P is for Policymaker

The term 'policymaker' is subject to sustained over- and misuse. Ben Hepworth argues that we should differentiate people by the work they are doing.

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The **dictionary definition of a policymaker** is:

> **policymaker**, noun: *A person responsible for or involved in policy-making.*

Who is – and who should be – captured by the definition? Admittedly, 'responsible for' and 'involved in' are vague, and 'policy-making' is circuitous when used alongside 'policymaker'. But the term policymaker seems to be the lowest common denominator used to describe those working in government roles.

I am not alone in this reflection – **James Georgalakis** and **Olivia Stevenson** have made similar observations. The passage of time only reinforces the issue because of sustained over- and misuse. There isn't even consensus on whether it's one word, two words, or two words with a hyphen. Discussion at a recent **International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO) event** prompted this article, which draws on my experience working in academic-policy engagement in the UK Civil Service.

ambiguous **typology of evidence and policy**. In all these, and more widely, the term 'policymaker' abounds. Reassuringly, in Joe Mintz's writing on **policy impact** the term policymaker isn't used, but overall the situation is poor.

The average research project is planned, executed, and scrutinised, to the finest detail; the average research engagement approach is more "let's get this in front of some policymakers". There is a huge disconnect in rigour – the same rigour that is applied to academic research should follow through to engagement activity. Knowledge exchange has grown significantly since the advent of the Research Excellence Framework (REF); however, it is hard not to view activity as a **rudderless mass** when the focus seems to be on doing *more* not *better*.

We define academia by its **disciplines** and the Civil Service is no different. Instead of using a catch-all term we should differentiate people by the work they are doing. 'Policymaker' has a place in the lexicon but is often used misleadingly. I **use the term policymaker**; however, I do so carefully – to reference those working in the Government Policy Profession.

Call a spade a spade

There are a variety of different **Civil Service 'professions'** that comprise its half-a-million members. The largest is Operational Delivery, who are responsible for critical public services such as staffing prisons and administering welfare benefits. The Policy Profession is second largest and are usually who, within the Civil Service, people think of when they hear 'policymaker'. The Policy Profession is comparable in size to tens of other professions such as Finance and Legal. They are all an order of magnitude smaller

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together from the outset to deliver best public value."

With great policy comes great responsibility

Professional distinctions are critical when policy is portrayed or perceived negatively; but crucially, those delivering policy (Operational Delivery) have less involvement in its 'making'. I have witnessed first-hand how public-facing Operational colleagues suffer when citizens aren't happy – often relating to policy eligibility and not its delivery. Those *making* policy are shielded from public view, but with roles and responsibilities should come accountability. This is lost with poor language usage.

I am a member of the **Operational Research (OR) Profession**, part of the **Government Analysis Function**, whose members are collectively known as 'analysts' (cf. above ambiguity). When the term policymaker is used as a catch-all it can alienate people. Recently, when discussing an academic engagement activity with an external stakeholder who referenced policymakers, a colleague remarked "do you not want analysts to come along since they're the ones assessing the evidence and doing the internal research?"

Seek and you shall find

Many policy-conscious researchers strive to assimilate their research into decision-making. By understanding the roles and responsibilities of different government professions and how they work together, researchers can see where their work can feed in. Since the inception of the **Areas of Research Interest (ARI)** there is a more obvious entry point for engagement and more nuanced approaches will likely lead to greater research impact.

Leith, Bridie McGreavy, Melanie Ryan

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Deus ex machina

I hope the importance of professional distinctions in the UK Civil Service, and the value of clearer language use in academic-policy knowledge exchange is evident. Don't be afraid to use the term 'policymaker', but do so carefully and accurately. If in doubt, or if you don't know, then the term 'official' – for those of us working in the Civil Service – is not professionally restrictive. I have aimed to share just a fraction of the information on GOV.UK concerning policymaking, and have written about **evidence, engagement, and impact** more widely – as have others. For researchers and others keen to contribute evidence and expertise to decision-making, it's worth upskilling yourself on how policy is made.

Armed with the above information and advice, the Government 'black box' will hopefully appear a shade lighter. Maybe AI – the ultimate black box – will render knowledge exchange pointless and the quest for impact will be automated. Until then, as anyone who has interacted with a large language model will know, we must rely on the **relevant adage**: "garbage ('policymaker') in, garbage out"…

About the author

Ben Hepworth is a mathematician-turned-social-scientist working in the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) Evidence and Partnerships Hub. He leads on fostering collaborations with

necessarily shared by the Ministry of Justice (nor do they represent Government policy).

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