The Relevance Question:
The Professionalization of Political Science and the Waxing and Waning of Security Studies

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What Is the Relevance Question?

• International relations, like the social sciences in general, aspires to be both rigorous and relevant.

• The question is whether it can be?
  – When and under what conditions?

• What happens when the tensions between these two goals increase?
  – Which way are they resolved?
What’s the Evidence There is a Problem?

• “the relationship between the federal government and the social sciences generally and historically, while substantial in scope, has not been altogether harmonious.”

• “the walls surrounding the ivory tower never seemed so high.”
Some Data:
Decreasing Willingness of Scholars to Offer Policy Recommendations As Discipline/Field Become More “Scientific”

Percentage of Policy Relevant Articles in APSR from 1906-2006
What Do Policymakers Want?

Table 5. Scholar and Policymakers views on method utility for policymakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>TRIP Average Rank (q57)</th>
<th>Policymaker Average Rank (q18)</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Analysis</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>0.96</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quantitative Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Area Studies</td>
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<td>Historical Case Studies</td>
<td>2.07</td>
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<td>Contemporary Case Studies</td>
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<td>Formal Models</td>
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<tr>
<td>Operations Research</td>
<td>1.73</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The Different Perspectives of APSIA Deans and Top-50 POLS Chairs

Note: The respondents were asked to rate their agreement/disagreement in a five points scale. This figure shows that the average Chair disagreed with all the statements. The bars show the relative strength of such disagreement, -2 being a strong disagreement and 0 being a neutral stance.

Note: As above, the bars show the average agreement/disagreement, this time for the Deans.
Why Does the Relevance Question Remain Open?

• The relevance question is largely the result of disciplinary professionalization:
  – Source of tensions between rigor and relevance.

• How?
  – Division of labor produces narrower and narrower work:
    • Most policy questions broader.
  – Professionalization leads to greater sense of “corporateness:”
    • Privileges disciplinary > societal agendas.
  – “Science” increasingly defined as “method:”
    • Math/universal models = hallmark of science.
    • Limits range of questions to which it can be applied.
  – Basic research> applied work:
    • “Objectivity” requires focus on former.
What Explains Its Waxing and Waning?

• I look at the place of the subfield of national security studies in the discipline of political science from WWI through Minerva as case studies.

• Two Key factors:
  – Disciplinary dynamics:
    • Tend toward disengagement with policy/applied research.
  – International security environment:
    • Wartime/high threat:
      – Demand from govt./society for academic expertise.
      – Greater willingness to balance rigor and relevance = supply from the academy.
    • Peacetime:
      – Disciplinary dynamics privilege basic research.
Why Many Scholars Are Not Overly Concerned About These Trends

• A few believe science is all about the pursuit of “pure knowledge,” untainted by application:
  – It will never be relevant.
• Others think IR is too scientifically underdeveloped to expect relevance now:
  – That will change in the future.
• But most care about application and are optimistic:
  – Democratic Peace.
  – Trickle-down thesis.
  – Policymakers becoming more methodologically sophisticated.
  – New media offers alternative “transmission belt” for conveying applied implications of basic research.
  – Broader forms of relevance aside from policy recommendations for govt.
Why I Am More Pessimistic

- **Democratic Peace:**
  - Not clear most “scientific” version influences policy.
  - When it has influenced policy (Iraq), it has been disastrous.
- **Trickle-down thesis:**
  - Assumed rather than proven.
  - DoD studies of natural sciences and weapons systems not encouraging (HINDSIGHT).
- **Policymakers becoming more methodologically sophisticated:**
  - Assumes they weren’t before.
  - Assumes that aspiring policymakers appreciate cutting-edge social science.
- **New media offers alternative “transmission belt” for conveying applied implications of basic research:**
  - Assumes what needs to be proven.
  - Signals to noise ratio problem.
- **Broader forms of relevance aside from policy recommendations for govt.**
  - Agree in one sense.
  - But on the other hand, whether directly or indirectly, influencing govt. policy is the ultimate criterion of policy relevance.
Where Are We Today?

• Minerva = “mixed bag:”
  – Pro:
    • Renewed interest in govt. in “embracing egg heads and ideas,” as SECDEF Gates put it.
    • Many scholars have responded to the call since 9/11.
  – Con:
    • Minerva, especially NSF link, not popular in Congress:
      – Congress not enamored of funding basic research!
    • Minerva supported work more policy-relevant than normal IR (24% vs. 5%) but not as relevant as leading work published in subfield of security studies ($IS = 38\%$).
What Is to Be Done?

• ≠ vs. science or advanced social science methods.
• =
  – Recognize tensions/limits of professional social science.
  – Strike balance between rigor and relevance:
    • Problem>method-driven research agendas.
  – Rebuild “transmission belts:”
    • Not just think tanks and other third patires but scholars themselves.
  – Δ disciplinary incentives:
    • Broader input into scholarly evaluation.
    • Reward policy relevance.
  – Reframe ethical debate:
    • ≠ just about our obligations to science.
    • = our obligations to broader society as well.
What NDISC And Other Groups Are Doing About This Issue

• Carnegie Corporation of New York has made major investment in portfolio of projects to “Bridge the Gap” between the Ivory Tower and the policy world:
  – BtG project at AU:
    • Train academics how to better navigate the in policy world.
  – William and Mary/TRIP project:
    • Collect data on scholars’ attitudes toward BtG and policy relevance.

• Other projects as well ...
NDISC, I

• Pilot grant:
  – Survey of senior national security policymakers on when and how they use academic social science:
First board-level grant:

- Relevance Ranking of international relations program in top 50 POLS depts.:

- Convened three workshops:
  - Austin, TX: Scholars’ Summit, 2/27-3/1/13.
  - Washington, DC: Scholars and Policymakers [w/Stimson Center], 1/30-31/2014.

- Theory of interrelationship between disciplinary dynamics and security environment:
  - Book coming soon ....
NDISC, III

• Renewal grant projects:
  – Re-run policymaker survey trying to capture views of younger policymakers on social science:
    • TRIP and Virginia Tech.
  
• Add questions to TRIP 2017 to gauge “disincentives” to doing policy-relevant scholarship:
  – Also work with TRIP and BtG again on this.

• Broader relevance ranking looking at all sub-fields of top 50 POLS depts.
  – With Baylor University.

• Impact of blogs on policy relevance:
  – With Virginia Tech.

• APSIA Deans’ “Delphi Survey:”
  – With MIT and TRIP.