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THE EXPERIENCES OF PSYCHOLOGISTS WORKING IN FEDERAL POLICY
POSITIONS

by

Kimberly Lauren Adams

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

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APA has long emphasized the importance of psychologists' involvement in federal policy work and in recent years the number of psychologists choosing to make careers in this field has increased. Despite the growth of policy work as a vocation for psychologists, there is little empirical research looking into the experiences of psychologists who enter this career. Eight license eligible psychologists were interviewed about their experiences working on policy within the federal government and interview data were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. The core category that emerged from this study was, "Psychologists are well-suited to work in federal policy development; however, there are ways to better facilitate their entry to this career." Main themes under this core category included challenges in transitioning from academia to policy; ways in which communication and research skills are transferable to policy; ways the field of psychology could be more involved in policy at different levels; and ways graduate training programs could better prepare and facilitate careers in this field for psychologists. The study highlights the importance of training psychologists to be knowledgeable about the many opportunities to be involved in policy; suggestions for enhancing a focus on policy work in graduate training are provided.

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Introduction

Psychologists receive training as scientists, clinicians, educators, or advocates and are becoming increasingly involved in developing public policy at different levels within the federal government. Public policy has varying definitions among scholars, however, it may be broadly defined as a statement, or lack thereof, by a government in response to a problem, that has an impact on the public (Birkland, 2020). The American Psychological Association (APA) highlights the need for psychologists' activity in public policy, stating their "training and expertise make [them] uniquely qualified to contribute to the development of federal policies and programs" (APA, 2014, p. 4). The APA statement continues by listing psychologists' ability to apply scientific knowledge to understanding and resolving issues, the many ways psychologists are impacted by public policy, and the need to advocate for the field and the clients psychologists serve as additional reasons psychologists should be encouraged to participate in public policy.

In the last 45 years, APA has emphasized the importance of psychologists' involvement in federal policy work via the creation of fellowships and specific training opportunities. For instance, the Congressional Fellowship program, created in 1974, has provided opportunities for 129 psychologists to be involved in drafting legislation, assisting with congressional hearings and events, preparing briefs and speeches, and responding to constituents and the media (Garrison et al., 2017). Since its creation in 1995, the APA's Executive Branch Fellowship has placed 26 psychologists in the National Institute of Health, the National Science Foundations, White House offices of science and technology policy, as well as Departments of Defense, Justice, and State (Garrison et al., 2017). According to Garrison et al., in the past decade approximately 75% of these Fellows have continued to work in public policy, a change from the

historical trend of these psychologists returning to their previous careers of academia or clinical practice.

Although the need for and interest in involvement in public policy is evident, there is less information on how people learn how to work in this area. The professional study of public policy has only recently developed and has struggled to find a home in academia; both within academic departments and scholarly journals (Bozeman, 2013). Bozeman noted that many who consider themselves public policy researchers come from a variety of academic backgrounds such as sociology, economics, political science, and public policy. Considering this “fragmentation of policy scholarship” it is understandable how other disciplines, like psychology, might also be struggling with how to prepare individuals for careers in this field (Bozeman, 2013, p. 172). Although there are models on how social science research is used in formulating public policy (Almeida & Báscolo, 2006; Weiss, 1979) and anecdotal reports and presentations about individual experiences, there is very little empirical research regarding the roles or experiences of psychologists who engage in policy work; what their work entails, and how they prepared for engaging in policy development and implementation. Using the description of APA’s efforts to increase involvement in policy and knowledge from other health fields’ approaches to policy work, the current study explored the experiences of license eligible psychologists practicing in federal policy development, with the hope of informing the preparation process for psychologists planning on engaging in policy work.

APA in Policy

Aside from the congressional fellowships and internships listed above, APA encourages psychologists’ engagement in policy work predominantly through advocacy and lobbying. Within APA’s Public Interest Directorate, the Public Interest Government Relations Office (PI-

GRO) educates psychologists about advocating for psychology on local and national levels, educates politicians on how psychology can contribute to matters of public policy, and provides congressional briefings and testimony (APA, 2010). The goal of the PI-GRO is to apply psychology to the underlying “problems of human welfare and social justice” and promote equitable treatment (APA, 2010, para.1). According to their most recent report, the PI-GRO created over 90 supporting policy documents, organized over 250 meetings during congressional visits, enrolled over 350 people in advocacy trainings, and coordinated over 10,000 letters to Congress through the Federal Action Network (APA, 2018). The Federal Action Network is co-maintained by the PI-GRO, Science, and Education Offices of APA and delivers federal updates and action alerts with the goal of providing information psychologists need to advocate effectively for both their field and their clients.

The Science Government Relations Office (Science GRO) within APA’s science directorate engages in similar advocacy activities as the PI-GRO, however, with a focus on advocating for funding for research within federal science agencies (APA, 2008). The Science GRO also encourages the use of psychological science in policy-making decisions and “vigorously defends the field from partisan attacks” (APA, 2008, para. 2). The three main policy areas for this office are promoting and defending research, federal funding for psychological research, and substance use disorder research. APA’s Education and Practice directorates are each also involved in advocacy efforts at the state and federal level, in ways similar to PI-GRO and Science GRO.

The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI), an independent society affiliated with APA, also provides resources for how psychologists can become involved in political advocacy. These resources include education on how to write a policy brief; fact sheets,

briefs, and APA resolutions; and ways students can become involved in NGOs through the United Nations (SPSSI, 2021). SPSSI also funds their own public policy fellowships on Capitol Hill. These APA resources indicate the organization's emphasis on effective engagement in political advocacy, but the majority of the actions psychologists take through PI-GRO or Science GRO fall short of policy development and those who are active via the Federal Action Network or other advocacy behaviors are unlikely to be engaged in policy work as their primary employment.

Preparation for Mental Health Professionals Working in Policy

In contrast to the number of resources available for psychologists to participate in political advocacy, there is significantly less information for psychologists who wish to learn how to become involved within the federal or local government in policy development. There is, however, information from the discipline of social work. In 2010 the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2019) developed the Social Work Policy Institute (SWPI) with very clear goals of enhancing social work's presence in the world of policy. As an outgrowth of this emphasis, social work increased their focus on training in policy work by including it in their educational guidelines, set out by the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (SWPI, 2012).

The educational guidelines identified many gaps in the education of social work students as related to engaging in policy work (i.e., the marginalization of policy practice as a social work career, the difficulty in acquiring skills needed to induce change, and the lack of engagement of policy practitioners as instructors and guest speakers in an educational setting, SWPI, 2012). Recommendations were developed to address some of these barriers via the creation of connections between social work programs and policy organizations, policy-focused field

placements, increased educational exposure to practitioners engaged in policy work, and targeting educational experiences to address policy work competencies (SWPI, 2012). These recommendations would appear equally appropriate for the preparation of psychologists who wish to focus on the development of policy, but psychology as a discipline, has not devoted the same level of attention to preparing psychologists for engaging in policy work.

One of the few articles pertaining to psychologists explored barriers and possible solutions for psychologists interested in becoming involved in policy work (Paquin, 1977). These barriers included the complexity of policy formation, the difficulty of finding psychologists who can commit the amount of time necessary to work, and the scarcity of training provided to graduate students regarding this line of work. Paquin also suggested possible solutions to these problems, such as changes to graduate student training, providing internships in government agencies, and “resocializing” psychologists to think about the role they can play in this field and how important it is (Paquin, 1977, p. 356).

Some things have changed since Paquin’s time when psychologists often engaged in policy work only part-time, in addition to their positions at universities or private practices. With an increasing number of psychologists working in policy as their primary place of employment, the barrier of finding time for policy work appears less relevant; however, the other barriers and solutions Paquin listed seem as important as ever to ensure that future psychologists are aware of what they can do to prepare for entry into this expanding field (Garrison et al., 2017).

Despite the increased focus on policy work by APA, there is relatively little research on psychologists’ work in policy. A recent article by Glassgold and Wolf outlined how psychologists trained in both policy and advocacy can encourage mental health considerations into pandemic related policy responses (2020). In their article, Glassgold and Wolf outlined the

ways psychology training could support greater policy involvement moving forward, primarily through integrating policy and advocacy training into higher education programs. In their work on the Deep Poverty Initiative, Williams and Davis (2020) provided guidance for mobilizing psychologists to write op-eds, conduct congressional visits, and organize local service providers in service of changing policy. This initiative also worked with policy makers to introduce a Resolution on Deep Poverty for a vote in Congress. Apart from these recent articles and initiatives, much of the information that might be helpful for psychology students interested in learning about policy work tends to come from journal editorials, career spotlights in APA's *Monitor on Psychology*, or features in *gradPSYCH Magazine*. For example, speaking about his experiences working in policy, West (2017) outlined relevant skills needed, such as sticking to what is clearly relevant, not being afraid to admit ignorance, and being able to convey findings as simply as possible. Similarly, articles in the APA's *Monitor on Psychology* from former APA congressional Fellowship awardees provided summaries of their experiences and learned skills that assist in policy work (Corry & Haskell-Hoehl, 2012; Smith, 2012; Stambor, 2005).

Study Purpose

Unfortunately, the material presented in the above sources frequently highlights only the positive nature of the work and does not provide a critical understanding of the experiences of psychologists involved in policy work and the types of training experiences or preparation that facilitate this career path. The lack of empirical literature available for review clearly demonstrates the need for more research on this topic. In light of the paucity of existing research on this topic, grounded theory was chosen as the most effective method of inquiry for the current study. Grounded theory is effective in exploring subjective experiences, showcasing underrepresented voices, and bringing individual perspectives to the foreground (Charmaz, 2017;

Fassinger, 2005). The study is based in a constructivist framework as first introduced by Charmaz (2006) to describe how the researchers and participants both construct their own realities. Charmaz's approach focuses on the interaction between researcher and participant and posits that the researcher's interpretations are also constructs. This approach to grounded theory argues that data and theories cannot be discovered; instead, they are constructed by all parties involved. Levitt (2015) further expanded on the constructivist approach by evaluating the centrality of the role of interpretation and how it is best evaluated in service of the social justice goals at hand (Kannan & Levitt, 2017). In adopting a constructivist-social justice approach to this study, the principle investigator was interested in the content of participants' answers to the research questions, as well as how these answers are constructed within the interviewees' social contexts and systemic forces they encounter (Levitt, 2015).

The current study focused on psychologists who are or have been employed in federal policy development. The primary purpose was to investigate the experiences of these psychologists with specific attention to how they became involved in federal policy and how they functioned within this environment. As psychologists choosing to work in the field of policy development come from diverse training backgrounds and serve in varied roles, it is worthwhile to explore their experiences to better prepare future generations of psychologists who may wish to pursue this career path.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were eight license eligible psychologists who had completed one of several policy fellowships either through APA or the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). The inclusion criterion of psychologists who were trained as

health service providers or license eligible, was due to similarities in training programs (i.e., their focus on both clinical and research training). Additionally, all participants needed to have at least one year of experience working in policy development within the federal government.

Participants ranged in age from 30 to 63 (mean age = 39.9 years, *SD* =11.2). With regards to ethnic identification, seven participants identified as White, and one identified as Hispanic. With respect to gender there were six women and two men. Four participants were licensed and four were not. Participants ranged in the number of years working full-time in federal policy from 1 to 7 years (mean number of years = 3.75, *SD* = 3.06). When considering all work in indirect or part-time work in policy this range expanded from 1 to 11 years (mean years = 5.62, *SD* = 3.38). See Table 1 for additional participant information.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	Still in policy work?	Type of fellowship completed	Degree type
1	30	White	Female	Yes, non-profit	Congressional Science and Technology Policy Fellow	Clinical Health PhD/MPH
2	32	White	Female	Yes	Congressional	Clinical PhD
3	35	White, Hispanic	Male	No	Congressional	Clinical PhD
4	41	White	Female	Yes, state policy	Congressional	Counseling PhD
5	32	White	Female	No	Congressional	Clinical PhD/JD
6	37	White	Female	Yes	Executive Branch	Psychology PhD
7	63	White	Female	Part-time consulting	Congressional	Clinical PsyD
8	49	White	Male	No	Executive Branch	Clinical PhD

Procedure

Potential participants were identified from previously awarded APA Congressional and Executive Branch Fellows as listed on the APA website, as well as through personal networking by the author. Once identified, they were individually invited to participate in the study via an emailed letter. After participants responded to the initial emailed invitation, they were provided with an informed consent to review and return. Interviews were scheduled using Zoom. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and consent was obtained to audio record and transcribe the interviews. Participants were informed that they could request that any part of their transcript to be excluded from the analysis. The audio recordings of these interviews were then transcribed by the author and subjected to a grounded theory analysis. Data collection ended when all new data obtained from interviews fit into categories already in existence, referred to as theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2000; Fassinger, 2005). For this study, theoretical saturation was observed during the final two interviews, and no further outreach was conducted.

Description of Qualitative Method and Analysis

Retrospective recall interviews were conducted that allowed psychologists to reflect on their overall experiences working within federal policy. Interviews were semi-structured to allow space for additional questions to be asked as needed and to fully explore psychologists' experiences. An initial interview protocol was developed upon reviewing the available literature for important concepts, with the overarching interview question being "What are the experiences of psychologists working within federal policy?" Additional questions were asked to clarify these experiences and focused on the following areas: the use of psychological research in policy work, clinical skills used in the field, mentorship, and barriers to working in this field. Example questions included: "What unique perspectives/qualities do psychologists bring to policy

development/work?” “How do psychologists working in policy utilize research?” “What advantages/barriers do psychologists face working in policy?” and “What can students or early career psychologists who are interested in policy work do to prepare them for this career?” Interview questions were added or altered based upon the data analysis and emerging categories (e.g., questions were added regarding experiences being the only psychologist in an office and what others understood about psychology after participants referred to these experiences in the initial interviews). Questions were also added to follow up or encourage more in-depth responses from participants as needed.

Grounded Theory Analysis

The data were analyzed using a version of grounded theory analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) developed by Rennie, Philips, and Quartaro (1988). This method is often used to explore subjective experiences and advance the development of theories by focusing on interaction, action, and processes. Glaser and Strauss described the process of discovering theories as an ongoing dynamic process that is actively changing as new research is conducted (1967). Theory is developed through inductive analysis to explain the phenomena grounded in empirical observation.

Once the interviews were transcribed, participant responses were divided into meaning units (MUs), defined as segments of texts that contain one main idea (Giorgi, 1988). This process of identifying, naming, and labeling meaning units is called coding. The number of initial MUs derived from all eight interviews totaled 1,258. Then MUs were compared and organized according to similarities to create initial categories. This process was repeated such that the initial categories were compared with one another to create subcategories, categories, and finally higher order clusters. The formation of MUs, initial categories and subcategories took place in

conjunction with the interview process, through a process called constant comparison, with MUs gathered from new interviews being compared and integrated into existing initial and subcategories or generating new categories as needed (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). For this study, no new categories were generated during the analysis of the final two interviews, beyond the first (and most concrete) level of the hierarchy. This suggested theoretical saturation was achieved at this time and the hierarchical model was comprehensive.

The researcher also kept memos throughout the process of data analysis. These memos included short notes keeping track of the names of concepts, their relationship to one another, developing theories, and any other ideas emerging from the analysis. According to Charmaz (2000), memo writing can help to define hunches and leads for collecting data and can help inform initial coding as well as direct theoretical sampling efforts. Memoing captures the evolution of categories, as well as changes in assumptions about how those categories relate to one another. Memoing is also used to record method-related discussion and help researchers become aware of biases in an effort to limit their effects on the study (Rennie, 2000).

Credibility checks and epistemology. Two credibility checks were utilized to enhance the credibility of the study (Kannan & Levitt, 2017; Morrow, 2005). First, at the end of each interview, participants were asked questions such as “Was there anything we did not ask that seemed important in this interview?” to see if the responses were thorough and determine if there was any omitted information. The second credibility check was to provide interview participants with a summary of the findings and ask for feedback indicating their level of agreement with the descriptions of each cluster. All eight participants were provided the clusters and categories described below; to date, three responses were received noting no disagreement with the developed clusters or categories.

Researcher. Information on the author’s perspectives and background can be helpful in qualitative methods as it provides the context for understanding the findings (Fassinger, 2005; Morrow, 2005). The principal investigator is a white, cis-gender female, heterosexual, counseling psychology doctoral student with an interest in policy work and experience in qualitative analysis, particularly consensual qualitative research. Based on the author’s interests and knowledge, some assumptions identified prior to data analysis were that a lack of policy training and knowledge would be a barrier for psychologists. Another assumption was that there would be a lack of discussion in training program of policy as a field where psychologists worked. Additional expectations brought into the research were that psychologists would be useful participants in policy development and implementation due to research skills. Assumptions about barriers included lack of general understanding of the political process and being from a profession not necessarily known for working in the federal government.

Results

From the eight interviews, 1,258 meaning units were identified. The method of constant comparison described above generated a hierarchy that consisted of four levels (i.e., initial categories, sub-categories, categories, and clusters). One core category emerged that encompassed the seven major themes or “clusters.” Table 2 presents the description of each cluster is described, followed by descriptions of the underlying categories that comprise each cluster.

Table 2
Clusters and Categories, With Number of Participants Who Contributed Units

Cluster and Category Titles	<i>N</i>
Cluster 1: Challenges in transitioning from academia to policy	
1.1 Flexibility is key in transitioning to policy	8
1.2 Stayed connected to MH field through extracurriculars, as policy work is not always focused on mental health	7
1.3 The political nature of policy work can be difficult	6

Table 2 (Continued)*Clusters and Categories, With Number of Participants Who Contributed Units*

Cluster and Category Titles	<i>N</i>
1.4 Little understanding of how psychologists can engage in policy work	6
1.5 Stigma about mental health can be a barrier	6
Cluster 2: Interpersonal skills facilitate relationship formation; necessary for success in policy work	
2.1 Communication skills are an advantage for psychologists in policy	8
2.2 Ability to handle unexpected or stressful situations is an advantage for psychologists	6
2.3 Professionalism skills are helpful in policy work	7
Cluster 3: Psychologists bring valuable research skills to policy work	
3.1 Translating research to lay people is a valuable skill in policy work	8
3.2 Understanding, analyzing, and writing research is a rare skill in the policy world	8
Cluster 4: Scientist-practitioner training facilitated employment across a range of positions in federal policy	
4.1 Psychologists can use a scientific approach to broad decision making/behavior change questions, not just domain specific topics	8
4.2 Diverse set of skills allows for work in a variety of policy portfolios	8
Cluster 5: Graduate training could provide opportunities to make entering a career in policy easier	
5.1 Interest in policy was developed and pursued independently of training mentors or advisors (8)	8
5.2 Training programs could provide more training on how systems and politics impact mental health and not just on individual treatment	8
5.3 Training programs should emphasize translating research findings and psychological knowledge to non-psychologists	8
5.4 Students should be encouraged to engage in professional societies, community organizations, and politics to gain awareness of policy issues	7
5.5. Psychologists in academia should be knowledgeable on career options in policy and how to best prepare students for this career	7
Cluster 6: The field of psychology could increase its involvement in policy	
6.1 Policy makers do not read scientific journals	8
6.2 Very mixed feelings about APA's involvement in policy	8
6.3 Advocacy work is closely related to policy development	8
Cluster 7: Working in policy is a meaningful and enjoyable experience; continued to keep that focus throughout career	
7.1 Experienced many personally significant experiences working on meaningful legislation	8
7.2 Felt supported and prepared by APA and AAAS while on fellowship	6
7.3 Was impressed by how smart and caring policymakers were	5
7.4 Continued to maintain a policy focus in career after fellowship	6

Note: *N* is the number of participants who contributed units to the category.

Cluster 1: Challenges in Transitioning from Academia to Policy Work

This cluster contains descriptions of some of the challenges faced by psychologists in adjusting to a new field. Data from all eight participants were represented in this cluster and the five core categories contained described these challenges in greater detail.

Category 1.1

In the first category, participants highlighted the importance of flexibility during this transition process. Some participants noted seeing other science fellows (not psychologists) struggle with adjusting to positions where their hard-earned degrees were not as important as they might be in other employment positions and their expertise in certain subjects might not matter much. Coming from a different educational background from many of their peers was also identified as a challenge, with one participant describing a “steep learning curve” in learning to navigate the more political space. Both of these challenges were described as requiring a flexible mentality in their approach to the work and their identity as psychologists in order to overcome those challenges.

Category 1.2.

The second category identified staying connected to the mental health field in general as another challenge in adjusting to policy work. Seven participants shared that they had to make intentional efforts while working in federal policy to maintain engagement with the psychology field through outside activities since their work in the policy was not often connected to mental health specific subjects. Some of the ways psychologists identified staying connected to the field was through conferences, editing journals, and maintaining personal network of psychologists. Difficulty in maintaining licensure was also mentioned, as it was difficult for those not in

psychology focused jobs to justify to employers why they should get funding or time off to obtain continuing education credits.

Category 1.3

In this category, six participants described struggles with the political nature of their work; however, these difficulties varied based on what type of role psychologists were in. Psychologists placed in federal research roles noted being very aware of the need to be non-partisan in their work, while psychologists who worked in Congress encountered how politics and politicians can impact policies regardless of support from research and science.

Category 1.4

Six participants contributed to this category highlighting how the general lack of understanding about how psychologists can participate in policy can be a significant barrier. This lack of understanding was described as coming from both psychologists and non-psychologists alike. Individuals outside of the profession tended not to have a thorough understanding of the varied experiences and the scope of knowledge psychologists can have. For example, one participant described being questioned about how they could contribute to a discussion surrounding the impacts of a cancer diagnoses and treatment, seeing as it was not a specifically mental health related issue. Even psychologists were discussed as posing a barrier through this lack of understanding with several participants describing how their training program mentors either lacked the knowledge to direct them towards this field, or actively tried to dissuade them from it. Additionally, once the fellowship year was over, it could be difficult to get hired on in a congressional office, as those doing the hiring might be confused about the more non-traditional career path.

They're like, oh, but you didn't intern, but you didn't do this, you didn't do that; have you thought about being a legislative correspondent or a legislative aide? Which again, did not feel like I was above that work, but would be a significant pay cut, would be like a real step back in just about every way other than it would be as a permanent staffer. And so, I think that's just like, getting people to really understand not only the career path, but also what you're bringing to the table. (5)

Category 1.5

This category contained data from six participants who described coming across mental health stigma directed towards both those who needed services as well as providers. Some participants noted a change in behavior from peers once they learned they were psychologists, either becoming nervous or dismissing them as an unimportant figure in policy work. Another participant noted that it was sometimes difficult to get policy makers to pay attention to mental health issues or fund services due to stigma. Other participants described a bias towards the psychology field:

I think there is still a bit of a you know, we're a soft science, kind of bias. (8)

Cluster 2: Interpersonal Skills Developed in Psychology Training Facilitate Relationship Formation; Necessary for Success in Policy Work

This cluster illustrates how the social and clinical skills psychologists developed in training positively contributed to their success in various policy roles, with all eight participants again contributing to this cluster.

Category 2.1

The largest category from this cluster included data from eight participants and highlighted how important relationship building was within the policy world and how

communication skills honed through psychology training were an advantage in this area. One participant highlighted how they were able to obtain co-sponsors on bills based on the strength of their relationships. Building trust was an important skill echoed by other participants and likened to rapport building skills developed through clinical work.

Category 2.2

In this category, six participants described ways their clinical skills (i.e., group and family therapy, negotiation and persuasion skills, dealing with challenging clients) and the unpredictable nature of clinical work allowed them to be able to handle stressful and unexpected situations that arose during their time on the Hill.

I think we have a leg up in how to negotiate, and all you do for a lot of bills and policy work is talk to people who disagree with you, or who are angry or yelling at you and so being able to work with those types of people, you know, nothing I see on the Hill is going to be as strange and as stressful as some of the thing I saw in the medical hospital right? (1)

Category 2.3

The final category within this cluster included units from seven participants and described how various areas of professionalism developed in psychology training were useful in their policy experiences. Examples of these professional development skills were interviewing skills, being able to work well with leadership, conveying confidence to others, and working well within an interdisciplinary team.

Cluster 3: Psychologists bring valuable research skills to policy work

In this cluster all eight participants described how important research related skills were in their federal policy experiences and the various ways that those skills were utilized.

Category 3.1

Eight participants remarked on how important it was to be able to translate academic research in a way that people without academic or scientific backgrounds would be able to understand. This concept of translation was discussed as particularly useful to ensure that accurate conclusions were drawn from research findings, and that findings were not being taken out of context in order to support certain policies incorrectly. One participant described the importance of translation skills in his work:

But for me, the biggest thing in politics, especially being a psychologist, working in politics in that role, like it's all about translation, like translating research into like easily digestible bits based on your audience. (3)

Category 3.2

All eight participants contributed to this category and shared that skills related to understanding, analyzing, and writing research were very useful; more so than skills related to designing or implementing research. Participants highlighted that these skills were not very common among others working in policy who did not have a background in academia that included a focus on research and scientific analysis. Participants who worked closely with members of Congress typically utilized research by conducting literature reviews in order to prepare officials for various meetings and hearings, and to provide recommendations as to whether the representatives should support legislation or not. Participants who worked more in research positions identified that they primarily collected and disseminated data to help answer policy questions from lawmakers.

Cluster 4: The Scientist-Practitioner Training for Psychologists Facilitated Employment Across a Range of Positions in Federal Policy

Within this cluster, items from eight participants were included focusing on the qualities that allow psychologists to be able to work within many different roles and departments across the federal government. This was discussed as a unique ability for psychologists compared to other scientists (chemists/biologists) who tend to find work in domain specific areas.

Category 4.1

One such quality described by all eight participants in this category was the ability to use research and a scientific approach to address broader decision-making and behavior change. This ability was described by all participants as an important advantage for psychologists in policy. Participants elaborated on the fact that their ability to understand and digest knowledge in such a comprehensive way allowed psychologists to work across a wide variety of domains and portfolios (e.g., military, unemployment, criminal justice, Dept. of Defense.) and not just those related specifically to behavioral health topics. Participants described this as a valued perception of psychologists held by policy makers and staffers with previous experience working with Fellows.

Category 4.2

All eight participants described the wide range of skills provided by psychology training (research, social, and clinical) as yet another advantage in the policy world. Clinical experiences in particular were described as providing a unique perspective on policy as psychologists often have had many different roles within those systems (e.g., provider, patient, policy worker). Having worked clinically with individuals who faced systemic barriers within the legal, health

care, employment, and education systems was also described as providing a unique perspective that psychologists bring to policy work.

The policy specific work, I think is the human factor component of it. Like I...for better or for worse, I think that I had more of an eye on how policy would impact the individual and communities. (3)

Cluster 5: Graduate Training Programs Could Develop Opportunities to Make Entering a Career in Policy Easier

This cluster included items from all eight participants and encompassed many ways that training programs could help prepare students for working in federal policy, as well as some of the contributing factors that led participants to get into policy work in the first place.

Category 5.1

Eight participants shared they had to be intentional about seeking out opportunities either through internships, postdoctoral positions, or additional certificate programs to learn more about policy involvement, often without assistance from training program mentors. Participants acknowledged an interest in policy that developed early in their training history, with some as early as their undergraduate experiences. Specifically, four participants expressed that their frustration in seeing the harm caused by larger structural issues was a contributing factor to their eventual interest in policy work.

At that point I think and then from there on out with my clinical work and some of the legal work that I was doing, it just felt like it wasn't quite big enough... t's about these larger structural issues that need to change. So that for me was what I always think of when I talk about going into policy. (5)

It gets hard after a while, you know, you can shape your very small area of your field, but you feel like you're not doing enough, right? (6)

Several participants also recognized an interest in politics starting at a young age, one that was often informed and encouraged by family members. These participants reported that since their interest developed earlier in their training career, they were able to make more intentional choices along the way to include this aspect in their training.

Category 5.2

One important area where all participants identified room for improvement in psychology training programs was in increasing the focus on larger systems and politics. This emphasis was encouraged even for students who are not interested in a policy career as it is important to know how these things can impact the mental health field as well as the impact laws and policies might have on their clients on an individual level.

Category 5.3

An additional recommendation made by all participants focused on emphasizing that training programs should teach how to translate information/research to laypeople. The fact that this was identified as an advantage for psychologists in Cluster 3 enforces just how essential it is to help trainees develop this skill in all training programs, regardless of what field they are entering.

In my opinion, everyone should be communicating outside of the profession, right. What that looks like is different for everybody and in terms of the audience that you're intending to reach, but we shouldn't just be talking to one another. (5)

Category 5.4

Seven participants also felt training programs would benefit from encouraging students to be more involved in professional societies, local community organizations, and even local politics to increase awareness and understanding of policy and government issues. The importance of this understanding for all psychologists, not just those interested in a policy focused career, was also identified. Participants pointed out how difficult it would be for psychologists to effectively advocate for policy recommendations if they did not have a solid understanding of how these systems work.

Category 5.5

Seven participants emphasized how important and helpful it would be for psychologists to know that policy careers exist and to have mentors encourage these careers, especially during their training years. Participants shared their struggles in knowing they didn't want to pursue academia, or research or clinically focused positions, but were unsure about what other options existed. Several participants shared their realization that many psychologists actually work in policy; however, those careers aren't shared or talked about much, creating an appearance of it being an unusual career choice. It was also discussed that while there are many psychologists in policy, they are very spread out and participants described often being the only psychologist in their office.

I guess that's the one thing I would say, is there are jobs for psychologists, or I would say people with psychological training, throughout the government at every level. And that's true of state and local governments too probably. (8)

Cluster 6: The Field of Psychology Could Increase Its Involvement in Policy

In this cluster, eight participants contributed reflections on ways that lobbying and advocacy by psychologists and APA could improve and why it is important to do so.

Category 6.1

All participants highlighted the need for lobbyists and advocates to make sure academic research gets to policy makers, as they do not read scientific journals or seek out this research on their own. The importance of translating research for lay consumption was again included here, as it is necessary to ensure policy makers really understand the research presented to them. Participants also identified the importance of researchers including more concrete policy recommendations with their research to facilitate this transfer of information.

Category 6.2

Among all eight participants, there were mixed feelings about APA's involvement in advocacy. When evaluating APA's engagement in advocacy several participants highlighted the importance of remembering that APA is membership organization and that their focus is primarily on the membership related issues (e.g., research funding, increasing jobs for psychologists, reimbursement rates) versus more social justice focused advocacy. Participants also commented on their perception of APA struggling to engage the broader psychological community in advocacy and how focusing on guild/membership issues in their advocacy was one of the reasons for this difficulty.

Like there's a number of [APA advocacy items] that have been around for a really long time. So I, I do feel like because of that, I think that has alienated, I think, a lot of psychologists from thinking about what a APA does or could do in the advocacy space. Because I think for many it was like, well, these are just

professional guild type issues - they may not necessarily pertain to everyone.

They're not addressing anything about, you know, new psychologists coming into the field, the increasing diversity that we're trying to create...any of that. So I can see how I think for many people that was never very appealing and didn't make people really want to join APA or felt like they were advocating for stuff that they wanted. (4)

Participants also acknowledged that APA has in recent years been shifting their focus and described their recent stronger emphasis on social justice and advocacy issues as a positive change that would hopefully result in more psychologists becoming active in policy. It was not until working at APA that some participants became more aware of the work APA did and the larger impact the organization's advocacy had on policy. Participants also discussed clinical and counseling programs following in the footsteps of community psychology programs and focusing on systems level interventions as a positive trend for the field.

Category 6.3

Eight participants elaborated on the nature of advocacy work and policy development in this cluster's final category. Advocacy was described as a broad umbrella term that encompasses many different activities that anyone could engage in. Participants described policy as taking those ideas and recommendations from advocacy groups and turning them into change that can be accomplished. This interconnected relationship highlighted the necessity of knowing how to successfully and effectively advocate in order for change to be implemented.

Cluster 7: Working in Policy is a Meaningful and Enjoyable Experience; Continued to Keep That Focus Throughout Career

Units from all eight participants made up this cluster, incorporating the overall positive experiences psychologists had while working within the federal government in policy related positions.

Category 7.1

Eight participants expressed their enjoyment of their federal policy experiences with many describing particularly meaningful and challenging experiencing working on legislation during their time in working in the federal government. Participants identified these meaningful experiences while working on such varied legislative topics as the transgender military ban in 2017, learning about and responding to news of families being separated at the US/Mexico border, and sexual assault/violence prevention work. Participants discussed unique experiences gaining different perspectives on policy from different committees as well as challenges in implementing a bill after it is passed and viewed these experiences as useful in later careers that might include state policy positions, advocacy, or even clinical work.

Category 7.2

Six participants shared how supported they felt through APA and AAAS while on fellowship and how connected they felt to psychology through that support. They noted professional development and networking opportunities throughout their fellowships that encouraged that support and allowed for positive transitions afterwards.

Category 7.3

Five participants shared that their expectations of what people who worked in policy were like turned out to be inaccurate. Some participants entered their federal policy experience

expecting to come across individuals more focused on politics and bureaucracy, however they were impressed with the hard work and focus on positive change that policy workers and staffers showed.

Category 7.4

Six participants expressed that they continued to have a policy focus after completing their fellowship working on Capitol Hill. Some participants continued this focus through part-time policy related work such as consulting or advocacy, or by focusing on policy in their teaching positions and mentoring students with similar interests. Some stayed involved with government policy at either state or federal levels.

Core Category

The core category reflects an overarching theme within the analysis. In this study the core category was, “Psychologists are well-suited to work in federal policy development; however, there are ways to better facilitate their entry to this career.” The ways psychologists are well suited to working in policy development are described in Clusters 2, 3, 4, and 7 where participants described how valuable various skills learned in psychology training were. The barriers that limit psychologists from getting into careers in policy were highlighted in Clusters 1, 5, and 6 where participants provided feedback and recommendations that would better prepare psychologists for engagement in this career field. This central theme reflects participants’ experiences of being highly qualified, valued, and successful in policy positions, while often being the only psychologist in any given office or department.

Discussion

This study sought to understand the unique experiences of psychologists who have worked full-time in federal policy and provide information on their preparation for this career

pathway. Findings from this study support APA's claim that psychologists are well positioned for participation in public policy, partially due to being able to use psychological knowledge and training to conceptualize and propose solutions to structural issues. Multiple participants highlighted how being able to use knowledge and research to broadly impact behavioral change was a valuable advantage when it comes to policy work. In addition to these more content focused areas, "soft skills" such as critical reading, writing, and professional development skills also translated well to the policy field.

An important goal of the study was to gain information on factors that either facilitated or created barriers to entering into policy work. Feedback about barriers and recommendations given by participants aligned with those provided by both Paquin (1977) and SWPI's educational guidelines. The importance of psychologists having knowledge about how they can play a role in policy was described by all participants as important, regardless of the careers they eventually enter. The educational gaps that social work attempted to address with their updated educational guidelines, particularly the marginalization of policy practice as a career were echoed in the responses participants provided about the difficulties of even realizing policy work could be a possible career.

It is interesting to note that many of the valued skills for policy work participants learned in their psychology training are contained in APA's Competency Benchmarks in Professional Psychology (APA, 2012). For example, one competency cluster is focused solely on relationships and being able to "relate effectively and meaningfully with individuals, groups, and/or communities" (Competency Benchmarks in Professional Psychology, Benchmark II). All participants identified this capability as one of the most important aspects of being an effective policymaker. An additional competency area that was identified as a useful skill in policy work

was “applying scientific methods to profession” (Benchmark III). While these competency clusters and associated core competencies are often discussed in terms of how they might look in clinical settings, they clearly translate well into a variety of employment settings. Given that knowledge of advocacy, specifically ways to enact systems change (Benchmark VI) is also one of APA’s Benchmark core competencies, using suggested behavioral anchors for the development of this competency could serve as a guide for psychology graduate programs interested in incorporating a focus on politics and policies into their training.

Implications for Psychologists and Training Programs

Many participants described that the process of realizing policy was a career option was not always easy nor was the path straightforward. Participants described that mentors were unaware of how psychologists could work in policy and policy-training programs were hesitant to accept psychology trainees due to the multiple responsibilities faced by those students during their training years. Addressing the accessibility of these types of training programs would be one way to address this barrier. If APA, SPSSI, or other organizations provided more short-term, affordable, training options that could be completed either online or on the student’s own timeline, it might address barriers related to the time constraints inherent in professional psychology programs that have strict hours requirements for clinical practica and internships. Participants interviewed in this study voiced that perseverance was required to push back against these barriers and forge their own career paths. Making these opportunities more accessible to students in psychology programs that train psychologists as health service providers would be an important first step.

Participants highlighted how simply talking more about policy work as a potential career field would have made this process easier since one of the earliest barriers described was simply

a lack of awareness of this career option. According to participants, this could be as simple as inviting guest speakers into classes or forums to share their experiences or as extensive as offering an elective focused on this non-traditional career path. It would also be helpful for advisors to have greater awareness of this option when working with students who might be struggling to identify a career path that fits their interests. Discussing policy work as a potential career for psychologists, as opposed to focusing on clinical work or academia as the primary career options for trainees, would be an important initial step in encouraging students into this career. Participants noted that while options to engage in this career are out there, they are difficult to find if someone was not already interested and actively looking for them. Making these options more visible early in training would be a helpful way to introduce more students to different career possibilities.

Another consistent recommendation made by participants was the importance of including education on how policies, laws, and systems shape the lives of all individuals, whether psychologists interact with those individuals as educators, direct service providers, researchers, or fellow citizens. Regardless of what direction psychologists choose to follow in their careers, being able to understand and talk about the implications of these larger systems will be useful. Additionally, with training programs and APA having an increased focus on social justice and equity concerns, it is necessary to understand these systems and their impact, to better advocate for how to change anything.

Limitations

One primary limitation of this study was that due to the small sample size and lack of racial diversity among participants, these results are not widely generalizable. Given that individuals with less privileged identities are often most strongly impacted by state and federal

polices, it would be important to explore ways that the path to policy work, and experiences within that field, might look very different for these individuals. This lack of diversity among the participants is also reflective of psychology as a profession; adding to the difficulty of finding a diverse sample. Another aspect of homogeneity among this sample that limits generalizability was that only psychologists who were no longer in federal policy participated. Psychologists who have engaged in federal policy work as a long-term career option would likely have different experiences and perspectives to add to this discourse. During recruitment, several psychologists still in federal policy work responded that the time request for an interview, 60-90 minutes, was too incompatible with a policy related career in which meetings are considered long if they reach 30 minutes.

Future Directions

The exploratory nature of this study focused on general questions of experiences related to entering and working in public policy but did not allow for in-depth exploration of specific areas that are worth exploring, such as why participants chose to leave policy work after fellowship, or a more in-depth exploration about barriers or bias experienced. It would also be valuable to explore training program or mentor perspectives regarding knowledge of less traditional psychology careers as well as barriers to incorporating some of the participants' recommendations into psychology training programs. In an effort to engage with psychologists still working in policy and be respectful of the demands on their time, a more focused quantitative survey might be a useful approach to increase information about this group's experiences as well.

Some participants noted that psychologists from other disciplines were more prevalent in policy work than their clinical and counseling psychology counterparts. It might be useful to

explore this discrepancy and determine what contributes to this difference, especially in light of the perceived value of many of the clinically focused skills and the core competency of advocacy for health service psychologists (i.e., those from counseling, clinical, or school psychology training programs). Research examining how these non-clinically focused psychology specialties prepare their trainees for this work might be useful in translating those approaches to clinical and counseling programs. It is also worth noting that even among the sample interviewed for this study there was only one participant from a counseling psychology background. This could indicate potential differences between these two disciplines in relation to engagement policy work that might be worth exploring further.

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