

Obstruction of research, diminution of policy development, erosion of democracy

There are numerous examples of high-profile federal government researchers or appointed bureaucrats whose contracts were not renewed, or who quit or were terminated, when their findings or perspectives did not align with the conservative ideology of the Harper government. Less well known are the experiences of academic researchers whose research involves the participation of civil servants and the study of policy. In this article I share a couple of research experiences that involved civil servants who made concerted efforts to restrict access to interview participants in one case, and who made a defensive response to emerging research findings resulting in a complaint in the other. The purpose of this article is to expose some examples of how government attempts to curtail research at the expense of exploring, re-examining, and potentially creating new and possibly more effective policy. Such actions amount to an assault on democracy itself.

RESEARCH PROCESS OBSTRUCTED

A colleague and I undertook a two-part research study looking at the extent to which lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people were recognized in health policy. One part of the study focused on federal policy, the other on provincial policy in Ontario. We undertook this work under the auspices of a larger national team study on the health and resiliency of LGBTQs (Mulé and Smith 2014). In addition to content analysis of existing federal health policy, we sought interviews with officials from Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) who at that time held positions in departments and units with the potential to address policies related to LGBTQ health. We tar-

BY NICK J. MULÉ

Nick J. Mulé is an associate professor in the School of Social Work and seconded to the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies, York University.

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geted key policy-makers at the intermediate and senior levels in five divisions within Health Canada, and approached nine policy-makers and one ministry official therein to participate in the study. Within PHAC, five policy-makers were approached within four divisions. Some were unavailable during the data collection time period. Others indicated no knowledge of LGBTQ populations and/or claimed that their work did not expose them to these communities. By deeming themselves as not useful for our purposes, they provided a clear indication of the absence of policy attention to our subject matter. Ultimately, we secured interviews from two Health Canada civil servants and one PHAC civil servant.

CONTROLLING THE AGENDA

Harper government's strong centralized control over the management of information and the pending federal election of May 2011 may have dampened the response rate, for we were

seeking interviews during the winter of that year. Our observations were confirmed, however, by two senior policy-makers we interviewed, each sharing insightful information regarding internal processes designed to restrict policy research by non-civil servant researchers. One of our respondents spoke of a climate of "risk aversion" in which the Harper government has actively discouraged civil servants from speaking to two specified sectors: the media and researchers. Now well known is the extent to which the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) controls all media communications, even to the point of restricting federal government researchers from speaking directly to the media regarding their research results.

"Risk aversion" is but one of a number of strategies Harper is using to run a tight ship and maintain control of the conservative agenda. The civil servant remarked that it is the PMO's view that media and researchers cannot be trusted to uphold ideologies of the Conservative Party, and present the possibility that attention may be taken off course. Rather than risk having to face difficult questions that call for reflection and introspection on the current work of the government, the strategy is to avert having to engage in such a process at all. I will return to the serious implications of such a strategy later in this article.

Another senior civil servant that participated provided me with a back story to the difficulties we had in trying to recruit research participants. He confided that a memo was circulated throughout Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada regarding "Mr. Mulé's research." The memo incorrectly defined my research as studying LGBTQs within the civil service from a human resources perspective. It went on to direct anyone who did participate in my study to inform me that human resources treats

LGBTQ people as it would all employees, based on non-discrimination policies. Someone on a listserv exposed the inaccurate understanding of the focus of our study, clarifying that they believed my study was looking at how LGBTQs are taken up in federal health policy, if at all. The response came that those who participate are to remind Mr. Mulé that health services are provided to all Canadians equally as citizens of this country. When I inquired of this civil servant where the memo originated, the respondent said it came from the PMO.

When I learned of this memo (which of course could not be shared with me), the dots started to connect between this incident and what the previous participant shared regarding “risk aversion.” Apparently, once the PMO became aware of our research, it felt the need to circulate a memo, an act that on the surface was designed to direct people’s responses (in itself an intrusion on both the research and democratic process), but more covertly to discourage participation in the study. Even when the inaccurate understanding of the study was exposed, the same pattern was repeated, the same advice circulated regarding how to respond with a pat answer lacking any nuance or relevance to the question.

STATE PROTECTIONISM OVER INTELLECTUAL INQUIRY

While the research was in progress for the provincial aspect of this study, I presented a paper at a provincial LGBTQ health conference that summarized emerging findings in one session, and in another drew on the findings of a panel that had looked at how to balance HIV/AIDS with the broader health and well-being issues of LGBTQ populations. A junior policy-maker took offence to my emerging findings, complaining in her evaluation that they did not paint the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (OMHLTC) in a positive light. A senior civil servant verbally berated the second panel for undermining the work of those working in

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the field of HIV/AIDS, fearful that broadening the gaze on health issues beyond HIV/AIDS would dilute all the work done to date on HIV prevention.

The naiveté of the former and the overreactive protectionist response of the latter came to a head when they and others from the ministry called a special meeting with the host of the conference, a community agency funded by OMHLTC. They questioned the agency about how my abstracts were accepted and the credibility of my work. The agency tactfully responded that my abstracts represented the hard yet important questions being raised by our research, which was publicly funded, and that as a published scholar my work has been validated by peers. These civil servants were politely reminded that the conference is a venue to raise questions, discuss important issues, and, most importantly, learn from the experience. I learned of this discussion after the fact, as I had not been invited to the meeting.

CONCLUSION: WHAT IS LOST?

The common theme in these experiences is that the government is attempting to curtail and control knowledge that is being produced in the interests of those being studied, and restricting intellectual development. This has disturbing implications for future policy-making. What is lost in this process is the important role research plays in future development of policy and practice arising from what is being studied. In this case, the status and position of LGBTQs in health policy is getting lost in the politics of state preservation. By maintaining the status quo to justify

past and existing work, those most implicated (those affected by policy) have been absented. Mobilizing knowledge between sectors (that is, the state, academics, NGOs) provides a great opportunity for knowledge development and production with potential outcomes such as more relevant and impacting policy.

Instead, we find ourselves in a neo-liberal climate in which we are federally governed by a highly controlling PMO that is ideologically driven to the point of diminishing the reach of science. From trying to feed potential research participants the responses they are expected to give, to more subtly discouraging their participation, the Harper government has created of an environment of “risk aversion” that seeps down to civil servants who shy away from research and its reflexive process due to myopic protectionism rather than consider the well-being of populations. Politically, this is an assault on democracy and a blow to efforts to improve society on any number of fronts. Knowledge production through research plays a key and invaluable contribution to democracy, one that must be grown and nourished, not shunted and dismissed. 

WORKS CITED

Mulé, Nick J., and Miriam Smith. 2014. Invisible populations: LGBTQs and federal health policy in Canada. *Canadian Public Administration* 57 (2): 234–55.