

Policy Insight

The State of Public Policy Research in the Philippines¹

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The University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) *Philippine Journal of Public Policy* (PJPP) Writeshop was held last June 27–28, 2019. The writeshop gathered early career researchers in the Philippines to share and refine their research work into journal manuscripts intended for public policy. Seven fellows were selected—six of whom pursued their application. Each fellow was paired with a mentor who guided them through the stages of manuscript revision. Two of the manuscripts submitted to the PJPP Writeshop are published in this volume.

The program involved an introductory panel discussion on the state of the art of public policy research in the Philippines. Three experts on public policy research were invited to share their experiences in the field: Dr. Maria Ela L. Atienza, professor at the UP Department of Political Science and editor of the *Philippine Political Science Journal* (PPSJ); Dr. Rosario G. Manasan, senior research fellow of the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS); and Dr. Ronald U. Mendoza, dean of the Ateneo School of Government (ASOG). The experts shared their insights on public policy research: from the tensions between research execution and publication to the growing shift in the focus of research dissemination, including how young researchers can situate themselves and navigate the existing landscape.

On Publishing Research

Having been a long-time research fellow of the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, Dr. Manasan noted that there

has been a significant change on how researchers are addressing the public dissemination of their research.

Dr. Manasan shared her experience with PIDS, a think tank with fellows who are all doctorate degree holders, but who were largely trained to produce policy-oriented research papers. While the background of its fellows is academic, PIDS's target audience was initially the public, or, more specifically, the policymakers who would affect public action. Policy briefs were taken from full-blown policy research papers to be disseminated to legislators and other decision-makers.

Through the years, PIDS's research dissemination took on various forms: from 45-page discussion papers, which were closer to mini-dissertations, to colorful infographics that were better suited for the public's increasingly fast-paced lifestyle. Another noticeable shift in research across different academic institutions, including PIDS, is the attention given to research publication. With new standards in determining the value of research—that is, through citation indices and publication in peer-reviewed journals, among others—the field has understandably become more competitive. Getting published has become a key concern among researchers in their professional growth and development. Thus, the challenge for young researchers, beyond finding their own voice, is to meet all such metrics while making an impact on public policy.

Because publication plays a central role in one's immersion into public policy research, in particular, and the academe, in general, early career researchers hoping to get a foothold in the field should aim to get published. One of the inevitable rites of passage in academic publishing is the peer review. As the editor of the *Philippine Political Science Journal*, a Web of Science- and Scopus-indexed journal, Dr. Atienza highlighted that publication, particularly in peer-reviewed academic journals, is a rigorous process. The review process is, ideally, where the manuscript is further refined before it is published and enters public discourse.

The question, then, is: What makes a manuscript publishable, one that will pass the review process? While the basic answer may seem clear, that is, to craft a well-designed research with relevant data,

the devil is in the very fine details of coming up with such a research, and writing it down as an academic journal article, which can be two different things, at times.

Identifying Policy Issues

All three experts agreed that the starting point is identifying and responding to policy issues. Dr. Mendoza, dean of the Ateneo School of Government, noted that policy research is a way of advancing evidence-based reforms in public policy. Research should inform policies, if there is a need to address policies that no longer work, or look into policies that have worked and can serve as a model for others.

Without getting discouraged by the rigor of publication and the process of making a space for oneself in academic circles, the core of research, as Dr. Mendoza emphasized, is to have clear goals. Young academics engaged in policy research must not forget their purpose in pursuing their respective studies, despite the ordeals that come with it. This purpose is the incorporation of a well-thought of, scientific, and disciplined approach to policymaking. It comes with an acknowledgement that policy research is inextricably linked to social realities.

The link between policymaking and people's lives is manifested in how a policy affects (or does not affect) societal problems. The relevance of a policy issue is largely contextual: each society has its own specific set of issues to deal with, and corresponding policies with which to engage these issues. Situating oneself and one's research interests in the existing political climate is one way of identifying a policy issue to address. For instance, much attention is being given to climate change and fake news, because these are the prominent issues of public concern today.

Another way of identifying policy issues involves prioritizing problems to engage with. New and seasoned researchers alike recognize that one research cannot possibly encompass the entirety of issues that must be addressed. Specificity is key in constructing a solid research. While this is the case, a researcher vying for publication must equally learn how to frame their respective topic according to

the standards of their target journal. This is where writing, as a craft, must work together with research.

Researchers must therefore be aware of who (i.e., the specific journal and its audience) they are submitting their research to, and the journal's requirements. Dr. Manasan gave, as an example, public policy issues which may be relevant in the Philippine context, but which may not merit significant attention in other countries. In this case, an international journal may not give much attention to a research that solely concerns Philippine reality. If a scholar decides to pursue a particular international publication, they need to reframe their research accordingly, without necessarily changing their topic.

This transitions into the type of language used in academic publishing. For a manuscript to be considered for the review process, the researcher must be able to have a clear command of the language, adhering to certain standards in syntax, structure, and jargon. This also includes organizing the research writeup in such a way that follows an academic journal's format.

Organizing Research

What sets public policy research apart from other forms of academic manuscripts is that the researcher must keep in mind two target audiences. The first audience are members of the academic community who will incorporate their study in academic discourse, while the second are the policymakers and stakeholders who will use the research for policy reform and improvement. Both audiences are equally important, which makes navigating the terrain of policy research rather challenging.

Dr. Atienza differentiated policy research papers from other papers accepted in academic journals. The former offers a set of policy proposals backed by research findings to address specific policy problems. It is also written as an academic journal article, which, as Dr. Atienza explains, makes use of a language different from the usual policy brief. While many young researchers may be more trained in writing policy briefs, especially those who work for government

agencies or organizations, academic journal articles require a different type of rigor.

However, when writing a manuscript based on research, using the right language does not necessarily mean only following academic jargon. A manuscript must also have complete parts: the introduction, background of the study, review of related literature, methodology, findings, and analysis. This includes describing the context and importance of the research problem being addressed by the study through a clearly formulated research problem. The specific research questions must capture the essence of the study and should be pursued using appropriate research methods.

Other basic, yet fundamental, aspects of an academic journal article involve a clear working title and a brief, yet substantive abstract. After all, these are what catch the reader's attention before they proceed with the entire paper. At the same time, scholars must not overpromise in crafting their abstracts. Writing the abstract is a major challenge, as it should capture the key elements of the paper itself.

Research proceeds from a thorough review of related literature, which should inform scholars of gaps in understanding that should be filled, and in terms of which the study may be considered as making a significant contribution.

Another crucial factor in research is data analysis. As Dr. Atienza mentioned, much of policy research may have relevant data, but only a few may present a solid analysis. The analysis is necessary in coming up with policy options, which policy research papers often contain. These will ideally be used by policymakers in moving forward with their policies, and other academics in building on further refined policy recommendations.

However, young scholars also need to be kinder to themselves in this respect. Dr. Atienza explained that these are things that cannot be learned overnight. Finding a writing style that follows academic language will take plenty of reading and writing to master.

Dealing with the Review Process

On a more substantive level, Dr. Atienza suggested that early career researchers may also learn the tricks of the trade by paying attention to how the review process is conducted when asked to review the papers of their peers. Attention must also be given to the specific questions that certain journals ask when it comes to the methods and presentation of the research. Once manuscripts are considered for the review process, young scholars should expect to have their manuscripts undergo several revisions, and, more importantly, they should take into consideration the comments of reviewers.

Discipline is needed in the review process. Early career researchers, and even more senior academics in the field of policy research, must be able to follow the revision process and adhere to deadlines. Younger researchers may start out with having a mentor, who will provide input on their work. The mentor is often someone who has plenty of experience in their respective discipline, and who has also successfully navigated the field. Similarly, a peer reviewer has the necessary expertise to provide substantive comments on the paper. Thus, the remarks that both the mentor and the peer reviewers will provide are essential in refining and preparing the manuscript for publication.

Prior to the peer review process, a desk review may be conducted by an in-house editorial team, which will determine whether the paper is technically fit to be forwarded to peer reviewers. Authors must keep in mind that abiding by the technical requirements of a journal (i.e., with regard to citation, format, and word count), is part of the publication process. As much as journals have substantive standards that articles must follow, they also have technical guidelines to ensure consistency of format and style in their publications.

Not all papers are accepted for publication. However, this does not mean that a rejected manuscript has failed in its purpose, or that it is unsalvageable. As mentioned by the speakers, it may simply be the case that the paper does not meet the journal's criteria. There are many factors to consider—sometimes it is the adherence to a certain theme that a journal is trying to highlight; other times it is the way data is analyzed and processed by the author.

In both cases, the author can explore other options for publication. Authors may submit their paper to a different journal whose interests are closer to the paper's intent. They may choose to take the word of their reviewers and edit their manuscripts accordingly, or even craft an entirely different paper around the same topic.

The review process is daunting, but it is also necessary, especially when it comes to policy research. Data must be verified, analysis must be sound, and contribution to existing literature must be substantial. This is to ensure the cumulation of knowledge that feeds into a well-developed public policy.

Expanding Research Reach and Other Concerns

Getting one's research in public does not automatically mean capturing a following for a published manuscript. To become more immersed in the field of policy research, early career researchers must also find other avenues to share their findings. Dr. Mendoza stressed the need to capacitate young researchers through avenues similar to the writeshop, which brings together those who want to improve their research.

Feedback from peers in the same field is good, but feedback from those in different disciplines may generate more varied output. Early career researchers are encouraged to widen their horizons, from interacting only with other researchers in the same discipline to listening and sharing with peers working in different areas of specialization. The more diverse researchers' fields of interest are, the better. This is because, as Dr. Mendoza mentioned, changes in the landscape of public policy research include a shift toward a multidisciplinary approach.

The dynamism of policy is enhanced by policy researchers reaching out to experts in other fields related to the concerns they are focusing on. Examples would be in the field of health and disaster risk reduction, where policy researchers must also consult with experts to better understand the context of the policies they are reviewing.

It should be noted that networking is essential for the enrichment of intellectual linkages with peers from other disciplines working together for policy reform. A key concern is finding a research center to affiliate with in order to execute a comprehensive research agenda.

The realities of research include mundane but important administrative tasks. Dr. Mendoza cited the purchase of materials and software that will allow researchers to encode and process their data. Day-to-day concerns, like sourcing research fund, staff hiring, office maintenance, and managing overhead project costs and expenditures, among others, must also be attended to.

Conclusion

There has been a shift in the focus of public policy research. Different generations of policy researchers have different priorities. Before turning its attention to publication, policy research mainly involved disseminating information to the public through policymakers. With new metrics of assessing meaningful research, early career researchers must strategize to get a foothold in their intended discipline.

There are various reasons why young scholars need to publish: career advancement, personal growth, or social advocacy. However, in the highly competitive landscape of research publication, sustaining one's interest and discipline throughout the rigor of a review process and other aspects of research can be difficult.

A researcher must be able to consider and act on other concerns, such as administrative tasks and fundraising. In this respect, finding a research institution to affiliate oneself with can be advantageous, especially in executing long-term or large-scale research agenda. To broaden the perspective of researchers toward effective policy reform, networking with peers outside one's specialization is as important as talking to others working in pertinent areas of concern in other fields of expertise.

Producing the actual policy research involves several steps: from the formulation of the policy issue to manuscript review and revision.

In writing, researchers are not only expected to have a clear grasp of the theory; they also need to take into consideration the policy implications of their work. That said, the technical aspect of policy research writing may seem less exciting than fleshing out one's ideas, but is equally important for publication.

A first draft of a manuscript is not the end, of course. Authors are expected to discern helpful comments from the peer review which will improve their paper, and further refine it into publishable material. Being gracious in the face of constructive criticism is an important attitude that researchers must imbibe in order to navigate the landscape of research publication. During review and revision, a disciplined routine will be helpful in accommodating the demands of meeting deadlines and working with peer reviewers' comments. Keeping all these in mind, it appears to be a long stretch in transforming an initial draft into a final, publishable article.

However, despite the difficulties in surviving the newly competitive terrain of public policy research, young scholars must not lose hope in their chosen profession. The dynamic nature of research is yet to yield further changes (expected or unexpected) in the future, which may lead to interesting progress. At the same time, a researcher must return to the essence of policy-oriented research: to answer questions, instill a scientific, well-thought of reform in policymaking, and contribute to the body of knowledge and public discourse.

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Note

1. This policy insight is a compilation of key points from the panel discussion by Dr. Maria Ela L. Atienza, Dr. Rosario G. Manasan, and Dr. Ronald U. Mendoza at the Philippine Journal of Public Policy Writeshop 2019.