A Different Kind of Snowball: Identifying Key Policymakers

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2005

Abstract

Studying policy networks raises challenges in three important areas: identifying members of the policy network, gaining access to the network, and reporting findings from the study while maintaining confidentiality. Using the tobacco control policy and health policy networks in Victoria, Australia as a case study, the article describes how to use a reputational snowball to identify a policy network. I argue that the reputational snowball not only presents a useful tool for identifying micro-level network members, but also provides a means for assessing which members of the policy network are core, and which ones are on the periphery. Issues around reporting in studies of policy influentials are also discussed.
Introduction

Studying policy networks raises challenges in three important areas: identifying members of the policy network, gaining access to the network, and reporting findings from the study while maintaining confidentiality. The first challenge involves identifying the key influencers in a given policy field. This problem is one of identifying the central, key members of policy networks as well as those members who are on the periphery. Another issue faced in studies of influentials is that of reporting. In particular, how can a researcher accurately describe a policy network while maintaining confidentiality, and are promises of confidentiality important for this type of research?

In 2000 my colleagues and I commenced a study on tobacco control and health policy making in the Australian state of Victoria. The VicHealth Centre for Tobacco Control, a tobacco control advocacy organization, funded the research. The goal of the project was to identify the key players in the health policy and tobacco policy areas Victoria, and to find out whether tobacco control was on the then-current Victorian government’s health policy agenda, what else was on the health policy agenda, and what views policymakers had of tobacco control.

In Australia, tobacco control policy is done at both the Commonwealth (federal) and state levels of government. At the state level, tobacco control policy is almost exclusively the domain of the health policy area; tobacco control can thus, at the state level, be seen as a sub-field of the larger health policy field. We were interested in finding out who the key policymakers were in health policy and tobacco control policy in our state. We wanted to be able to claim that the group that we interviewed were the most influential in their policy area in Victoria. We decided to use a different type of snowball to identify our sample: the reputational snowball.

This article describes the process we undertook to identify the key policymakers, and the pros and cons of this type of research method. I argue that the reputational snowball technique that we used to identify key policymakers was both effective and replicable, providing a useful addition to existing approaches to the study of policy networks.
Identifying Networks of Policy Influentials

Policy networks are groups of connected individuals or institutions who have the capacity to influence (e.g. initiate, develop, block) policy in a given field. Policy researchers have written about policy networks as vehicles through which policies get initiated, developed, and eventually implemented (Considine, 1994; Marsh & Rhodes, 1992; Marsh & Smith, 2000). Policy networks are not fixed: their composition varies depending on what policy issue is under consideration (Laumann & Knoke, 1987) and can change dramatically when the policy setting changes, such as when a new government is elected. For any given policy field there will be a few key players who will be influential in all areas of that field, but most sub-fields will have specialists who only become influential when proposals in their area are being actively considered. In a broad policy field like health policy, there are many sub-fields that have their own core influentials. This makes these networks somewhat difficult to identify.

Various techniques have been used to identify elites. For example, Useem used *Who's Who* to identify corporate executives (1995), and Herzog found elected female politicians on public registers (Herzog, 1995). Laumann and Knoke took a different approach, identifying influential organizations and interviewing informants from them (1987). For Laumann and Knoke, the influential organization was the unit of analysis, not the influential person. Other researchers have used the traditional snowball technique, where informants are asked to suggest other people for the study (Ostrander, 1995). These techniques have not often been used to study policy networks.

Social networks have been studied using a variety of techniques including: various mathematical tools used to measure links between network members, and to describe networks and the relationships therein (see Scott, 1991), ethnographic studies that describe a variety of relationships within networks of people including kinship (Geertz, *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 347 1973; Stack, 1974), exchange (Weiner, 1985), and reciprocal dependencies (Newman, 2001) and, in the policy area, networks have been studied as means through which policy is made (Marsh & Rhodes, 1992; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993). The peernomination snowball method of identifying a policy network that we used for this study was used in a previous study of policy making in Victoria in the early 1990s (Considine, 1998; Headey & Muller, 1996; Lewis & Considine, 1999; Muller & Headey, 1996), but it has otherwise not often been used in studies of policy networks. Studies of policy networks have generally examined mid (meso-) level policy making (Rhodes & Marsh, 1992), rather than micro- or macro-level, and have thus neglected the methodological questions of how to identify micro-level networks and better understand how they operate.
There is little overlap between the different approaches to network studies. I propose that the method used here, that of the reputational snowball, provides a way of identifying both the core and the periphery of policy networks at the micro-level, which can then be studied in various ways.

**The Reputational Snowball**

We used a peer-nomination reputational snowball technique (Goodman, 1961) to identify the networks of key health policy and tobacco control policymakers in Victoria. This technique assumes that groups of influentials in a given field are interconnected: that members know each other, either personally or by reputation, so that if you ask them who the key people in the field are, they will know (Scott, 1991). In launching our snowball we asked seven people who we expected would be in either or both of the two networks (based on previous research in this area) to nominate those people who they thought were influential. Our snowball launchers were contacted by phone. The peer-nomination snowball technique was briefly explained to them, and they were told that they were starting the process. All seven agreed to participate and I followed up the initial phone contact with a letter or a fax that included instructions and two nomination forms. The instructions on the first nomination form read:

> Please nominate those individuals who are most influential in the area of health policy in Victoria (residence in Victoria is not necessarily a requirement). You may find it convenient to nominate ten to fifteen names, but you can nominate more or fewer if you wish.

There were 15 lines below, then blank space with a note saying ‘Please Turn Page’. The instructions for the second list said:

> Are there any individuals who are particularly influential in the area of tobacco control policy who are not on the first list you have just filled in? Please name them below. (If they are on your first list, please place a tick next to their name on the previous page.)

There were 10 empty lines below, with the rest of the page as blank space. The snowball launchers were asked to return the two forms to me. Upon receipt, I contacted every person that had been listed on any of the forms by letter. The letter to the nominees stated that their peers had identified them as an influential person. It then briefly described the study, provided them with a definition of influence,1 and asked them to fill out and return (in the enclosed stamped envelope) the nomination forms.

The letters were from me, but were on VicHealth Centre for Tobacco Control stationery, so it was clear that I was with a tobacco control organization. We ran our snowball for five rounds, including the launch round. In each round letters and nomination forms were sent to all the people who were nominated in the previous round, provided they had not been contacted before. Once a letter had been sent to a nominee, they did not receive further correspondence from us regarding the snowball. After each round of mail-outs we waited for responses...
before beginning the next round. The fifth round only elicited a few new names, and all of them were of people who were in organizations or positions that were on the periphery of the policy making process, so we decided that it was time to stop the snowball. Overall 48.5% of nomination forms were returned.

We ended up with a list of 159 individuals who received at least one nomination. Thirty-two of these people received nominations only in the tobacco control area, and 91 received nominations only in the health field. So, of the 159 nominees, 123 (77%) were nominated in only one of the two policy areas. Table 1 shows the number of nominations received by these nominees. It indicates the broadness of the policy fields, showing that most people (97 of the 159 nominees or 61%) received only one or two nominations. This suggests that they might be somewhat influential, but they are probably not core members of their policy network. Thirty-six (23% of the 159) nominees received at least one nomination for influence in both policy fields. Figure 1 shows the combinations of nominations received by these people. Each number within the square in Figure 1 represents the number of people who received the given combination of nominations. For example, the five people in the bottom left corner of Figure 1 each received one nomination for being influential in health policy, and one for being influential in tobacco control policy. And the two people in the bottom right received only one nomination each for health policy, but at least four for tobacco control, suggesting that they are much more influential in the tobacco control area than the health policy area. To be categorized as a dual-influential, a nominee had to have received at least four nominations in both policy fields. Those who received at least four nominations for one field but three or less for the other were categorized as influentials only in the field where they had received four or more nominations.
Important members of policy networks might not always be the most obvious people. Our reputational snowball identified health policy influentials from six different job sectors: political, academic, independent consultant, public servant, hospital administrator, and NGO. Had we been trying to identify our network of health policy influentials solely by looking at influential organizations we would have missed the independent consultants and may also have missed representatives from the academic sector. This suggests the importance of looking at policy networks from the micro-level and also the importance of asking people themselves who are the members of their networks.

Discussion/Reflections

On the Reputational Snowball Process
The reputational snowball process is a reliable way to identify a micro-level policy network. If the policy network being studied has discrete boundaries, the reputational snowball will automatically stop when these boundaries are reached because no new names will emerge. In our experience, even after five rounds and 159 names, a few new names were still emerging in the health (but not the tobacco control) policy field. This suggests that the health policy field in Victoria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. nominations received</th>
<th>In health policy only</th>
<th>In tobacco control policy only</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 or more</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Nominees Who Received Nominations for Influence in Both Health Policy and Tobacco Control Policy.
might not have a discrete boundary *per se*: new people are invited to participate when policies in their area are considered.

The reputational snowball is particularly useful for assessing levels of influence. By counting the numbers of nominations each individual received, we were able to gauge how influential they were in the network. Being named by multiple nominators 4 or more suggests that an individual influential is seen to play an important policy role by people who sit in different places in the policy process. This, in turn, suggests that those with the most nominations are probably the most influential policy network members.

We were particularly interested in overlap between the two policy networks because we wanted to better understand the process that tobacco control policies must undergo if they are to get adopted. We hypothesized that there was a group of influentials who were key in both the health and the tobacco control policy areas, and this was the case. We found that the dual-influentials were almost exclusively health policy influentials with an interest in promoting tobacco control as one of their policy areas; they were not primarily committed to tobacco control. This was an interesting finding for us: it suggested that we need to keep this group interested and up-to-date with our tobacco control policy initiatives if we are to get them adopted.

The next time I run a reputational snowball I will do a number of things differently. First, I will send follow-up letters to non-respondents. Our nominator response rate of 48.5% is high for an unsolicited mail-out study, but it could have been improved if we had more aggressively followed up with non-respondents. Did the low response rate affect the networks I ended up with? I don't think it did: the people who we ended up identifying as key influentials were definitely central policymakers in their fields. Many of the people named were, based on their positions, people we expected to be influential. However, having a higher response rate would have given us even greater confidence in our data.

Second, I would not wait for responses from a whole round before sending out the next round of letters. The entire snowball process took approximately three months; it could have been shortened considerably had we sent out letters whenever new names came in.

Finally, although the reputational snowball is used by formal social network analysts, mathematical data analysis was not our intention in gathering our data, so we did not collect data on network links that could have been analysed statistically. If I were to do this again, I would ask for this type of data. It might have been interesting to see what formal network analyses could have told us about our two networks and their overlap.
Confidentiality and Ethical Issues in Studying Influentials

I did not, in my letters for the snowball process, promise nominators any sort of confidentiality, but as I was intending to interview those people who received four or more nominations, and for those interviews to be confidential, it made sense that the names of the nominators would also be kept confidential. But that did not mean that they had to keep the names of the people they had nominated secret: many nominators told their peers that they had nominated them and asked them whether they had been contacted yet and who they had named! So although I was not telling anyone anything, network members were discussing these issues with each other. Although this discussion between network members actually shows the network in operation, it made it awkward for me not to be able to even disclose that I had spoken to someone when the person already knew that I had. Duke reports a similar experience, noting that she responded to it by trying to give vague answers (Duke, 2002). This was also my strategy, and like Duke, it made me uncomfortable.

Victoria is a relatively small state, and keeping the networks confidential definitely limited the ways that I could describe them in my reporting of the project. However, I believe that, at least in some cases, by promising confidentiality I was able to receive answers in the subsequent interviews that were far more candid than I would have received had the interviews been on the record. The trade off is that I could not use some of my data (such as my lists of policy influentials) for advocacy purposes, and tobacco control advocacy was the purpose of the project. I would have been able to gain access to some of those who refused interview requests had I asked for assistance from the influentials who I knew, but that would have breached the confidentiality of the refusers. Although I thought that promising confidentiality regarding participation would help with gaining access, if I were to do this again, I would promise confidentiality for interview content only, but not for participation. This would enable me to use my contacts to help set up the interviews.

Advantages and Disadvantages of the Reputational Snowball

The advantages of using the reputational snowball technique to study policy networks include: (1) it is a systematic and replicable way of identifying who are members of policy networks; (2) it is possible to gauge how important an individual member is to the network by counting the numbers of nominations received; and (3) it is particularly useful for comparing nested networks and determining points of overlap. The disadvantages include: (1) it is very time-consuming; (2) responses are often very difficult to read; and (3) the response rate for mail-outs can be low. The response rate could be improved, but it would make the process even more time-consuming.

The reputational snowball technique for identifying policy networks would be appropriate in other policy settings, particularly at state and local levels where the
networks are small enough to be accessed. It is an effective technique for identifying both who is a member of a policy network and whether they are core members of the network, or whether they are on its periphery. Prior research has shown that the reputational snowball can identify policy networks across time, suggesting that it is a replicable research method (Considine, 1998; Lewis & Considine, 1999; Muller & Headey, 1996). It could also be used to study the development of a particular policy. This would enable the policy process to be examined in action, showing how a policy network mobilizes particular individuals at particular times, for example. This study has shown that policy networks can usefully be analysed at the microlevel. The reputational snowball also provides a middle ground between formal social network analyses and meso-level policy network studies for those wishing to study policy networks. It provides an important addition to current tools used in policy studies.

Acknowledgements
Thanks to Bruce Headey for his assistance with the design of this project and to Chloe Alsop for her assistance with running the snowball. This research was funded by the VicHealth Centre for Tobacco Control.

Note
[1] Each nominator was provided with the following definition of influence: Influential people are those who have a demonstrated capacity (not merely the potential) to do one or more of the following:
● Shape ideas about government policy;
● Initiate policy proposals;
● Substantially change or veto others’ proposals; or
● Substantially affect the implementation of policy.
In other words, influential people are those who make a significant difference at one or more stages of the policy process.
We provided this definition to be clear about what influence in a policy area involves. We particularly wanted to make sure that people who had the capacity to veto policy proposals were included in the definition, as this could be important for a potentially contentious policy area like tobacco control.
References