



REVIEW

Navigating the ethical dimensions of the science-policy interface

Reviewed Book

Epstein, R. A., & Kaplan, O. (Eds.). (2024).
Speaking Science to Power: Responsible Researchers and Policymaking.
Oxford University Press

Reviewed by

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Abstract

Guidance for researchers seeking to contribute science to the policymaking process typically focuses on technical training, such as how to write op-eds and policy briefs. An under-discussed but vital additional consideration is how to navigate the ethical challenges that arise at the intersection of research and policymaking. In their edited volume, Epstein and Kaplan feature case studies grounded in research experience to identify, describe, and offer guidance on how researchers and policymakers can bridge the science-policy gap in an effective and ethical way.

Keywords

Policy-making, communication and governance of science; Science and policy-making; Bridging research, practice and teaching

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The edited volume, *Speaking Science to Power: Responsible Researchers and Policymaking*, addresses an increasingly relevant challenge for researchers: how to generate knowledge that can effectively and ethically bridge the gap between science and decision-making to inform the policymaking process. While typical “bridging” advice focuses on making research more accessible to practitioners (e.g. by offering guidance on communication, writing op-eds and research briefings, etc.), this volume focuses on the ethical challenges that emerge in efforts to bridge the gap between these two groups. Through a series of in-depth case studies of science policy engagement drawing primarily on the International Relations discipline, this volume offers innovative, clear, and thoughtful considerations for how to responsibly engage in the researcher-policymaker interface.

The volume is organised in chapters written as case studies, with practitioners and researchers reflecting on specific ethical challenges that they have navigated during their careers as policy-engaged researchers. Each chapter explores a different ethical dilemma that researchers may face when doing policy-relevant work and offers clear guidance on how to navigate these challenges through ethical reflexivity. Chapters explore engagement dilemmas such as the draw towards overgeneralization or prosocial lying, navigating the influence of pre-determined policy goals, developing equitable and effective research partnerships with community partners, avoiding the misuse of data (such as cherry-picking or box-checking), and the importance of recognising researcher, policymaker, and research partner positionality.

The authors set up their contribution as a middle ground between two traditional views of science engagement with policy. The first, grounded in Pielke’s [2007] Honest Broker theory, positions scientists as actors who use rigorous methods to explore policy-relevant questions, explain the outcomes to policymakers, and clarify the range of policy options emerging from their analyses — but refrain from policy advocacy. The second, as described by Mair et al. [2019], emphasises that facts alone cannot speak for themselves and scientists are legitimate contributors to reasoned debate about policy options. Epstein and Kaplan expand on these proposed roles for researchers, recognising that ethical challenges can interrupt researcher intentions of autonomy and independence. “By anticipating engagement dilemmas”, the editors argue, “we aim to help scholars and practitioners think through problems before they encounter them on the ground, thereby improving the conveyance of findings” [Epstein & Kaplan, 2024, p. 8].

This volume is a valuable resource for scholars at all stages of policy-engaged research, from researchers who are currently engaged in policy-relevant research to those just beginning to embark on this journey. As the authors note, expectations regarding the policy impact of academic scholarship are increasingly common in tenure and promotion criteria, prompting many researchers to delve into this role with minimal training on how to do it effectively and ethically. This volume would be of particular value as a classroom resource for training Ph.D. students on how to ethically engage with policy communities. The chapters are accessible and applied, offering clear guidance rooted in real-life research experiences, ripe for additional unpacking and discussion in the classroom. Each chapter also has independent value and could be examined individually for deeper ethical investigation by scholars working in those specific areas, for example, post-conflict studies, economics, governance, and development. The case studies lend themselves particularly well to scholars of international relations and social science, although the lessons could be equally relevant to any researchers whose work may inform the policy process.

Certain chapters were particularly notable for their innovative perspectives on ethical challenges that many researchers may not predict. For example, “*Preregister your Ethical Redlines*” (Lyll, chapter 2) should be required reading for anyone planning a community-engaged research project, particularly in conflict or post-conflict zones but arguably including any engagement with communities or decision-makers. Kaplan’s chapter (“*Partnered Policy Engagement: Positionality and the Ethics of Collaborating with Civil Society Organizations*”, chapter 5) prompts important considerations about partnering with practitioners as research partners, notably the role of power and role imbalances, the need to acknowledge positionality, and differences in comfort with academic, research, and policy settings.

The robust introduction to the volume positions this work in the context of more general challenges associated with science communication, including how to thoughtfully employ framing and narrative, the importance of understanding and navigating emotion not as separate from fact, the role of values in people’s interpretation of facts, and the importance of accessible framing and source credibility. While these concepts of science communication are not the primary focus in the chapters, they are a relevant undercurrent of the recommendations and implications of ethical reflexivity. A more direct connection between these science communication challenges and the conclusions of the case studies could improve the relevance of this volume as a commentary on science communication, but its absence does not detract from the innovative value of this work to all efforts to bridge the science-policy gap.

While primarily targeted at researchers engaging in the policymaking process, this volume is important for both researchers and policymakers to explore and understand, to better facilitate a more useful, equitable, and responsible exchange between the research and policymaking enterprises. Readers of the book will be better prepared to make meaningful, data-informed contributions to the policymaking process in an effective and ethical way. As the editors write in the introduction, readers of this volume will take an important step towards “becoming thoughtful, informed, and ethically reflective gap-bridging scholars” [Epstein & Kaplan, 2024, p. 9].

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