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Title:

Academic knowledge brokering in local policy spaces: negotiating and implementing dynamic idea types

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Abstract:

Background - Academic researchers are occupying more varied roles as both knowledge producers and knowledge brokers in policymaking spaces beyond the national level. As the local arena presents different dimensions to the knowledge-policy-practice nexus, an assessment of the interaction of evidence and policy at this scale is warranted.

Aims and objectives - This paper considers how two early career researchers acted within two different policymaking spaces at the local level to: bring new and synthesised evidence to decisionmakers; respond to evidence and research requests from a diverse group of local actors; and serve as a critical friend.

Methods – autoethnography.

Findings - We find that early career positionality presents common issues for policy engagement across the cases, however, the contexts necessarily differ due to the power of specific actors, the internal and external interests at play, and the varied relationships confronting the academics. Deploying Smith's four 'idea types' as a framework, we draw attention to the shifting roles academics need to play given the churn between institutionalised ideas, critical ideas, charismatic ideas and chameleonic ideas.

Discussion and Conclusion – Agency, triggers and structural rigidities are key to the movement between idea types. Future research based on interviews with local policymakers may help to further reveal how shifts between idea types come about.

Key messages:

Local policy bodies may be more open to a wide range of idea types, currently under-researched.

The propensities for siloed or cross-cutting working shape the nature of ideas engaged with.

ECRs can be effective knowledge producers and brokers but their positionality must be considered fully.

Shifts across idea types may emerge or be conditioned by ECR agency, triggers and structural rigidities.

Key words/short phrases:

local government, idea types, knowledge producer, knowledge broker

Word count: 7789

Background

The nexus between evidence and policy is an issue that continues to animate academic debate, and this has been framed in terms of the ‘research policy gap’ (Oliver et al, 2014) as well as the disjuncture between those ‘producing’ research and those ‘constructing policies’ (Smith, 2013, p. 4). Not only is this nexus a site of academic debate, it is also prominent in the everyday working of academics via the ‘Impact Agenda’ (Smith et al, 2021) and the push for further public engagement by academics (Watermeyer, 2012). Academics are therefore increasingly asked to be knowledge producers, knowledge brokers, critical friends and ‘entrepreneurs’ almost simultaneously as they attempt to achieve policy impact (Oliver and Cairney, 2019). This paper contributes to conceptual and empirical gaps in our understanding of academics who work at the nexus of research and policy, specifically academics who are knowledge producers and brokers in the early stages of their academic career. We consider how ‘ideas’ at work in two recent cases function in the hands of the early career researcher (ECR), and then discuss how agency, triggers for engagement, and structural rigidities within policy contexts impacted how early career researchers performed in these roles¹. These themes are well covered in the literature but are rarely viewed from an ECR lens (see Oliver et al, 2014; Cairney, 2016; Kay, 2012).

Literature context

A focus on the evidence-policy nexus reflects a broad concern from academics for policy relevance and impact, coupled with an attraction for policymakers to frame strategies and interventions in a manner that is rigorous and thoroughgoing (Oliver et al, 2014). While there is a wealth of ‘how to’ literature for academics working between the worlds of evidence and policy, and empirical evidence on the experience of individual researchers, there is less empirical evidence on the structural factors that influence how these individuals can and do engage in the evidence-policy nexus (Oliver and Cairney, 2019). One of these empirical gaps is on how ECRs work at this nexus. Career trajectory, along with a variety of other structural factors such as socioeconomic status, gender and race, influence how and why academics engage in policy spaces (Cairney and Oliver, 2018; Smith and Stewart, 2017).

Early career academics as knowledge producers and brokers in policy spaces are notably absent from both empirical and ‘how to’ literatures (with the exception of Evans and Cvitanovic, 2018). The absence of the ECR experience from this discussion has therefore produced literature that assumes equal access to power in policy spaces and equal opportunities to engage in the long-term work of relationship building with policy actors without career costs (Cairney and Oliver, 2018). Relatedly, an evidence base created on the experiences of the more powerful or successful can miss how the ‘ideas’ that function in the nexus do so differently in the hands of the less outwardly ‘powerful’ (Smith, 2013). This lack of evidence can leave today’s ECRs to ‘fight the same battles and learn the same lessons over again’ relating to policy impact (Oliver and Cairney, 2019, p. 8).

In this piece we choose to focus on the idea types taxonomy of Smith (2013) as one part of the evidence-policy nexus that can be better understood with new evidence from ECR producers and brokers. We offer a critical view on the idea types through the specific power and power

¹ Here we consider an early career researcher based on time spent post-PhD in an academic role, often less than seven years. This definition aligns with those provided by funders for grant awards only given to ‘early career’ researchers; both in the UK (e.g. UK Research and Innovation, where an ECR is defined as within eight years of PhD award and six years of a first academic appointment) and in Europe (e.g. European Research Council, where an ECR is within seven years of PhD award). The authors consider themselves ECRs as they commenced these roles within five years of PhD completion.

differentials; in other words, idea types would appear to us to be unequally available to ECRs because they have more to lose and don't have the symbolic capital to function critically. Guided by Smith's taxonomy, we zoom in to two specific interfaces of ECRs acting in local policy spaces.

This paper is positioned within a large literature on evidence use in policy spaces, sitting amongst studies that discuss issues such as how evidence is constructed and used (or not) in policy spaces (Oliver et al, 2014; Nutley et al, 2010; Nutley et al, 2019; Weiss, 1979); the difference and merits of 'evidence-based' and 'evidence-informed' policy (Boaz et al, 2019; Cairney, 2016; Head, 2016); and studies that focus on the people in both spaces who create and mobilise evidence for policy impact (Cairney, 2016; Cairney and Oliver, 2018; Oliver et al, 2020; Smith, 2013; Smith and Stewart, 2017; Wilkinson, 2019). Specifically, this paper adds to work on the latter topic; the people working within the evidence and policy nexus.

The entanglements of evidence and policy are based on various starting points. One is a knowledge or policy-problem first basis, where evidence is provided to support a policy choice already made; another is where research activities give tactical 'breathing space' to policymakers; and a third is where long-running relationships and non-linear processes determine evidence-policy interfaces (Smith, 2013, p. 7; also see Boswell and Smith, 2017; Cairney, 2016; Matthews et al, 2018). Each of these starting points can be the basis of the 'bridge' to move between evidence and policy (Smith, 2014, p. 561).

Furthermore, it is valuable to interrogate *how* policy communities interact and engage with evidence; for example, the skills to use or the time to interpret research and evidence (Oliver et al, 2014; Nutley et al, 2019). This focus also necessarily considers how academics engage with the 'receivers' of this evidence. Some empirical work has found that academics are urged to 'talk human' or 'understand better' the concerns of policymakers as a matter of course (Matthews et al, 2018, p. 668), feeding concerns that evidence-based policymaking is little more than an instrumental exercise (Smith, 2013). There are also concerns that the proximity of researchers to policymakers in some contexts drives research uptake more so than the quality of research itself (Smith, 2013, pp. 22-23).

Framing

Regardless of the normative value placed on these relationships, they are an important focal point for any analysis of evidence and policy in policy spaces, as interpersonal relationships have notable impacts on evidence use (Oliver et al, 2014; Cairney, 2016; Sin, 2008; Ward, 2017). In this paper, through our case expositions, we explore how these relationships underpinning the evidence-policy nexus may be conceived and evolve. To do so we utilise Smith's (2013) four idea types – institutional, critical, charismatic and chameleonic – to guide our analysis:

- **Institutionalised ideas** are, through their continual and effective circulation within networks of actors, able to 'exhibit the characteristics of "facts" or unchallengeable "contexts" which policymakers must operate within' (2013, p. 113). Academics working within this idea space – hinging on close working relationships with policymakers - often consider gradual, incremental policy change through 'policy learning' within existing silos as the most effective approach to policy impact.
- **Critical ideas** focus on 'identifying problems with the current policy direction' (2013, p. 148) without subsequently providing an alternative solution in the immediate term. The policy contribution of research is to gradually change actors' ways of thinking in the longer term. Academics working primarily in these idea types are rather distant from immediate policy concerns, and often approach their work from an advocacy-oriented perspective.

- **Charismatic ideas** are critical of existing policies but also propose alternatives. They are ‘transformative in their power...[and] challenge ideas that have become institutionalised’ (2013, p. 151). These ideas are unlikely to come from inside bureaucracies nor from gradual change; ‘instead likely to stimulate change through political and societal shifts and pressures.’ (2013, p. 153). Academics working with these idea types are advocates that work closely – but not too close – with civil servants alongside a broad network of other actors to promote these ideas.
- **Chameleonic ideas** are elastic and transformable. They are ‘able to travel between actors and across boundaries’ (2013, p. 192) to become more acceptable for different contexts, even if the idea may challenge existing ideologies. Academics working with these ideas often put on different ‘guises’ with different audiences with an aim to ‘ensure the likely survival and influence of favoured ideas’ (2013, p. 198) and to succeed in both policy and research spaces.

Working with the idea types allows this paper to bring into view the different proximities between researcher and policymaker; autonomies of viewpoint; and strategies academics employ to secure research impact. It is unlikely that an academic works from the perspective of just one of these idea types over the course of their career.

We argue, moreover, that these framings may evolve and shift over the course of a singular evidence-policy nexus, as the demands of the researcher and policymaker evolve. As such, this investigation is led by the principal research question, ‘In what ways does the evidence-policy nexus in local institutional contexts exhibit shifts in Smith's idea types?’ This is followed by the subsidiary research question: ‘How do early career researchers engage with the institutional contexts where these dynamic idea types emerge?’.

The paper discusses three different mechanisms that impact how these idea types move in policy spaces: agency (of the researcher); triggers for engagement; and structural rigidities. Each of these mechanisms are common themes in evidence use literature, summarised most notably in Oliver (2014) as issues that detail researcher characteristics, ‘contact and collaboration’ and policymaker/policy characteristics that shape evidence use, and more broadly academic/policy engagement. These mechanisms also are discussed in policy studies literature that detail the importance of ‘agenda setting’, ‘windows of opportunity’ (Cairney, 2016) and policy path dependencies or legacies (related here to the idea of structural rigidities) (Kay, 2012).

Methods

Building on Head’s (2016) injunction to take seriously how different policy domains and organisational types shape the evidence-policy nexus, in this paper we detail two cases of early career researchers (ECRs) embedded in knowledge production and brokering roles at a local level in the UK in the course of their day-to-day work within a university.

To explore these contexts the paper follows an autoethnographic method which has been defined as ‘a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts’ (Spry, 2001, p. 710). By giving ‘voice to personal experience’ (Wall, 2008, p. 38), autoethnography requires some collapse (or boundary dissolution) between the researcher and the research object (Butz and Besio, 2009). Reflecting what Butz and Besio (2009, p. 1666) describe as reflexive or narrative ethnography, our approach resembles ‘a reflexive effort by field researchers to analyse how they are situated in relation to the people and worlds they are studying, and to the fields of power that constitute those relationships’.

In this paper, and reflecting the ethical challenges of undertaking autoethnography, we refer to cases anonymously to ensure an outline of our own experiences does not obscure or override the interests and reflections of others. As autoethnography is characterised by subjectivity, this paper does not seek to provide an insiders 'court history' or an exposé of the cases and their successes and challenges. Rather the cases are used to draw out issues which have wider significance for considering the evidence-policy nexus. Developing a broader set of perspectives on the case contexts we discuss, and the views on knowledge brokerage and production, may be amenable to future interview-based research. This paper, however, is the first exploratory work into these cases, based on our own reflections as early career researchers working in these policy spaces.

Table 1 summarises key contextual factors underpinning the two cases discussed in this paper.

[Table 1 here]

The paper proceeds from here by outlining the two case autoethnographies. While both cases have the ECR focus and operate in the same local authority, the differing timeframes suggest a different vantage on the evolution of idea types. This is explored in the discussion section which offers reflections on the characteristics of each case as they relate to the idea types. We then reflect on the mechanisms by which idea types shift (or do not shift) in our local contexts, before we identify issues for future research and the avenues for future comparative work.

Findings

In this section we outline both case contexts in turn, with a focus on the knowledge brokering and knowledge production functions that emerged.

Case 1: local social recovery after Covid-19

The first case considers academic engagement within a recently created policy group (also referred to as a taskforce) at the local authority level focussed broadly on 'social recovery' after the Covid-19 pandemic. This group is part of the authority's larger Covid-19 'renewal and recovery programme' and centres equalities and 'community empowerment' as cross-cutting themes. The author (researcher) was asked to be involved as a member of an academic advisory group. This group's wide remit resulted in a group comprised of local public servants in community facing-roles and directorates (e.g. community planning), public servants in 'practitioner' roles (e.g. local health and social care partnership) and third sector leaders; roughly 30 members in total with affiliated additional members as required. Each representative, save for policy group organisers, is aligned to one of the twelve group workstreams ranging from mental health and child poverty to minority ethnic and disabled communities. Although there are political leaders in this space most of the advisory group's engagement occurs with local public servants and practitioners. The most engagement with government occurs with the civil servants who convene the policy group and are responsible for community planning in their day-to-day work.

An important feature of this policymaking context is the elevated role for the third sector². This prominence reflects the desire of the taskforce to work with community-facing organisations given the changed relationship between the local public and third sector in the Covid-19 crisis. The local authority more closely collaborated with the local third sector in the initial crisis response period,

² The third sector is also referred to as the voluntary sector or the non-profit sector. We use third sector in this paper as it is the prevailing term for these types of non-state actors in our context.

especially in relation to food provision and other support for those shielding or isolating, and therefore ensured third sector organisations had a larger role in discussions around recovery from the crisis in this taskforce. Third sector voices on the taskforce that represent the interests of those with disabilities (a disabled people's organisation with a charismatic leader); those from minority ethnic communities (which includes a range of both advocacy organisations and community-based service delivery organisations) and representatives from the local authority third sector interface organisation (who was the key partner in the Covid-19 referral helpline) emerged as powerful voices in this policy space. The taskforce is therefore comprised of various domains of representation, with potentially different ideas and ideologies about how to address the aims of this policy group.

After the advisory group was formed, the initial 'ask' from the taskforce was relatively undefined. The first few months were spent defining with the key council interlocutors the advisory group remit and what the policy group both 'wants' and 'needs'. This period of negotiation, iteration and boundary setting was based primarily on individual meetings with interlocutors and through participation in policy group meetings where the workstreams were also defining their remits. From the start, however, the group's remit was to sit 'alongside' the taskforce and serve as an objective 'critical friend' to all those leading taskforce workstreams. Members of the advisory group did not receive any funding from the council for these activities.

The author is one member of the advisory group; an early career researcher specialising in social security policy whose role at the university also consists of a sizeable proportion of knowledge exchange activity. This academic has been able to serve as a critical friend in co-existing roles of knowledge broker and knowledge producer; the first time contributing to a local policy group in this way. Because the author was not previously known to many on the taskforce, the author provided new knowledge to the group in an early meeting (as a producer) and coordinated other academic inputs (as a broker) to demonstrate credibility in the space. The informality of this taskforce, with direct lines of communication between the author and the group leadership, enabled this credibility-building work to be done relatively quickly with personal communications and meetings. However, for many ECRs their positionality (i.e. lack of existing 'status') may be a larger barrier to engagement and may therefore need to rely on other academic 'gatekeepers' to work in these spaces effectively.

Knowledge Broker

One of the initial requests of the policy group's leadership was for the author (and the wider advisory group) to inhabit a relatively 'traditional' supply/demand knowledge brokering role, supplying new evidence to the group members from academics in their networks in a neutral networking function. Apart from this initial ask being too broad to be practicable – there simply is too much evidence on the social impacts of the pandemic for one broker to usefully collate and coordinate – this type of request from policy actors operates under the assumption that the more up-to-date evidence available to decisionmakers, the better the decisions. However, decades of research asserts that 'evidence alone [is] not likely to trigger significant policy change' and rather policy change is a combination of evidence, 'political competition, power struggles, societal shifts and values/ideologies' (Smith 2013, p. 145).

Rather, the author chose to approach the knowledge brokering role as discursively as possible, building relationships with those on the taskforce as a matter of priority. This approach was taken primarily because the knowledge broker was a relative 'unknown' to many of those on the taskforce. The author collaborated with leaders of the policy group to pinpoint what types of information and evidence gaps existed for members; in particular, the members were interested in as much information on the local and regional context as possible. After the evidence remit was determined,

the author worked within an existing network of academics to gauge their interest in contributing to the taskforce in meetings and in new policy briefing outputs, while also casting a wider net in an open call to academics across the university.

An important skill in this 'broker as facilitator' role is an ability to understand the needs of the policy actor and their short and long-term agendas, and to frame this adequately for academics who want to contribute. To do this, the author held discussions with academics prior to their contributions about how to make the most of their evidence and findings within the context of the key issues the policy groups work with (e.g. 'place-based' initiatives/local plans for poverty reduction; digital inclusion; and equalities). The author also encouraged academic contributors to include findings that may not currently be within the group's field of vision to potentially challenge assumed knowledge, even if the research identifies problems rather than solutions.

The taskforce leadership requested that the advisory group serve this brokering function so that there were fewer points of contact with the potentially wide range of academics. While in general most of the academics whom the advisory group worked with have been satisfied with the engagement, some challenges emerged. In one instance, an academic felt the advisory group was controlling the flow of information and engagement by not allowing them to get in touch with taskforce leaders themselves. This brings up a notable experience for brokers, where some academics feel stifled by the need to go through a broker while others may be grateful for this opportunity and engagement via a broker. For academics who might already have experience engaging with many types of policy actors, this gateway via an ECR may feel more like a bottleneck; particularly because an ECR may not be seen as an authoritative actor compared to more established academics.

Knowledge producer

Alongside the role as a knowledge broker, the author also contributed to the work of the taskforce as an individual knowledge producer; albeit in a knowledge production role that is less 'defined' as in Case 2. The blending of these two roles illustrates an academic working in this 'middle territory' (Smith 2013, p. 182); responding to the needs of policy actors in the shorter-term while also attempting to produce evidence in their own field to be parlayed into academic outputs with a longer time horizon.

An interesting facet of knowledge production in this taskforce has been the request to adapt research presented by the author to include more evidence on the cross-cutting issue of equalities, for example, where in previous work this may not be as prevalent. This adaptation was made to address the unique remit of the group and the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on equalities groups, but also to reflect the presence of strong voices of equalities groups on the taskforce. Although the knowledge produced was done so proactively, the engagement also included being reactive to the group's evidence needs.

Working as a knowledge producer in collaboration with other academics within and beyond the advisory group has also meant setting boundaries in discussions with taskforce leadership in the types of evidence the small group would produce. The advisory group had to make it quite clear that it is not 'commissioned' by the taskforce to produce research, nor can it be realistically expected to respond to every request for evidence as an ad-hoc evidence 'supplier'. One of the compromises proposed by the advisory group to meet the evidence needs of the taskforce was to curate existing evidence on areas of focus into new policy briefings. These outputs would synthesise the most up to

date evidence on a particular topic and consider the policy and practice implications of this evidence as it related to both national and local policymaking spaces.

Case 2 – local socio-economic change

The second case considers an evolving collaboration which saw the ECR support an independent advisory group concerned with socio-economic change at a local level in the UK. The advisory group was established to provide advice on a local authority-led programme of work for socio-economic change, which initially sought narrow technical inputs but evolved to provide wider advisory insights.

The group was established to act as a critical friend to a fledgling unit within the local authority, and the nature of this relationship is worthy of some attention. The critical friend role is ultimately underpinned by the advisory group's stated independence, as noted in a foundational document. However, this critical friend role is shaped by the funding line whereby the local authority provides resource for the advisory group to function. Part of this resource was used to support a researcher (the author), who supported and reported directly to the advisory group while being directly employed within a university. The advisory group is constituted by pro bono members who are selected by the chair of the advisory group based on their substantive research and policy expertise and are drawn from higher education, the public sector and the private sector. In summary, there is an indirect line from the researcher, mediated by an advisory group, to local policymakers. Or, more particularly, the ECR supports advisory group members who in turn make decisions about what advice is given in an independent capacity to the local authority.

The complexity of this advisory group role is reflected in the wider arrangements concerning the interests of the national/central government units, who have a funding interest in the related programme of work alongside the local authority. An important backcloth to these multiple interests is that local authorities are highly constrained in the autonomies they have to act. Therefore, understanding which tiers of government could do what was important to the researcher. Furthermore, personnel both within the advisory group and within the local authority unit changed over a few years (Smith, 2013, p. 202). Additionally, there was variation in proactive versus reactive types of engagement with the advisory group and author: at times the advisory group suggested work areas to the local authority to consider and at others the local authority pointed out a knowledge gap which the advisory group was asked to respond to. In this case, as distinct from Case 1, the knowledge producer role was more prominent than the broker role, so we start with the former.

Knowledge producer

The researcher's role in supporting the advisory group – who in turn made decisions about what to advise the local authority – hinged on the generation of research notes primarily. These research outputs varied in form and time commitment. Many of the notes were brief issues notes that introduced the advisory group members to relevant considerations. These may be 2 to 3 pages, and were designed to inform an upcoming discussion, for example. At the other end of the spectrum, full working papers may be developed which were based on a more typical research approach: research design; data collection; data analysis, and summary outputs and reporting. These may take up to a year or more and may involve full ethics submissions along with various forms of dissemination. This work tended to be independently formed and not co-produced with local authorities to ensure the independent role of the advisory group. However, inception and update meetings with local authority partners were held at various stages.

One issue with the production of various research outputs was determining who could appropriately represent the research to policy audiences. In some instances, the researcher would directly present research results and findings to the local authority, but in most cases this was undertaken by an advisory group member. Therefore, marrying rights of authorship with the interests of the advisory group members in representing the work was an important matter. Indeed, signalling who could represent material, and on what terms, reflects an important issue to consider.

A further issue for knowledge production was the nature of the research output in balancing different advisory group members' views on how the group should relate and give evidence to the local authority. Whilst some members of the advisory group were inclined to pitch in and help local authorities wherever they could - perhaps with an overriding concern for the institutional funding channel (and reflecting an institutionalised idea type) - others saw involvement as warranting careful judgement given the independent position of the group. Relatedly, the nature of research outputs brought about contestation, with some advisory group members taking the view that the group should do what is asked of it (and what is most useful for the local authority), as opposed to other members who sought to 'speak truth to power' and offer a more resolute critique of existing policy practices. In preparing research outputs, this balance of judgement concerns both the nature of recommendations that the researcher might suggest for the advisory group then to advise the local authority on, as well as the tone and pitch of the research output. In terms of the latter, issues about how to balance the identification of weaknesses and opportunities in existing policy areas presented a common issue for debate when writing and presenting to the local authority unit (e.g. using language such as: 'activities on policy x are falling short on ...' as opposed to 'there is an opportunity to strengthen policy x by ...').

A related dimension concerned the parallel development of in-house knowledge capacities within the local authority, which raised questions about how in-house knowledge aligned or potentially replaced the knowledge produced by the advisory group. Amongst other things, this presents issues of what is expected as effective knowledge: is it controllable knowledge which the local authority designs and commissions, as per a consultancy; or is it a more open and discursive relationship where the advisory group takes a stronger hand in determining what is important and of value (and where knowledge is presented to the local authority, whether sought or not, in some cases)?

In terms of knowledge production, finally, domain-specific knowledge is an area that may form tensions within an advisory group and between the local authority unit being advised. That is, local socio-economic change issues can be framed in quite different ways – with quite different problems and solutions pointed to – and this poses a potential challenge where the underpinning evidence is far from definitive. This includes tensions about what is causing what, or what is most important regarding socio-economic change. These debates over conceptual or empirical entitlement reflects who has, or claims to have, authentic voice in addressing a policy issue.

Knowledge broker

Aspects of the advisory group's work has been to act as a bridge between the research community, where the research community extends beyond the advisory group and the ECR acting for it, and policymakers. Such brokerage was reflected through a few modalities in this case. First, the broker pointed local stakeholders to specific sets of expertise known to the researcher or to the contacts of advisory group members. Here the advisory group acted as a relatively neutral networking function to link local authority personnel to other academic colleagues who have expertise to bring to bear. One example of this may be where the academic researcher links local authorities to sources which have a specialist understanding of policy appraisal techniques, for example. A more active brokerage

role, second, is where the advisory group actively formed networks to support the development of ideas which the group believes will be useful to local stakeholders. This involved building wider coalitions of actors who can support the advisory group on an issue area and would be attractive to policymakers looking to consider a wider set of views on a policy issue.

One further issue is who does the brokering in this complex space – is it the pro bono advisory group members or the researcher supporting the group members? In this case this tended toward the advisory group members undertaking the brokering, though on occasions brokerage was brought about by the researcher. This reflected the seniority of the advisory group members and who they could call on; it also reflected different views on who could appropriately represent knowledge and ideas to policy audiences (we return to ECR agency below).

Power linked to interlocutory roles may also reflect the symbolic nature of advice, and this is pertinent to both knowledge brokering and production roles. That is, the advisory group was comprised of senior individuals who had a strong public standing within the local context. This raises the issue of whether, therefore, it was simply the knowledge per se that was valuable or whether it was who was carrying the knowledge that carried weight. In other words, knowledge may be valuable because of who is saying it, rather than what that knowledge may be or reflect – or there may be some balance at play. Here we need to consider the instrumental interests of local policymakers, who may gain leverage and credibility among other policy partners by associating with certain knowledge sources.

Discussion and Conclusions

Having outlined the two cases, we now turn to consider how the researchers' roles as actors within the evidence-policy nexus exhibit shifts in the four idea types sketched out by Smith (2013). The idea types provide, in this rendition, a heuristic to consider the changing nature of evidence-policy praxis, and the following commentary exposes why some idea types may have greater prominence and persistence than others. Table 2 provides examples in each case of where each idea type has manifested thus far, or where the context is amenable for the idea type to emerge.

[Table 2 here]

While Table 2 summarises the key 'static' examples of where and how the idea type manifested in our cases, what is notable is how these idea types are 'dynamic' in the hands of researchers, reflecting shifts during policy engagements. What are the mechanisms by which these shifts can occur, do occur, or do not occur? In what follows, we consider three mechanisms through which shifts in idea types can be realised, building on the content of the cases. In each of the cases, the ECR positionality shapes how the evidence-policy nexus is approached, as the researchers are positioned within a series of relationships that shape what they can and cannot do.

Agency

Agency brings into the view the extent to which researchers within an evidence-policy nexus can shift between idea types. Our cases offer different reflections on this point. In Case 1, a variety of voices and the wide remit of the group, coupled with a major shift in political and social context of working, created a new context for what is 'possible' within local authority policy. Notably, the institutional ideas of what the local authority could reasonably 'do' within a variety of policy areas were challenged in this crisis, as local authority and third sector working changed dramatically and public services worked at unprecedented speed in Spring 2020. That provided the context by which the author and other academics felt they could bring forth new – mostly critical – ideas that might be better received by local authority officials and elected members at this time. This included ideas

such as reasons for disproportionate impacts on some groups (e.g. lack of trust and consultation between communities and the public sector), and broader critiques that may not necessarily be directed at the local level but which have impacts on local systems (e.g. the need for a wholly revised social care system). The policy group has been particularly open to new solutions presented that move beyond critical and into charismatic ideas from both academics and external actors who present their evidence to the taskforce.

The remit of this group and a social context enabling new ideas to be welcomed has improved researcher agency in this space. The more informal nature of group leadership has also enabled the ECR to engage with leadership without the need for a 'gatekeeper' as a knowledge producer. The author-as-broker also served as a gatekeeper in this space, which for some academics appeared to stifle *their* agency in this space. The tension between limiting the flow of individual engagements with policymakers at their request and the desire by some academics to engage on their own terms is potentially inherent in a broker relationship, and perhaps one that may never be resolved.

In Case 2, agency is cultivated by the local authority funding source and the role of the ECR in reporting through the advisory group. That is, room for movement was shaped by expectations of content and recommendations of a certain guise (i.e. institutionalised ideas), and this was guided by local policymakers in part. Agency of the researcher to put forward a critical or charismatic idea almost required a degree of shadow agency, as given by the mediating role of the advisory group. Coupled with the observation that different views on pitching evidence to local policy audiences may be in place – with some members leaning toward consensus over criticism, and vice versa – a multi-faceted relationship context confronted the researcher.

Agency therefore speaks to the ability of the researcher to move across idea types by deploying interpersonal and relationship management skills most prominently. Case 1 shows – with its wider reach of activity – a process where ideas and evidence are somewhat more up for grabs and academics (especially ECRs) can therefore engage with policy group members beyond institutionalised ideas. Case 2 shows researcher agency conditioned by expectations of both the local authority and the direct reporting line to the advisory group, to a greater extent, which may limit shifts across different idea types.

Triggers

Preceding agency, and the ability to act, are the triggering events or arrangements that permit action in the first place. Such triggers may take a range of forms, from events that spur new emphases in policymaking to the institutional levels at which policy attempts are made (e.g. local government compared with central government). In terms of events, social and economic ruptures ask questions of how policymakers can effectively respond. In Case 1, as intimated prior, the clear implication is that critical ideas could come through given both the substantive reach of the group, and the variegated membership of the group. An important trigger in this space that is – and can be – unique to the local context is the role of the third sector. This is primarily due to the wider 'equalities and communities' remit of the policy group itself but it may also reflect the wider role that the third sector plays as a supplementary actor to the state in local public service delivery (Young 2000). The leadership of this policy group recognised this role and gave the views of the sector equal footing in this space, which has supported the emergence of new solutions-focused ideas for collaborations with public sector actors. The prominence of this type of stakeholder has also enabled academics to present potentially charismatic ideas and cross-sectoral policy solutions which go beyond institutionalised ideas that may be more prominent in public sector-only policy groups.

In Case 2, societal events trigger the nature of advice required but so do the arrangements involving the local authority and connected units within national/central government. The onus for reporting in various ways is one manifestation of this institutional arrangement providing a trigger for different forms of agency. For example, reporting on progress to date concerning the local unit's programme of work is likely to warrant a different pitch from reporting on an issue that reflects a more embryonic feature of the policy process, where policymakers are looking to grapple with a substantive policy issue for the first time. The former is likely to require an institutionalised character where an output performs a predictable role, while the latter may potentially reflect other idea types. As Smith (2013) spells out though - and as hinted at in the case write up above - this refers to the presentation of content, reflecting the complexities of reporting to local and wider government audiences, rather than manipulating evidence as such to please the ear of policy audiences.

Structural rigidity

The preceding mechanisms emphasise where movement can occur across idea types and in our experience local contexts may provide a malleable space for academics to exercise agency and thus engender triggers in idea types and their shifts. However, the authors were still necessarily bound by entrenched expectations and rigidities in policymaking during their work within the evidence-policy nexus. Institutionalised ideas, by definition, offer the most continuity for the evidence-policy nexus; so, agency for new or alternative ideas, and the evidence bolstering these ideas, is likely to be exhibited in the critical, charismatic and chameleonic types. However, structures come in different forms.

Structural rigidities can be framed in terms of the channel through which the evidence-policy nexus works and the nature of audience composition (who receives and works with the evidence). In terms of the former, channels reflect how knowledge is transmitted and controlled. Case 1 shows a wide diversity of channels through a wide scope of work (social recovery) and therefore the knowledge presented to the group does not necessarily have to come via one producer or cover specific topics. Knowledge in this case also utilised the wider understanding of 'evidence' as forms of knowledge beyond research evidence (Nutley et al, 2019). Case 2 shows more circumscribed channels, set out by local authority demands and the preferences of the advisory group (which the researcher operates within).

Audience composition, on the other hand, reflects who is the 'policy' part of the evidence-policy nexus. Siloed arrangements within local government may mean certain ideas are institutionalised in some parts of the municipality but not in others, potentially based on where different views circulate. Consequently, an evidence-policy nexus that reflects a cross cutting remit may receive acceptance from some but resistance from others. This 'policy atomisation', as described by Smith (2013), is something the policy group in Case 1 explicitly aimed to avoid by setting out issues like 'equalities' and 'community empowerment' as objectives for all workstreams. However, the structure of policy groups into 'workstreams' for management and organisational purposes necessarily meant that some workstreams were more able to naturally adopt these ideas into their working (e.g. for a workstream on ethnic minority communities) than perhaps some others (e.g. a workstream focussed on local authority assets). These ideas, however, have likely been able to 'travel' within the policy group more meaningfully because of the insistence of group leadership to work with these cross-cutting issues for multiple 'audiences'.

In Case 2, audience as structure is exemplified by a degree of normative consistency about what broad socioeconomic change was to be achieved; the institutionalised idea. The audience was

typically the same across the years – albeit with some personnel shifts – so a relatively consistent expectation was in place in terms of the broad focus of the evidence-policy nexus and what it should seek to achieve (that is, from the advisory group to the local authority unit). Within that consensus on policy outcome, and when looking at how to achieve commonly held objectives, the prominence of a critical or charismatic mode may come through to a greater degree. This suggests a hierarchy of idea types, with the broad outcomes and focus providing an institutionalised framing, but with discussions on policy tools and mechanisms on how to get to the outcomes providing an arena, potentially, for critical and charismatic ideas to emerge.

Conclusion

In relation to our primary research question we find that Smith's idea typology provides a valuable framework for considering how the evidence-policy nexus is fashioned. The contribution of this paper is to show that the idea types can be evidenced at local settings and how they shift and evolve through the evidence-policy nexus. Hinging on the interplay between agency, triggers and structural rigidities, the cases – which exhibit varying actor ranges and time-periods – show that local arenas can provide fertile spaces for charismatic and critical ideas to take hold, particularly where a new policy emphasis or compulsion is in place (Case 1). At the same time, local arenas present institutional lock-ins in terms of the nature of evidence and recommendations sought (Case 2). The role of ECRs acting within the policy-evidence nexus suggests the need to effectively maintain a series of relationships to achieve impact with multiple audiences as both a knowledge producer and broker. Finally, the paper points the way for further theorisation of the mechanisms that lead to movement between idea types within other policy-evidence contexts. Deploying interview methods in future research, it may be particularly useful to explore how policymakers reflect on the changing nature of ideas – from institutionalised to critical, etc – and what triggers such changes from their perspective.

Our subsidiary research question considers 'How do early career researchers engage with the institutional contexts where these dynamic idea types emerge?' Here we find that ECRs in these spaces are particularly impacted by the uneven power structures inherent in the policy context where they intend to work, as well as by more 'powerful' academic and policy actors working in the same space (echoing the concerns of Oliver and Cairney 2019). This exploratory sketch of ECR policy engagement in a local space serves to show the merits of idiographic, case-based reflections, and while lessons learned for the authors stem from this, drawing these out to wider contexts warrants careful consideration given the diversity of local arenas through which the evidence-policy nexus may emerge. Nevertheless, it would be useful to dive deeper into the experience of ECRs who have chosen to – or have a strong desire to – engage with local policymakers as a core characteristic of their academic career, recognising that the duration and nature of engagements will vary widely. Doing so will be important for further revealing the power dynamics and potential career tradeoffs at stake for ECRs.

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