

From Research to Action: Improving the Policy Impact of Academic Research

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photo curtesy David Parker, MD



The Problem – academic research is for academics

- Academic research is written for an academic audience
 - Of course
 - Evaluated based on publications in academic journals
 - Run by academics for academics
 - Within disciplines, there are clear lines of engagement and communication
 - And time varying sense of what's important
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The Problem – we want a bigger audience

- We hope for a “if you build it, they will come” dynamic with policy engagement
 - That’s unrealistic
 - Search Costs
 - There’s too much out there and people are busy
 - Confirmation bias
 - Consumers poorly placed to evaluate those time-varying, discipline specific discussions of what’s “important”
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Current Solutions

- Curated bibliographies or databases
 - Helpful – reduces search costs
 - But
 - costly to keep up to date
 - And still need to be searched – confirmation bias
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Current Solutions

- Curated bibliographies or databases
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 - costly to keep up to date
 - And still need to be searched – confirmation bias
- Translational writing
 - Separates message of research from its validity
 - Assuming the “academic” concerns are about validity
 - Still leaves search cost and confirmation bias problems
 - Misdiagnosis of the problem

A solution borrowed from academic research

- Identify your policy market at the design stage
 - Same as how you think about the academic market for your paper
- Engage that policy market at the design stage
 - Help inform the questions you are asking
 - Same as you ask academic peers for input at the design stage
 - This outreach itself has value
 - Learning how to ask tractable questions takes practice
 - Identifies sources of confirmation bias
 - Creates investment in research results
- Be prepared to tailor deliverable to policy needs

How to achieve this outreach

- What academic researchers can do now
 - Cold outreach
- How can we facilitate this more in the future?
 - Matchmaking events
 - Might help start building relationships, but they take up too much time over the long run
 - Organizations like those involved in this event can act as facilitators
 - Most people can spare the time for a virtual coffee
 - An alternative to policy directed research



Personal Lessons on Constructive Policy Engagement

- People rarely know what they do not know
 - By definition, you know what you know
 - There's an unbounded set of things you do not know and there's not a lot of surplus time to ponder
 - Policy needs help identifying questions
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Personal Lessons on Constructive Policy Engagement

- People rarely know what they do not know
 - Policy needs help identifying questions
 - Time constraints are central to policy engagement
 - Really what's behind the demand for “translational” work
 - Policy can't spend a lot of time pondering questions or how to translate them into tractable research questions
 - Partnerships are impractical
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Personal Lessons on Constructive Policy Engagement

- People rarely know what they do not know
 - Policy needs help identifying questions
 - Time constraints are central to policy engagement
 - Policy can't spend a lot of time pondering questions or how to translate them into tractable research questions
 - Language matters
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Language – not all working children are child laborers


- 20th International Conference of Labour Statisticians Resolution to Amend the 18th ICLS Resolution Concerning Statistics of Child Labor (2019)
- Key concept: **production boundary**
- The general production boundary
 - “The production boundary includes (a) the production of all individual or collective goods or services that are supplied to units other than their producers, or intended to be so supplied, including the production of goods or services used up in the process of producing such goods or services; (b) the own-account production of all goods that are retained by their producers for their own final consumption or gross capital formation; (c) the own-account production of housing services by owner-occupiers and of domestic and personal services produced by employing paid domestic staff.”
- The “general production boundary” is different than the “economic production boundary” or “the production boundary of the SNA”
 - Own-account production of household services within households is not in the SNA
 - Why? because the decision to produce and consume is simultaneous and with limited impact on rest of economy

Language – not all working children are child laborers


- *Working Children*
 - Children engaged in any activity falling within the **general** production boundary for use by others or for own use
 - A child is below the age of 18


Language – not all working children are child laborers

- *Working Children* subcategories
 - *Own-use production work by children* – production of goods and services for own use
 - *Economically active children* – work within the boundary of production of the SNA
 - Excludes unpaid household services
 - ***Employment work by children* - work performed for others in exchange for pay or profit**
 - *Unpaid trainee work by children* – work performed for others without pay to acquire workplace experience or skills
 - *Volunteer work by children* – non-compulsory work performed for other without pay
 - *Other work activities by children* – not defined but includes work nec such as unpaid community services and unpaid work by prisoners when ordered by a court or similar authority




Language –
not all
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- Child labor (ILO 2022) “refers to work that:
 - is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and/or
 - interferes with their schooling by: depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.”
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Child labor – when is work harmful?

- All work entails costs C
 - There is a time constraint that binds
 - All work entails benefits B.
 - Accrue to many different agents
 - What is harmful?
 - Net cost (C-B)? Impractical!
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Defining child labor in practice

- Worst forms of child labor
 - a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom, as well as forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict;
 - b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances;
 - c) the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in relevant international treaties; and
 - d) work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.
- Worst forms of child labor other than hazardous work or unconditional worst forms of child labor a - c
- Hazardous work - d

Defining child labor in practice

- Worst forms of child labor
 - Worst forms of child labor other than hazardous work
 - Hazardous work
 - Designated hazardous occupations and industries for children
 - Long hours of work and night work
 - Time spent commuting should be part of work schedule
- Work within **the SNA production boundary** performed by children below the minimum age
 - Excluding permissible light work
 - local laws (yes) or less than 14 hours per week for ages 12 & 13 (yuck)
- Hazardous unpaid household services
 - Circumstances or hours (at least 21)

Implementation - SDGs


- Child Labor (SNA production boundary basis)
 - Worst forms of child labor
 - Ages 5-11 economically active for at least 1 hour per week
 - Ages 12-14 economically active for at least 14 hours per week
 - Ages 15-17 economically active for at least 43 hours per week

Implementation - SDGs

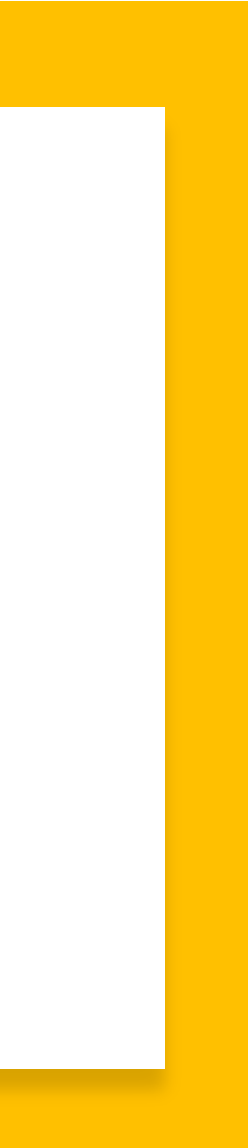
- Child Labor (SNA production boundary basis)
 - Ages 5-11 economically active for at least 1 hour per week
 - Ages 12-14 economically active for at least 14 hours per week
 - Ages 15-17 economically active for at least 43 hours per week
- Child Labor (General production boundary basis)
 - Ages 5-11 economically active for at least 1 hour per week and / or involved in unpaid household services for at least 21 hours per week
 - Ages 12-14 economically active for at least 14 hours per week and / or involved in unpaid household services for at least 21 hours per week
 - Ages 15-17 economically active for at least 43 hours per week
- Both include children in worst forms of child labor


My opinion on SDG Implementation: No

- SDG tracking has a particular policy objective
 - SDG implementation is good for that, but bad for academic research
- For research that aims to understand causal mechanisms, outcome definitions that vary by age and hours creates confusion
 - Theories do not imply any obvious discontinuities
- Hours only have relative meaning




Practical definitions in academic research

- Working
 - Own-use production work
 - Unpaid household services
 - Own-use economic activity
 - Economically active
 - Employed
 - Child labor
 - Appropriate to local laws
 - Compromise is its incomparability across countries
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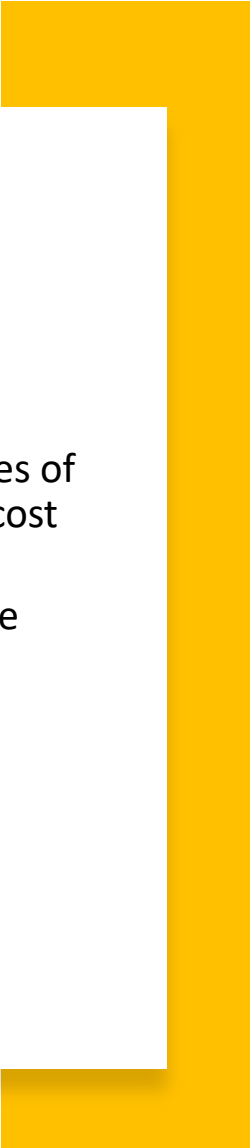


Do we need to distinguish between types of own-use production work?

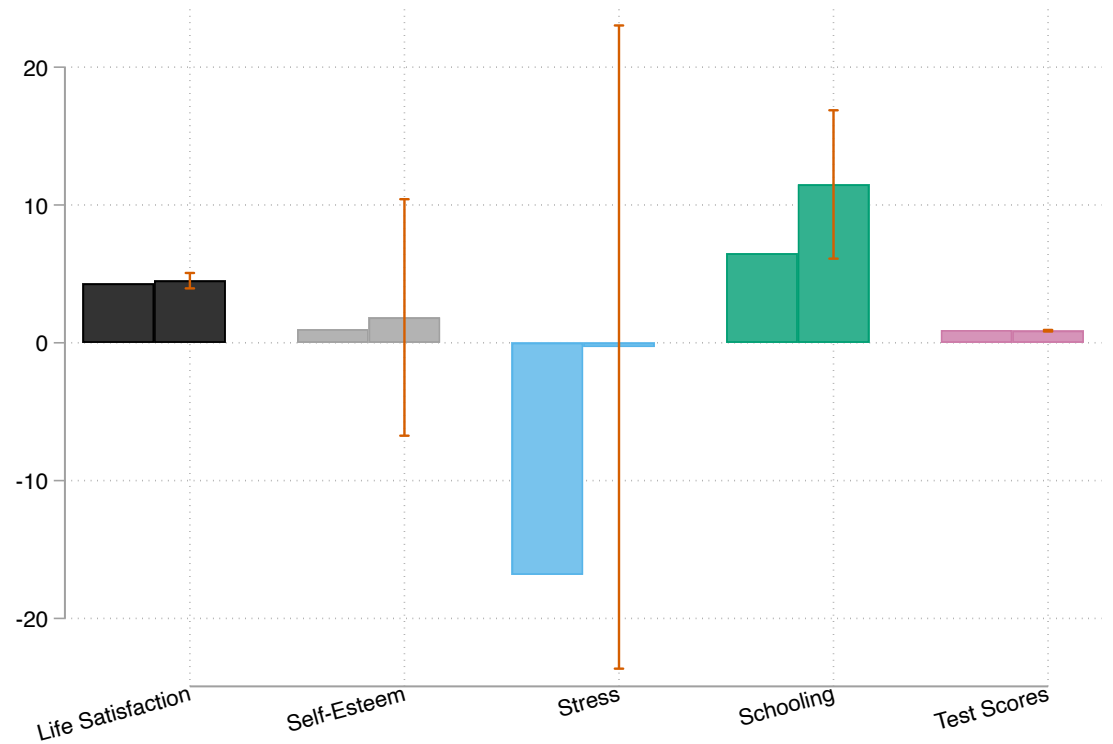
- If parents feel the same about both types of work, they will have the same implicit cost
 - Do parents “feel the same”?




Do we need to distinguish between types of own-use production work?


- If parents feel the same about both types of work, they will have the same implicit cost
 - Do Unpaid household services and Own-use economic activity have the same implicit cost?
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One example from
7th grade girls in
Ajmer Rajasthan:
Own-use economic
activity vs unpaid
household services
indistinguishable





Practical definitions in academic research

- Working
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Summary: What can academic researchers do to improve the policy impact of their work?

Know your reader

Watch your mouth