

**If you are a researcher and you want to inform debate**  
**on a certain topic, what do you do?**

This series of four handouts collates advice from three academic psychologists that may be of interest to students and academics seeking to develop a greater chance of policy impact. The full length interviews by Winnifred Louis with the academics as well as all four handouts are available on <http://www.socialchangelab.net/policy.html> .

**Community and Clinical Psychologist Eleanor Wertheim:**

- \* Educate yourself and find out what's out there - don't reinvent the wheel.
- \* Do reading in the literature, go to conferences, be aware of what's in the media.
- \* Think to yourself, what will make a real impact? This is not the same as how to get a great publication or do the most intellectually interesting project – design studies for impact.
- \* There is a sequence of what is needed: 1) Do research to document the prevalence of a problem that is not on the radar of policy-makers. 2) Do theoretical research to understand what the risk and protective factors are for that problem, and then empirical research to show them playing a role and demonstrate substantial effect sizes. 3) Design interventions and test them -- first in a controlled way in the lab (to show it works), then in applied research in the field at broader scale (to show it will scale up and the difference it makes). So there's a progression – you first need to understand what stage the topic you're interested in has reached.
- \* Features of research that decrease your impact: Addressing esoteric questions of little relevance. Skipping steps – you need to have shown that there is a problem; document its scale; show the efficacy of your proposed intervention or solution; show it works in the field.
- \* External validity – you get more leverage with applied / field research, not just lab - but usually a progression where you first do lab and then applied research works best.

**Environmental Psychologist Kelly Fielding:**

- \* You need to talk to people. People from other disciplines and backgrounds. Few issues are single-discipline issues.
- \* Turn up to meetings that relate to that issue. When a meeting is called, read the emails, and even when you are an early career researcher or student, turn up. Sometimes nothing comes of it - but in my case, turned into grants, prestigious future fellowship – because the linkages I built up with govt, universities, partners, and because I started to do cutting-edge, topical research.
- \* Be really open, willing to listen.

- \* Decode jargon, and seek to simplify and clarify your own language.
- \* Being available increases the impact of your research ... Creating simple, visual tools to allow people to relate to and comprehend your message. You need to make the research available to people who are not making research their top priority or career.
- \* Not prioritising interaction with policy makers, inter-disciplinary contacts decreases impact. So do single disciplinary journals, conferences, audiences ... Or non-collaborative careers - working only within your own university.

### **Cross-Cultural Psychologist James Liu:**

- \* Form relationships. Invest in an ethical and relationship-focused career from day 1.
- \* Who is making the decisions for the change you want to see made? Seek to meet them and form relationships for the long term.
- \* Be mindful that in govt people swap in and out, so it's hard to have traction. Also there is a discrepancy where ministers will say x, while bureaucrats will do y – it can be hard to understand machinations from the outside. So having someone on the inside who can translate for you and guide you is invaluable. Sometimes it is easier to influence or shape NGOs. It is also helpful to aim for local successes vs policy at the national or sector level where the waters are murkier, and your connections to influencers are fewer and not so deep.
- \* Universities will not necessarily help you to achieve impact - their focus is not policy impact but marketing, media publicity. They will help you to get publicity for your research but they don't have a theoretical lens or as consistent a policy lens as you may have.
- \* You will need to focus on working flexibly, outside normal channels, instead of bounded by bureaucracy or within normal channels for standard publication. Also working to a faster timescale, with focus being on vivid data for persuasion - human stories. Research provides evidence of need, efficacy, and feedback to improve implementation.
- \* Standard psychological approach decreases impact of research: Treating your participants as subjects, extracting info and summarising as a dictator, is one-sided - this is unlikely to have impact on your communities, and it creates disconnects. You need to be in the position of helping people to share information, and communicate between different communities and different interest groups.
- \* Influence is all about connecting, contextualising instead of abstracting. Decontextualised data is a long way from policy. And time frame is immediate, on the fly - not distanced; not laboriously anticipated, conducted, painfully published, but responding to serendipity, opportunistically.
- \* I struggle with it - the tensions and challenges of seeking to do academic work with policy impact are real and it is not easy. Element of luck!

*Feedback?* We welcome your comments and questions, to [w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au](mailto:w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au) or via the comments box at [socialchangelab.net](http://socialchangelab.net) .