Abstract

Policy research can play an important role in understanding, and informing public policy making. We explore policy research in Australia through leading Australian policy texts, and find the focus to be on how to understand policy, rather than how to conduct policy research. More attention to the conduct of research could contribute to an enhanced understanding of how knowledge about policy is generated and contribute to policy investigation. We then consider the various methods used in current policy research through an empirical analysis drawing on 120 recent Australian public policy papers. What emerges is a limited focus on methodology, and an unexpected prevalence of qualitative methods compared to comparative, quantitative or mixed methods. We argue that there is considerable scope for Australian policy scholars to pursue research using a range of methods and to become more reflective about methodology, its documentation and development, so that the state of knowledge about Australian public policy can be improved, and the reputation, profile and impact of the profession can be enhanced.

Key words: public policy, research methodology, research methods
Introduction

Public policy making provides a useful focus for research because of the centrality of public policy for how people are governed (Colebatch 2002), its contribution to responding to major problems (Considine 1994) and the regulation of social conflict (Hajer 1995). Policy is also worthy of investigation because it is an interesting social phenomena in its own right. Further, divergent views, budget constraints and changing public expectations mean governments need to develop a better understanding of how to develop, implement and evaluate policy. Public policy research assists with this work, particularly if calls for more evidence-based policy are to be followed. There are however, many ways in which public policy can be investigated, each approach drawing on particular theoretical and methodological assumptions (Marsh and Stoker 2010b, Sabatier 1999). The selection of an approach to analysing, or researching, policy can be complex as Bacchi (2009) highlights due to the politics of policy studies.

This paper explores how policy research is dealt with in recent Australian policy texts and what research methods are used in the conduct of public policy research. We do so by briefly revisiting discussions about the role of research in policy and considering how research is covered in leading Australian policy texts. We then consider the various methodologies used in current published research and discuss how policy research could develop. It presents empirical analysis of the research methods used in 120 papers published in the Australian Journal of Public Administration (AJPA) and Australian Journal of Political Science (AJPS) between 2012 and 2014. The analysis shows limited attention is being given to methodology in current published research, and a prevalence of certain types of research relative to others.

Understanding policy research

Until recently political scientists and policy researchers directed relatively limited attention towards methodological concern, with Stoker arguing ‘political scientists have not been, in general,
sufficiently reflective about the nature and scope of their discipline. They just do, rather than talk about it’ (Stoker 1995:1).

There are at least three reasons for this limited attention to methodology. First, researchers have focused on the development of competing theories and explanations, such as liberalism and Marxist theory, and associated normative, empirical and prescriptive theories (Fenna 2004, Marsh and Stoker 2010b). Second, the influence of positivism on policy research has meant researchers did not see the need to explain the methods or methodology underpinning their research. Rhodes hints at this in discussing institutionalism:

Our forebears in political science were not preoccupied with methodology. Not for them the lengthy digression on how to do it. They just described, for example, the government of France, starting with the French Constitution. The focus on institutions was a matter of common sense, an obvious starting point for studying a country, and therefore there was no need to justify it. (Rhodes 1995: 42)

Third, the range of terms is confusing and often used interchangeably, as Grix (2002: 175) points out:

Given the variety of uses of the terms and terminology of social science research, it is hardly surprising that students rarely have a firm grasp of the tools of their trade. Different academics in different disciplines attach a wide range of meanings and interpretations to the terminology of research.

Grix explains the directional and logical relationship between concepts which (explicitly or implicitly) inform research (Table 1) in an effort to impose some consistency. However, there has been no widespread adoption of consistent terminology, nor do researchers often explain their use of basic terminology.
Table 1. Research terminology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Example 1</th>
<th>Example 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ontology</strong></td>
<td>What’s out there to know?</td>
<td>Foundationalist</td>
<td>Anti-foundationalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Epistemology</strong></td>
<td>What and how can we know it?</td>
<td>Positivist</td>
<td>Interpretivist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methodology</strong></td>
<td>How can we go about acquiring that knowledge?</td>
<td>Quantitative</td>
<td>Quantitative and qualitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methods</strong></td>
<td>Which precise procedures can we use to acquire it?</td>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Surveys and interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sources</strong></td>
<td>What data/information can we collect?</td>
<td>Survey data</td>
<td>Survey data and interview transcripts</td>
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Source: Compiled from Grix (2002).

The focus and intent of policy research also varies considerably. Blackmore and Lauder (2005) discuss this in terms of policy research requiring clarity about ‘the intentions for undertaking policy research, a capacity to frame the policy ‘problem’ and some clarity about the boundaries’, and: whether you are doing ‘research for policy’ and/or ‘research about policy’; whether you are an ‘outsider’ or an ‘insider’; whether your investigation is about all or any of the processes of policy production, dissemination and implementation or policy effects; and what level the analysis is focussed on (macro, meso, or micro level). With respect to the purpose of policy research, some insight into the spectrum of options available provided by Hill (2009) in Table 2. The analysis of policy/for policy distinction is limited by the requirement for an either or response. Whereas, for example it is possible to conduct research about policy, while also hoping to inform policy. There is also the issue of the terminology used to describe research about policy: whether ‘research’ or ‘analysis’ best describes this type of work. For example, the term policy analysis could be limited to research for policy, and policy research could refer to research of policy, or alternatively policy analysis and policy research could be used interchangeably.
Table 2. Different kinds of policy analysis

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Analysis of policy</th>
<th>Studies which seek to describe and explain genesis and development of policies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Studies of policy content</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Studies of policy outputs</td>
<td>Studies which seek to explain why levels of expenditure or service provision vary over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studies of policy process</td>
<td>Studies which focus on how policy decisions are made and how policies are shaped in action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analysis for policy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Studies which are concerned with the impact policies have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information for policy making</td>
<td>Studies which marshal data in order to assist policy makers reach decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process advocacy</td>
<td>Studies which seek to improve the nature of policy making systems through reallocation of functions and tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy advocacy</td>
<td>Involves the analyst pressing specific options and ideas in the policy processes</td>
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A final issue associated with understanding policy research is the range, and selection, of methods used and what this tells us about public policy research methodology. For, example, Marsh and Stoker (2010b) group methods into four categories: qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods and comparative approaches.

The consideration of policy research in public policy texts

Many public policy texts do not discuss research methodology. This is true of both general public policy texts (eg Howlett, et al. 2009) and more topic-specific texts (eg Dovers and Hussey 2013). Instead, the focus is on understanding public policy and the process of its development, implementation and review (Althaus, et al. 2007), or evaluating its success (McConnell 2010). The primary audience for this approach appears to be policy officers in the government, private and community sectors, political advisors and stakeholders rather than public policy researchers.
In this section we consider how policy research methodology is dealt with in four recent mainstream Australian public policy texts: *The Australian Policy Handbook* (Althaus, et al. 2013); *An Introduction to Australian Public Policy: Theory and Practice* (Maddison and Denniss 2009); *Public Policy in Australia: Theory and Practice* (Haigh 2012); and *Analysing Policy: What’s the problem represented to be?* (Bacchi 2009). Our focus on these texts is pragmatic and partial: we only consider recent Australian focussed texts that could be used in general ‘public policy’ studies: we avoid discussing texts focussed on politics, political parties, and political institutions. For example, we do not consider *Contemporary Politics in Australia: Theories, Practices and Issues* (Smith, et al. 2012) or older policy texts such as *Australian Public Policy* (Fenna 2004).

While policy texts books are usually aimed at undergraduate and post graduate coursework audiences, they also play a role in preparing students for research as part of coursework and beyond, including preparing students for post graduate and academic research. Introducing students to methodological issues may also equip students with conceptual skills for assessing policy research and understanding how academic knowledge about public policy is created.

Our discussion begins with *The Australian Policy Handbook* (Althaus, Bridgman and Davis 2013). Despite its explicitly practical orientation, little is said about how new knowledge about policy is generated. This is surprising, given that the concluding paragraphs in chapter one suggests ‘policy makers should always glean the value of original or improved frameworks for appreciating the policy process in an effort to secure improved practical outcomes’ (Althaus, Bridgman and Davis 2013: 11). Their approach is to work through different aspects of the policy cycle, following chapters explaining what policy is, and introducing the institutions involved. The chapter on policy analysis provides most insight into how policy may be researched, and discusses the importance of evidence-based policy. However, it downplays a key point: what counts as legitimate evidence is
contested (notwithstanding the need for a critical regard for what counts as evidence). This is disappointing given the contest over what counts as legitimate knowledge in policy practice.

The Maddison and Denniss (2009) text aims to link theory and practice. Policy research is primarily addressed in the chapter titled Research and Policy. While, the chapter focuses on ‘research for policy’ including evidence-based policy, a short section on ‘strategies for research’ is also provided in the chapter. In this they provide advice on how to guide policy workers in the use of other people’s research, and suggest some starting points for the occasions where you may be conducting original research (Maddison and Denniss 2009: 223). There is a brief discussion of quantitative, qualitative and comparative research methodologies, each illustrated using short case studies, and a conclusion about how evidence may be weighed up in the policy process. Their discussion is useful for introducing students, albeit briefly, to three prominent approaches to conducting research for policy. However, it overlooks issues associated with ‘research of policy’, or broader epistemological issues (although such issues are implicitly raised in the chapter on identifying issues).

Public Policy in Australia: Theory and Practice by Haigh (2012) aims to cover the theoretical traditions, ideas and concepts informing policy together with the processes that enable policy-making. As with Maddison and Denniss (2009) a chapter is devoted to discussing ‘evidence and research in public policy’, and similarly focuses on knowledge and ‘research for policy’ as distinct from discussing ‘research of policy’. However, there is no consideration of quantitative, qualitative, or comparative research and epistemological issues are not explicitly discussed, although they are hinted at in the chapter on ‘problem definition and agenda setting’ where there is a short discussion of framing and language.

Finally, there is Bacchi’s text Analysing Policy: What’s the problem represented to be? (Bacchi 2009). Bacchi’s approach starts from a different epistemological basis to the other texts, and seeks
to provide insights into policy by challenging mainstream approaches to policy through putting ‘problems’ into question, rather than learning how to solve them. Inspired by Foucault, Bacchi focuses on interrogating the representation of problems – her approach is a study of problematisation – and proceeds via a series of six questions:

1. What’s the ‘problem’ (for example, of ‘problem gamblers’, ‘drug use/abuse’, ‘gender inequality’, ‘domestic violence’, ‘global warming’, ‘sexual harassment’, etc.) represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the ‘problem’?
3. How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’?
6. How/where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted and replaced? (Bacchi 2009).

These questions provide a template for undertaking policy research and moves policy research beyond discussions about evidence-based policy to consider knowledge-power relations and ‘the politics of policy studies’.

The different texts discussed provide insights into aspects of researching policy, although none provides a fully adequate introduction to the topic. It is disappointing that Australia’s key public policy texts devote so little attention to explaining how policy research might be conducted. This could be addressed in three ways: first, inclusion of chapters on conducting policy research, in mainstream textbooks. For example, Blackmore and Lauder’s chapter on ‘researching policy’ (2005) in Somekh and Lewin’s Research Methods in the Social Sciences show that it is possible to consider questions about how policy can be researched in a relatively accessible way. Second, through preparation of edited books on approaches to policy research in Australia (which could
complement Marsh and Stoker’s (2010b) *Theory and Methods in Politics Science* or Sabatier’s (1999) *Theories of the Policy Process*. Third, the continued preparation of books along the lines of Bacchi’s which provide insights into policy making and governance, while also providing some pointers on how research might be investigated. Of the three strategies identified, the first two may be of most use to students wanting an introduction to how to conduct policy research, as they would provide exposure to the diverse ways in which policy can be researched, as well as introduce students to terminology to explains research methodology.

**The research methodologies informing current Australian policy research**

To explore the research methodologies informing Australian policy research we analysed papers published between 2012 and 2014 in the AJPA (69 papers) and AJPS (51 papers). We excluded papers solely on elections and voting, non-Australian jurisdictions, and not containing original research (speeches, introductions to special issues and commentaries). Papers were analysed to identify the research basis on which observations about public policy were made.

The papers were allocated into the broad categories of qualitative, quantitative, mixed and comparative methods. Drawing on Cook, et al. (2011) we also analyse: types of analysis (institutional, policy analysis/argument, qualitative description, qualitative content analysis, numerical description, and statistical analysis, as per Table 4); time frame; and sources of data. Where more than one research methods or type of analysis was used in a paper, each method/type was separately identified for the analysis.
Table 3: Types of analysis

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional analysis</td>
<td>Describes and analyses institutions; focussing on collective behaviour (structures and mechanisms of social order and cooperation governing behaviour between two or more individuals)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy analysis/argument</td>
<td>A critique or argument usually in an academic style, providing analysis of an idea or issue by way of referencing published authors, including policy analysis identifying problems, discussing key points and proposing solutions or identifying shortfalls in existing policy positions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative description</td>
<td>Describes a situation, identifying themes and issues, often over a historical timeframe (Sandelowski 2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative content analysis</td>
<td>Provides analysis of an issue through examination of recorded documentation (eg papers, speeches, interviews), such as in qualitative discourse analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numerical description</td>
<td>Uses numbers as a basis for analysis or comparison (including percentages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statistical</td>
<td>Varies from simple statistical descriptions of data through to more complex referenced techniques and modelling.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Researchers overwhelmingly favoured qualitative methods (68%), as shown in Figure 1. The remaining articles were based on mixed (11%), quantitative (11%) or comparative (10%) methods.

Figure 1: Use of methodological groupings
Figure 2 shows the more detailed types of analysis used. The most frequently used types of analysis were qualitative description and policy analysis/argument.

*Figure 2: Types of analysis*

For the 85 papers specifying a time-span, the average was 18 years (median 10 years). Research was skewed towards studies over 3 years or less (34%) and 30 years or more (25%), as shown in Figure 3.

*Figure 3: Research time span*
The most frequent source on which research findings were based was academic literature, followed by grey literature (Figure 4). Combined, these two sources were more often used than other sources including those based on recorded views (interviews, surveys, speeches and the media, in total 25% of sources), and numerical data sets (financial/economic, demographic and other) were used in around 10% of sources.

**Figure 4: Use of data sources**

In terms of the scale of the research, out of 28 articles specifying the use of sampling (interviews, surveys and other forms of data collection), sample size ranged between 15 and 21,000. There was a tendency within this subset of articles towards large-scale research effort. The average sample size was 1225, median 98. However, of the 43 articles using case studies, 25 articles were based on a single case, and 9 articles used two cases (the remainder used 3 or more cases).
Discussion

Australian policy research published in AJPA and AJPS in 2012-14 primarily relied on qualitative methodology, based on either descriptions of, or arguments about, about policy change. Academic literature or grey literature frequently provided the evidence on which research findings were based, followed by methods using surveys, interviews and other public statements. The use of case studies (mainly single cases) was also prominent. Mixed method, comparative and quantitative research was less common. Aside from the use of interpretation (see Australian Journal of Public Administration 73(3)), methodological issues in the study of public policy were not addressed. Instead most articles provided either analysis or commentary on substantive topics such as welfare, economics, environment, rural and regional, indigenous, and refugee issues. A smaller group of articles reflected on more general issues such as implementation, decision-making and policy advice.

Methods and types of analysis

There was limited use of quantitative methods in the articles analysed (Figure 1), despite high profile examples of quantitative policy research being available internationally (Kingdon (1984); Howlett (1997); and Jones and Baumgartner (2005). This stands in contrast to the findings of a larger study of non-Australian political science journals that found that 49% of articles used quantitative methods, 46% used qualitative methods and 23% used formal modelling (Bennett, et al. 2003). Political science may lend itself more to the use of quantitative methods, due to coverage of voting and elections, which translate easily to quantitative analysis. More specifically in relation to quantitative research, the use of numerical comparison and statistical techniques was similar (Figure 2). Tranter (2013) identified that public policy researchers have a tendency towards using simple statistical techniques. However, given the limited use of quantitative techniques this is understandable. Even simple numerical comparisons may yield significant insights if there is a good
fit between research design and question. Sophisticated techniques that search for complex patterns may be unnecessary if trends in public policy are easily identified.

Even when quantitative data was available, researchers tended to use qualitative methods. This is illustrated in a special issue of the AJPA on Australian Policy Agendas Project (APAP), which included sector-specific articles on public policy agendas as a first step towards understanding the nature of the policy agenda in Australia. Five of the six articles rely on historical and qualitative analysis, and do not use the data derived from speeches and parliamentary records. The other article (Cockfield and Botterill 2013) presented quantitative data from the project. Consequently Cockfield and Botterill (2013) identify different findings to the other APAP articles. They found frequent changes in attention rather than a punctuated equilibrium, whereas the other authors concurred with established literature on the existence of punctuated equilibrium. If this example is indicative of the public policy field, it suggests Australian policy researchers should be mindful of the blind spots associated with the approaches to research they use which may limit the potential to reduce generate new ideas and explanations.

There are many possible factors for reliance on argument and qualitative description (Figure 2), including: training (understanding of the norms of the field and/or level of comfort with numerical data); the scope of the journals analysed (AJPA encourages submission of reflections and commentaries); and researchers choosing to publish quantitative research elsewhere (e.g. in economics or public health journals). It may also be that that quantitative policy research is difficult because it involves trying to infer causing relationships between inputs and outcomes, with only limited capacity to control variables (Palfrey, et al. (1992:6), and there may be ethical concerns with experimentation in public policy (Danielson 2007). While this may be the case, it is also the case that there are alternatives to manipulative experiments, through using naturally occurring experiment-like variations, which could be applied to test hypotheses on public policy (Diamond and Robinson 2010). These experiment-like variations could be used to consider the success of
policy responses to an issue by comparing social indicators across a number of jurisdictions. This approach forms the basis of comparative public policy methods (Hopkin 2010, Rose 2005) and was reflected to a limited extent within the articles, for example, Fenna and Tapper (2012) test the impact of policy positions of different political parties and Grant and Dollery (2012) compare arrangements for local government across different jurisdictions. However, this type of approach has potential for greater application.

More broadly, given the dominance of qualitative methods, it could be suggested that they provide the best way of studying contemporary public policy (or at least the clear majority of Australian policy researchers have this view). Flyvbjerg (2001) appears to take such a position in suggesting that given social science is unable to develop the type of explanatory and predictive theories that are at the base of the natural sciences, it ought to focus on its strengths taking into account what we know from the ‘real-world’ of politics. Although the debate about qualitative or quantitative policy research, has not been as prominent in Australia as it has in the United States (Dryzek 2002), we suggest that the evidence assembled supports the view that Australian policy research is not closely aligned with the United States traditions, and may instead be more aligned with the British/European tradition. This is consistent with the assessment of Sharman and Weller (2009). Given the widespread use of surveys, interviews, speeches, and other records (which suggest seeking to form an understanding of a person or group of people’s view) it appears that a qualitative orientation is a dominant paradigm amongst Australian public policy researchers.

Sources of data and sample size

The tendency to use indirect research sources (academic literature, financial, economic and demographic) compared with more direct sources (grey literature, interviews/survey, speeches, legislation, parliamentary records, firsthand knowledge, media and archival) was surprising to the authors (Figure 4). The strong reliance on academic literature as the basis for reasoning, not merely
as an introductory or reflective capacity, relates to the more frequent use of qualitative description and argument as research methods. This means researchers are relying heavily on what other researchers are saying rather than collecting primary data. Consequently, public policy may become inward looking and subsequently limits its capacity to inform public policy practice.

While the widespread use records of ‘what people said’ (including surveys, interviews, speeches, media reports etc) may be useful, it represents a small subset of research sources that may be used. Therefore making use of other sources may assist in enabling the identification of different types of insights into the policy process.

When using quantitative methods, researchers tended not to base their research on primary public policy research materials (e.g. legislation, parliamentary records etc.) but on data that is recognisably numeric such as financial, economic or demographic data, while the public policy element of the research is qualitative (Cahill 2013, Drew, et al. 2013, Eccleston, et al. 2013, Fenna and Tapper 2012). Some articles presented data in support of a qualitative argument, rather than the data being integral to the analysis or findings (Capling and Ravenhill 2013). Other articles referred to the collection and coding of survey data but not did not make it clear how this was used to support their findings and qualitative analysis (Jones and Webber 2012, Shepherd and Meehan 2012).

Based on our analysis of the 2012-14 research papers we suggest there may be difficulty or discomfort in collecting and using data as part of public policy research, although it is not clear why this should be the case. Perhaps policy researchers think quantitative data time is consuming to collect because of beliefs about the quantity needed to support their arguments. For example one article described a study involving 25 semi-structured interviews as a “micro level investigation” (Holloway, et al. 2012). This is supported by the relatively large sample sizes in the quantitative papers. This may be necessary where the population size is large, but in general, there was little discussion the level of sampling required to fit the research design. This brings into question whether large-N sampling is necessary in all cases or whether a lack of confidence in experimental
design could lead to over-collection of data. An obvious exception to this is where researchers are seeking to elucidate views of the general public or popular opinion so need large surveys to do this. At the other end of the scale, articles using case studies tended towards only using 1-2 cases per article. Some researchers sought to extrapolate findings from specific case studies to other situations. The reliance on case studies exists, notwithstanding the limitations of this type of research (Steinberger 1980).

*Time span*

Figure 3 shows that Australian policy research encompasses both short-term studies, which focussed on a specific event or one electoral cycle, and longer term studies. This suggests that Australian policy research is concerned with a variety of questions and issues, and is attentive to both the colour of contemporary events and the longer-term dynamics of policy change and stability.

*Conclusions*

This paper has explored the ways in which Australian policy scholars explain and research policy, with a particular focus on the methodologies used. Our analysis sheds light on the way in which policy research is conducted in Australia, and identifies characteristics that may constrain the long-term development of the field. Many of the limitations should be relatively easy to overcome.

In relation to the general lack of focus on how policy can be researched in prominent Australian texts, we consider that there is much to be gained from giving greater attention to ‘researching policy’ being, if only to demonstrate that Australian policy scholars are aware of, and can engage, in these debates. Readily available responses include: the inclusion of chapters on conducting policy research (or at least greater consideration of methodological issues) in mainstream text books; the preparation of edited books on approaches to policy research in Australia; and the continued
preparation of books which clearly articulate particular approach to research policy. The preparation of methodologically focussed journal articles may also be useful, such as Colebatch’s (2002) article contrasting different theoretical perspectives to the study of governing.

In relation to the way Australian policy research is conducted, we note the tendency towards qualitative case studies and commentaries. While this certainly provides insightful accounts of particular areas of policy it may, rightly or wrongly, also be viewed as potentially limiting the usefulness of public policy research to provide broader insights. This is because case studies can be viewed as ‘unique cases’ rather than a means for theory building and testing, via the use of ‘critical’ or ‘exemplary’ cases. We also consider that the limited attention to comparative research is surprising, given that Australia’s states and territories provide an easy basis for comparison. Comparative research is an area that has significant potential for policy researchers as it: provides opportunities to observe ‘the ways in which political problems are addressed in different contexts [which] provides valuable opportunities for policy learning and exposure to new ideas and perspectives’; ‘enables researchers to assess whether a particular political phenomenon is simply a local issue or a broader trend’; and, contributes to the development, testing, and refining of theories about causal relationships (Hopkin 2010: 285). A useful example of comparative research include Curran and Hollander (2002) comparison of the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development and National Competition Policy. Quantitative methods could provide opportunities to test existing theories and generate new ideas but more consideration needs to be given to data sources and experimental design. Mixed methods research also has some potential, although the challenges associated with designing and resourcing such research may be restrictive, because of the ontological and epistemological questions that would need to be considered in developing the research project.

More broadly, our analysis aligns with the views of Marsh and Stoker (2010a) about the need to be clearer and more self-reflective about the way in which politics (or in this case, policy) is studied
(Dryzek 2002), and who suggests the need to engage across research traditions about shortcomings and strengths critical pluralism is required. Our analysis also fits with Kefford and Morgenbesser (2013) finding that PhD students in the related politics and international relations fields are seeking greater focus on methodological training. In conclusion, there is considerable scope for Australian policy scholars to pursue research using a range of methods and to become more reflective about methodology, its documentation and development, so that the state of knowledge about Australian public policy can be improved, and the reputation, profile and impact of the profession can be enhanced.

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