

# Understanding the Link Between Research and Policy

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Rural Communities Impacting Policy

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# Understanding the Link Between Research and Policy

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With the help and guidance from the  
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Thank-you to Shilo Gempton for her diagrams  
outlining the contents of the paper (see last pages)

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ISBN 0-9780913-1-0

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*The goal of the Rural Communities Impacting Policy (RCIP) Project is to increase the ability of rural communities and organizations in Nova Scotia to access and use social science research in order to influence and develop policy that contributes to the health and sustainability of communities. RCIP is a 5-year research project (2001-2006), funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and co-sponsored by the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre at Dalhousie University and the Coastal Communities Network.*

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## **Understanding the Link Between Research and Policy**

As briefly outlined in the other two papers in this series entitled, “A Brief Guide to Understanding Policy Development” (Rural Communities Impacting Policy, 2002) and “Challenges and Barriers to Community Participation in Policy Development” (Rural Communities Impacting Policy, 2002), changing or creating new policy is often a long, complex process, with many factors influencing the policy-making process. The ability to understand and effectively deal with this process is essential to impact policy in a manner favorable to the health and sustainability of rural communities. One way individuals and organizations can increase their chances of impacting policy in a way that benefits their community is by being as knowledgeable as possible concerning the key issues associated with the policy they wish to impact. Gaining this knowledge very often requires research to understand and define the key issues the community is addressing as well as to develop constructive ideas to advance a policy action plan. The manner in which this knowledge is collected and presented can have a large impact on the success of influencing the policy-making process. This paper will first outline the importance of research in policy-making and then provide a brief overview of the elements of the research process itself.

### **The Research to Policy Climate**

Recently, there has been increased interest in the use of research to inform policy decisions. For example, Coastal Communities Network (CCN) held a series of community consultations concerning rural development and policy-making in Nova Scotia. Participants in these consultations indicated a body of knowledge about rural Nova Scotia was needed that was designed to be useful to individual communities and the CCN collective. Furthermore, CCN member organizations wanted forms of knowledge that would tell them what was happening in rural communities that could indicate problems, advances, declines, and issues that needed to be addressed (Coastal Communities Network, 1998). Similar opinions were voiced in Rural Dialogues held across the country by the

Canadian Rural Partnership that there is a need to provide citizens with access to the tools, information, and skills necessary to make informed decisions and to take full advantage of opportunities for personal and community development in the policy-making process (Policy Research Initiative, 2000).

The research community is also beginning to respond to the needs of individuals, organizations, and policy makers to carry out research relevant to the policy-making process. For example, a new “research to action” paradigm is emerging in the social sciences whereby the applicability of research is a central feature, as is a participatory approach that recognizes that people in communities can define the nature of social problems and offer credible solutions (Frankish et al., 1997; Green et al., 1995). Other features of the “research to action” paradigm include collaboration among academic disciplines and between sectors, and inclusive approaches to research in which the ideas and viewpoints of people in communities are brought together with academic and government perspectives. The shift to this new paradigm has occurred for a number of reasons including the call to make research more accountable, the demands for an evidence-based approach to planning and decision-making, the desire for social scientists to be recognized as major players in health research, and the realization that there is a wealth of untapped social science and local knowledge which could be used to create a more equal and healthy society (Lyons, 1999).

Governments are also recognizing the important role that research can play in policy development. For example, in 1996, the Policy Research Initiative was created by the Federal Government to “develop a research strategy for Canada to prepare for the complex public policy challenges we are likely to face over the coming years” (Policy Research Initiative, 2001). Its goal is to build a solid foundation of expertise and knowledge upon which sound policy decisions can be based and in so doing, contribute to building a strong and vital Canadian Policy Research Community (Policy Research Initiative, 2001).

The amount of information and research available for different issues vary, with some issues receiving a great deal of research attention and others receiving little at all. Unfortunately, relatively little research has been done from a

rural standpoint and therefore information is often lacking to both identify important issues and to gain better understanding of them once they have been identified. This situation leads to a gulf between the desire/need for knowledge and the availability of information. Therefore, it is necessary for rural communities to make their research needs known in hopes of improving people's understanding of rural issues and problems. There is also a need for rural communities to have access to government information and available research. Presently, the Canadian Rural Partnership is trying to combat the problems associated with accessibility to information relevant to rural policy development by implementing an Information Access Plan for rural communities (Government of Canada, 2000).

#### **Freedom of Information Act**

There may at times be reluctance on the part of government agencies to provide information to individuals or community-based organizations. However, many documents can be obtained under the Freedom of Information Act which

*gives to the public a right of access to*

*(a) any facts or any analysis, study, report or background information obtained by the expenditure of public money; and*

*(b) all records in the custody of a public body that relate to any arrangement or agreement whereby a public body and other persons undertake and carry out, as partners, any work or undertaking that involves the expenditure of public money. (Nova Scotia Government Website [www.gov.ns.ca](http://www.gov.ns.ca))*

#### **What is Policy Research?**

There are many definitions of research, but simply put, research is the systematic collection and presentation of information. Policy research is a special type of research that can provide communities and decision-makers with useful recommendations and possible actions for resolving fundamental problems. Such research provides policy-makers with pragmatic, action-oriented recommendations for addressing an issue, question, or problem. The primary focus of policy research is linked to the public policy agenda and results are useful to the development of public policies (Majchrzak, 1984). A policy research effort begins with a social issue or question, evolves through a research process whereby alternative policy actions for dealing with the problem are developed,

and communicates these alternatives to policy-makers. Policy research is unique in focusing on action-oriented recommendations to social problems.

<b>Who Uses Policy Research?</b>		
Policy-makers	Policy Organizations	Universities
Government	Policy Analysts and Advisors	Individuals
Special Interest Groups	Voluntary Sector	Private Sector
Community Organizations	Lobbying Groups	Anyone Else Wanting to Impact Policy

There are many types of research that can be conducted to aid in understanding and helping communities affect the policy-making process. Different types of research use different means to systematically collect information. The type of research and the methods used to collect and present data affect how the information can be interpreted and used. It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe all the different types of research in detail. However, some of the most common types of research relevant to policy making are listed below.

#### Focused Synthesis/Review of Existing Research

Focused synthesis or review of existing research involves the selective review of written materials and existing research findings relevant to a particular research question or issue. This process involves examining published articles as well as a variety of other sources such as discussions with experts and stakeholders, anecdotal stories, personal past experience of the researchers, unpublished documents, and staff memoranda. Information sources are used only to the extent to which they directly contribute to the overall review (Majchrzak, 1984). An example of reviewing existing research comes from the Citizens Against Pollution's battle to change the level of effluent from a nearby treatment facility. In 1991-92, Citizens Against Pollution was formed to deal with concerns with the quality of residue or treatment material (i.e., smell, dirt, etc.) from the Boat Harbour treatment facility, which at that time was run by the Nova Scotia Department of the Environment. Statistics published by the government stated that the quality of this residue was above average. Citizens Against

Pollution hired a consultant from the Pictou Harbour Environmental Protection Project who collected, read, and analyzed reports and documents from all over North America concerning standards around residue quality. This research was conducted primarily through the local library which helped in locating and collecting the government reports and documents. After reading and analyzing the reports, a report was generated that challenged the province's data concerning residue quality and made six recommendations. This report was presented to Environment Canada and the province. Within three months, Environment Canada, the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) and the Department of Fisheries funded a two year environmental assessment of the area and turned over responsibility of the treatment facility to the local pulp mill. All six of the report's recommendations were followed and now the treatment facility is among the best in North America in terms of residue quality.

### Secondary Analysis

Secondary analysis involves examining data from existing databases. The statistical procedures to examine this type of data range from descriptive statistics that serve to describe the data and present it graphically to complex inferential statistics that model complicated behaviors. Difficulties finding databases with the desired information and lack of accessibility to these databases often limit the usefulness of secondary analysis for understanding a specific issue.

### Field Experiments

Another use of research is to examine the effectiveness of implementing a strategy to address an issue or problem. Data on resulting changes are collected and analyzed to determine the impact of the implemented strategy. Field experiments can be useful for gathering evidence concerning the potential impact of policy change prior to its implementation as well as for monitoring and evaluating the impact of a policy change after its implementation. An example of

a large scale field experiment is the Rural Palliative Home Care Project which compared how care was delivered to rural palliative patients living at home both before and after the implementation of a new integrated service delivery model.

### Qualitative Methods

Qualitative research involves the use of non-numerical data and often entails the collection and analysis of narrative data. Qualitative research methods are particularly useful for gaining rich, in depth information concerning an issue or problem as well as generating solutions. Examples of qualitative research methods include focus groups (where selected individuals participate in a discussion on pre-specified topics), in-depth interviews, and participant observation (where the researcher acts as both participant and observer in gathering information concerning an ongoing process). An example of qualitative research is a recent series of focus groups in six coastal communities carried out by the Nova Scotia's Women's FishNet. This research addressed how women's health and well-being had been affected by changes in their communities. Results from these focus groups suggest that these changes caused women to feel increased stress and negativity as well as lower self-esteem (Women's Economic Stability & Well-Being in NS Coastal Communities, FishNet Factsheets, 2001).

### Surveys

Surveys are used for gathering data on an issue or problem and its causes. Surveys may involve personal interviews or written questionnaires administered at one time or over several periods of time. Polls are a special type of survey usually conducted by large polling organizations using sophisticated statistical techniques to gauge the opinions of a large population. Governments often use polls to help them understand the population's concerns and opinions around current issues. An example of a local organization using surveys comes

from the Maritime Fishermen's Union #4 who surveyed fishermen in the Northumberland Strait region around concerns that the appointed size for catching lobster was too small, resulting in lobsters being caught before they had reached their sexual maturity. The results of this survey indicated that a large majority of fishermen felt that the size for catching lobster should be increased.

### Case Studies

Case studies involve recording and analyzing the actual experiences of an organization or community around specific issues. Case studies allow for the identification of behaviours and other variables related to a social issue or problem and often can provide a more complete understanding of a situation's complexity. Case studies also can be used to examine the process by which an intervention or policy action has been implemented (Majchrzak, 1984). An example of a case study comes from the planning and implementation process by which Isle Madame forecasted the fall of the fishery and subsequently rebuilt their fishing dependent community. In 1992, community leaders, based upon what they had seen in Newfoundland became concerned about the potential impact of a collapse of the fishery. A committee, made up of community members, was formed to study the impact of a fishing collapse for Isle Madame. The resulting report predicted the imminent collapse of the fishery as well as a plan for how the town could recover. The fishery collapse occurred in 1994 and in 1996 the town's fishing plant was closed and plowed to the ground, resulting in a loss of 500 jobs. However, by implementing their plan for recovery, over a period of a few years, the unemployment rate dropped from 12.5% to 6.5%. Because of their success, Isle Madame has been selected by KPMG consultants as a case study to model economic development and recovery after the collapse of a major industry.

### Cost-benefit Analysis

Cost-benefit analysis involves a set of methods whereby a researcher compares the costs and benefits to society of alternative policy options. Cost -

benefit analysis can take into account monetary, social, environmental, and other issues related to policy. This type of analysis can be a cornerstone of policy research providing for the identification of policy options that are likely to provide the most benefits at the least cost to a community (Majchrzak, 1984). An example of a cost-benefit analysis comes from a report published by GPI Atlantic that reviewed research examining the costs and benefits of banning smoking in public places. Based on this review, the report concluded that banning smoking in public places would not have an adverse economic affect on businesses such as bars and restaurants, and indeed, may even increase business (Colman, 2001).

### **Major Sources of Information in Policy Research**

There are many sources from which individuals, community organizations, and decision-makers can obtain information that may used in the policy-making process. Each source tends to collect and present information in a different manner and understanding what each of these sources has to offer can help in finding and accessing relevant information related to a policy issue.

#### Media

Newspapers, radio, and television are one of the most important sources of policy information. Media coverage is directly linked to the daily tactical battle in the House of Commons and Provincial Legislative Assembly during question period. Items that the mass media regard as important easily become items on which opposition critics will focus. This in turn can lead to actions by ministers and departments that might not have been on their own preferred agendas. The mass media is also a source of general information for the public and for interest groups engaged in lobbying activities.

#### Official Statistics

Public policy is influenced by both the content and the timing of the release of statistical and other data, much of which is collected by Statistics Canada, on major economic and political aspects of Canadian society. The release of monthly data such as the Consumer Price Index (CPI), for example, can influence the process and content of public policy.

### Polls

Polls are used to gauge the public's opinion and mood concerning specific topics. Government may employ pollsters to look at opinions for immediate electoral purposes and between elections. Gallup and other polls publish national data in various policy fields. Many government departments subscribe to regular quarterly opinion reports supplied by private firms. In addition, polls supply views about particular policy issues such as, for example, public opinion concerning clean-up of the tar ponds in Sydney, Nova Scotia.

### Specialized Policy Analysis Units and Think Tanks

Policy analysis units include the policy and planning branches established in many departments within government. Other government advisory bodies such as the Science Council of Canada and university research bodies such as the Institute for Research on Public Policy, reflect ideas from society and produce numerous reports and studies. (Doern & Phidd, 1992).

A think tank can be characterized as organizations with significant independence from government, who operate on a non-profit basis and engage in the study of public policy. One example would be the Canadian Policy Research Network (CPRN) which is a collection of several research networks examining a range of social and economic issues.

### Academic Community

The members of various university departments conduct research specific to their area of study and the research they produce can be a valuable source of knowledge for the policy-making process. This information is accessible to rural

community members and organizations through published reports and papers, and by requesting results and information directly from the specific university department. Further, many universities have established institutes to advance knowledge in a variety of areas that range in scope from local to global levels. An example of such an institute is the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre whose mission is to conduct and facilitate health promotion research that influences policy and contributes to the health and well-being of Atlantic Canadians.

### Traditional Knowledge

There are alternative ways of gathering information and knowledge other than the scientific methods used by most research institutions. Sometimes the answers to a rural community's concerns may lie within the community itself. Traditional knowledge is the accumulated knowledge and understanding of the place of human beings in relation to the world and may be passed on from generation to generation within a community. An example of traditional knowledge comes from the Malagawatch Medicine Project being undertaken by the Eskasoni Fish and Wildlife Commission. The project used traditional knowledge to identify plants for medicinal purposes as well as traditional use of lands (e.g., burial sites, fishing grounds, encampment sites). This information will be transferred to digitized maps to enable management of natural resources in a more resourceful way that promotes conservation of traditional lands and wildlife (Eskasoni Fish and Wildlife Commission, [www.tec.ednet.ns.ca](http://www.tec.ednet.ns.ca)).

### **Ways Research Can Be Used In the Policy-Making Process**

There are at least four ways research can be used within the policy-making process: 1) recognizing problems and identifying issues, 2) understanding key issues, 3) supporting a selected plan of action, and 4) evaluating and monitoring progress. Each of these uses for policy research is briefly described below.

### Recognizing Problems and Identifying Issues

Research can help in identifying issues or problems pertinent to rural communities. Often times, research information is presented by organizations from outside the rural community such as the media, government agencies, polling organizations, or universities and is not necessarily targeted toward a specific community issue. From this information, however, specific issues may be identified that community groups and/or policy makers will want to address. Once an issue has been identified, a community may decide that policy action is necessary and then try to influence the policy-making process. An example of research that may help identify rural policy issues is the Rural Report Card produced by the Rural Communities Impacting Policy (RCIP) project. This report uses indicators to describe different aspects of rural Nova Scotia. From this description, community groups or policy-makers may identify issues to be addressed pertaining to policy affecting specific rural communities in Nova Scotia or to rural Nova Scotia as a whole.

### Understanding Key Issues

Once a need for policy change has been identified, information specific to that policy area may be obtained from existing sources or a community may conduct research on its own. In either case, the information gained can be used by communities to identify key policy issues as well as potential strategies to address them.

### Supporting a Selected Plan of Action

Once individuals or community organizations identify an issue and decide that they want to try to impact the policy-making process, it is necessary to develop a plan of action and implement strategies to try to influence policy affecting the key issues. Once a plan of action has been decided upon, it is often helpful for communities to look for further evidence or research to support their proposed solution(s) and the policy changes required to implement the selected solutions. Information supporting a proposed plan of action can lend strength to a

community's perspectives on the best solution to a problem and increase the chances of that solution being implemented.

### Monitoring Process and Evaluating Impact

During and after the implementation of an action plan, it is important to monitor the process and evaluate the impact of the actions taken. Research may be used in helping communities to answer the questions posed about what worked, what did not and why as well as to identify areas that need improvement in the action plan. Monitoring and evaluation can be used to further refine the implemented solutions as well as to gain an understanding of how to better impact similar policy issues that may arise in the future.

### **Conclusion**

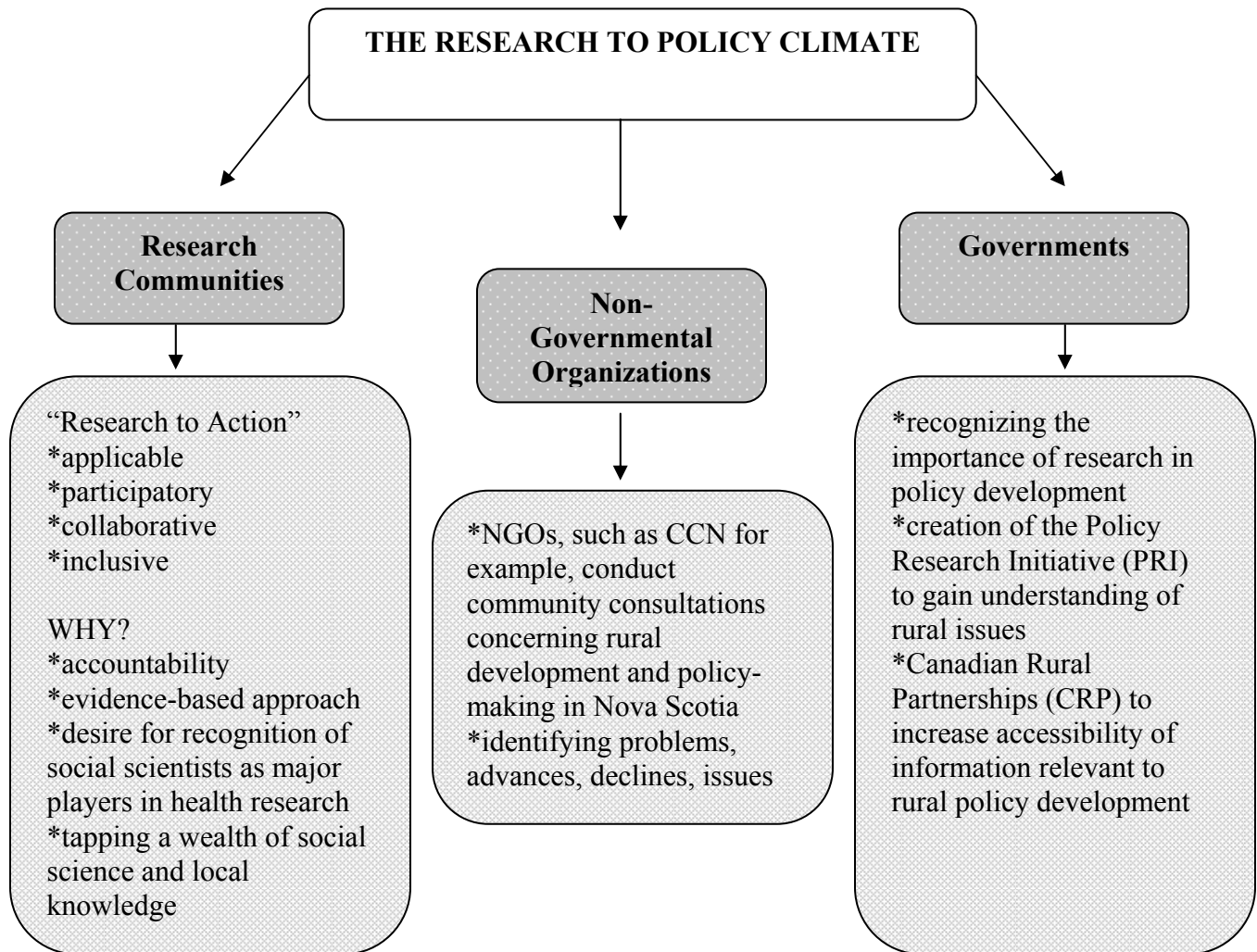
Research can play a major role in the policy-making process and there is little doubt that greater emphasis will be placed on policy research to help inform future policy decisions. From a rural community standpoint, it is important to note that the community itself can play an active role in research by summarizing existing information around a particular policy issue and by conducting its own research on specific issues and problems. Understanding and using research effectively can go a long way in helping individuals and community-based organizations to impact the policy-making process to bring about policy change that benefits the health and sustainability of rural communities.

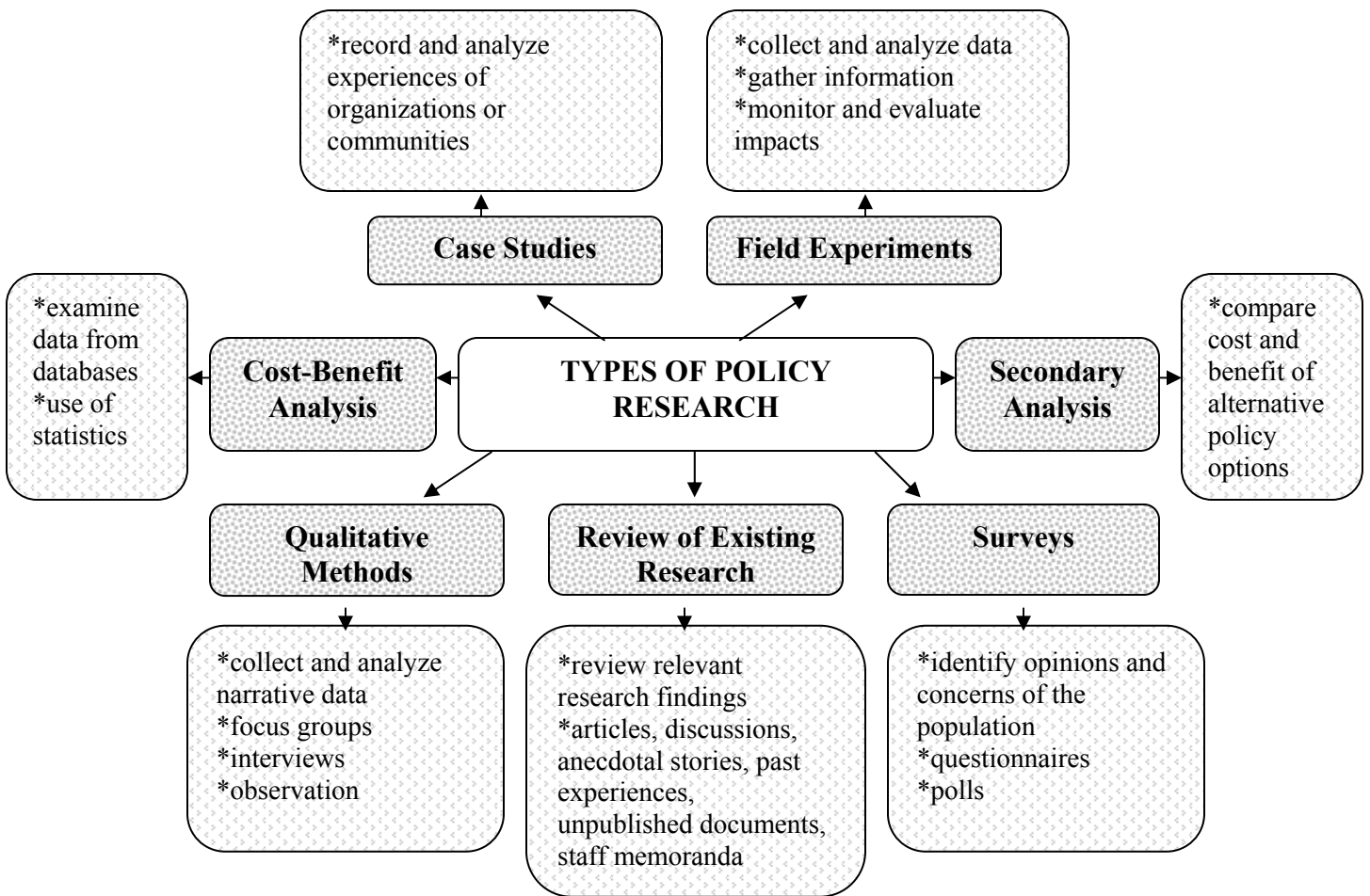
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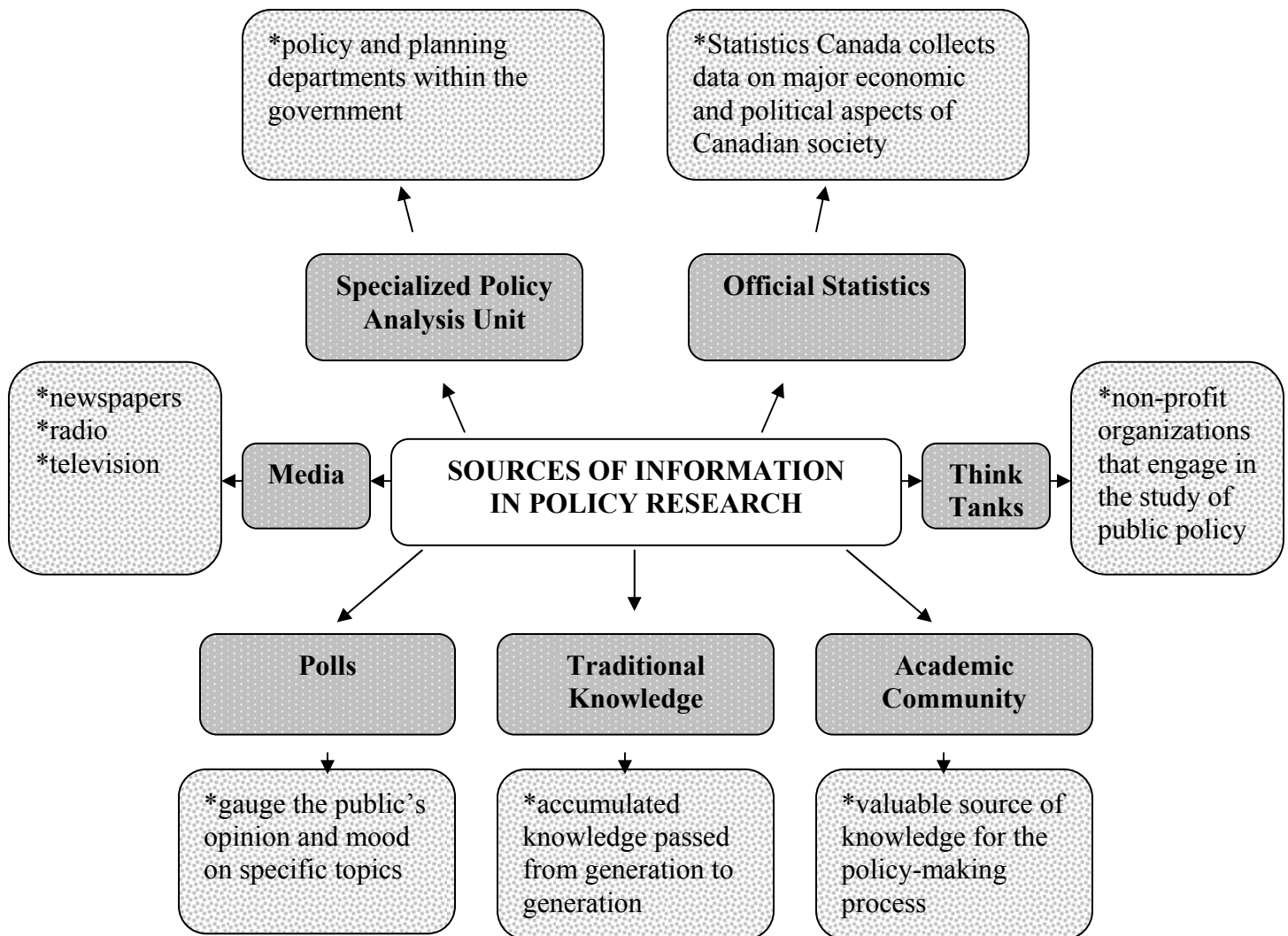
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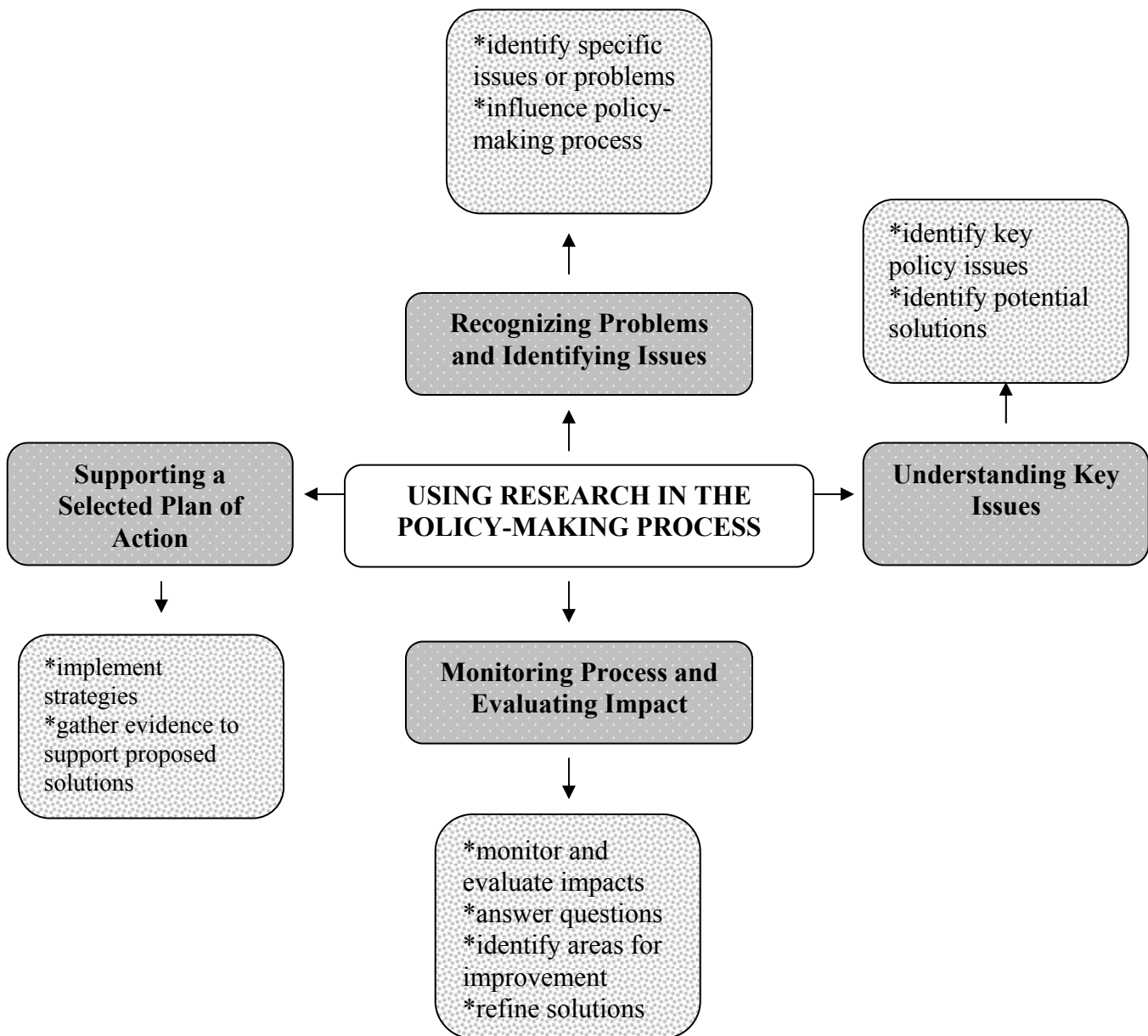
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**UNDERSTANDING THE LINK BETWEEN RESEARCH AND POLICY**  
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