirements in all our studies. We tried to set up a team to deal with income maintenance and economics, but it was too difficult to separate out those matters from all the other things we were doing. The final team is a public policy analysis unit, because right across the life cycle there are public policy issues. Most of the work done in our public policy team at the moment deals with what we think are the important issues, namely the division between statutory and non-statutory, or public and private, and the distinction between federal and state. We are doing a lot of studies on non-government and non-statutory organisations.

Because of the claims focus and the life cycle focus, we are doing studies that some people don't identify as welfare studies because the assumption often is that welfare studies ought to be directed downwards. In fact, that is only part of our process.
We are trying to do studies at three levels. At one level our research deals with characteristics of populations; this involves a great deal of demographic and survey work. We want to understand how people live and understand their characteristics. At a second level we want to understand how people interact with organisations and institutions which affect them. At a third level we want to study the macro policy and macro economics, macro political issues that affect the way in which the organisations and institutions interact with people and affect their life chances and also affect their characteristics. So we layered agenda item upon agenda item, and we hired experienced people to head up each of the teams. This is the outline which co-ordinates our work, and that is our answer to the question of what research to undertake.

How to do the Research

The second question focuses on methodology. How do we do the research?

How we do the research depends on whether we are trying to do exploratory, descriptive or explanatory work. I could talk in detail and at length about different social research techniques, about theory building and hypothesis construction, about data gathering and value assumptions, about presuppositions and empirical generalisations, about explanatory propositions and hypotheses and theories - in effect, the component parts of a research methods course. Beyond that, what is important is to be able to identify the appropriate techniques. An exploration is different from a description and, in turn, different from an evaluative study. We have to select our techniques. It is also important to be able to justify the worth of the research not only to ourselves from an intellectual standpoint, but also in view of our judgement of what is appropriate in a particular political context.

To develop a research project we have to go right back to conceptual issues. We have to work out our research objectives. We have to select the data we want to gather and we have to work out operations for gathering in that data, and work out how to collect it. We have to work out how to analyse it. We find ourselves constrained, as all researchers do, by time, by money, by personnel, and by the skills they possess. It is a long difficult process.

How to Communicate Research

What can I say about communicating research? To be effective with politicians, one does not prepare material with lots of roneoed pages and jargon and footnotes, I don't know much about communicating with politicians because that has not been my job. However, I remember once being told in all earnestness: "If the report you write can't be read on the plane between Canberra and Sydney, it's too long." I have remembered that. You make sure that your timing is right but you also make sure that you use the
language that politicians can understand. There was a magic
computer once that was going to translate things into
scientific jargon in Russian, and then back; somebody put "out
of sight, out of mind" into the computer and it came back as
"invisible maniac".

Given the right language, communication occurs. People
speak different languages to different people. I am more
used to talking to students and to academics, and that is one
communication process. Its outcome is very different from an
immediate policy impact, but one could argue that by teaching
one's research (this is the academic speaking) the research
gets built into the way of thinking of people and, in the long
run, eventually combines with other research, with other
approaches, and it becomes part of the world vision.

But there are different ways of communicating. I find if
we have some important study underway, it is much easier for me
to communicate through the formal university communication outlet.
Our university has a press office and, when we are doing papers
or releasing research findings, we call the press in and we can
get our materials picked up. Our position is very different
from that of middle-ranking bureaucrats in research positions.
Their permanent heads and their ministers would go absolutely
berserk, I would imagine, if they started attracting a fair bit
of press. So the academic and the policy researcher have different
needs. Different people take different roads and different people
take different notice.

How to get Research to have an Impact on Policy

The fourth question I posed was how to make sure the research
has a bearing on policy. I suppose if I knew the answer to that
question I wouldn't be here, but the point that was made before,
and I won't labour it, is that research is only one small element
in the whole policy process. Political and policy decisions are
made on the basis of political, and not scientific, criteria.
Often social science is used after a programme has been developed
to justify and to validate the decision, or to decorate the
decision.

Research can have an impact, however. An interesting study
was undertaken a few years back to gauge the impact of research
on a couple of pieces of American legislation. The researcher
found that the decision makers reacted to the research in terms
of the way they had originally perceived the problem and the way
they had originally perceived the researchers too! So, when
people went along to congressional committees, it could be
important to polish their shoes and wear a tie and have short
hair. The study describes the perceptions that congressmen had
of the way the topic is framed. The quality of the research
wasn't all that important.
Despite our improved techniques and despite our sophisticated methodology, we still haven't got, and probably never will acquire, the necessary methodological tools which will help us produce unequivocal, non-trivial findings for policy problems. There will always be equivocations. They will always be a bit of this and a bit of that. I went to a demographic conference recently in which population projections for the next forty-odd years were being discussed; they weren't unequivocal and there were almost as many projections as there were years, if you took all the different assumptions into account. It is most unlikely we are ever going to have cut and dried, black and white, unequivocal findings. For this reason, research will always have political implications.

People have different expectations. Some people ask: "If, as you have been saying, policy decisions are made on the basis of politics, not research, we don't know how to communicate research very well. We know how to do it, we do the technical side of it well, but we don't know how to measure whether it has influence on policy. Aren't you depressed about that?" The answer is no. There are many ways to feed what one learns from research into a broad process. It would be very pretentious to expect immediate impact.

There are two other aspects of this question. On the one hand there is the question of whether we have sufficient research skills to be able to deliver results unequivocably. What I am saying is no, probably not. We do have research skills to deliver some things but not to explain the whole state of the world and all life changes. So we have to segment the issues and develop limited targets. On the other hand the question arises as to whether decision makers know best how to make use of the research that they receive. Here again the answer is probably no. As a result we have a mixed market type situation where the two elements continually blend.

Finally, we need to look at the assumption that research is usually designed to identify need, that research is about social change and social reform. Sometimes it is, but very often it is not. Research services many masters. Research is sometimes used to contain and maintain the status quo. Sometimes it is used for policing. Much evaluative research, so called, is of a policing nature, to make sure that certain guidelines and limitations are met. Sometimes research is used as an important instrument of political power and as a weapon in bureaucratic in-fighting. And, of course, sometimes research is about social change and social reform. But research is not a matter of simple, cut and dried issues. One can do a particular study, one can examine a particular set of characteristics, and one can evaluate a programme. But that is a long way from providing an overall and comprehensive research assessment that will lead to interventions that may affect and alter life chances.
APPENDIX

SOCIAL PLANNING UNIT
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK
UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

OCCASIONAL POLICY SEMINAR

IDENTIFYING SOCIAL POLICY RESEARCH AGENDAS FOR THE 80s:
AUSTRALIAN AND QUEENSLAND PERSPECTIVES

PROGRAMME

9.00 - 9.10 Introduction and Welcome, Allan Halladay, Senior Lecturer.
9.10 - 9.40 Jill Brown - "Identifying a Health Services Research Agenda".
9.40 - 10.00 Discussion and Comments.
10.00 - 10.30 Tim Eltham - "Defining a Policy Research Agenda".
10.30 - 10.45 Discussion and Comments.
10.45 - 11.15 Morning Tea.
11.15 - 12.00 Adam Graycar - "An Agenda for Australian Social Policy Research".
12.00 - 12.30 Discussion and Comments.
12.30 - 12.35 Concluding Remarks.