Policy Studies Review, August 1985, Vol. 5, No. 1

I. PERSPECTIVES ON PUBLIC POLICY

Egon G. Guba

WHAT CAN HAPPEN AS A RESULT OF A POLICY?

I was asked recently to referee a paper that asserted "a perennial and fundamental policy question facing analysts is 'What happened as a result of a policy?'" That question is certainly not uncommon, but I happen to think that to pose it not only reflects a basic misunderstanding of the nature of policy, but also represents a misguided effort prompted by our continued use of an obsolescent inquiry paradigm.

MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURE OF POLICY

It is crucial to realize that the term policy does not denote a single concept (Guba, 1984). There are at least three levels at which the term has meaning: policy-in-intention is the domain of policy framers or legislators; policy-in-implementation is the domain of policy implementers, the agents who carry out the particular programs or treatments undertaken in the name of the policy; and policy-in-experience is the domain of putative policy "beneficiaries" and unintended "victims." When the question "What happened as a result of a policy?" is raised, the referrent is typically to the policy-in-intention. But it is immediately clear that whatever happened could not have come about as a result of a policy-in-intention, but--at best--of the policy-in-implementation. And even that level is usually insufficient to the question because the results must necessarily be related to the beneficiaries/victims, and the impact of the policy hinges upon their experience of the policy. Finally, that experience is heavily mediated by context (e.g., by the local culture; by the reactions and expectations of peers; by the motivation of the implementers and the size of their workload; and the actual availability of authorized resources).

We can thus come to one immediate conclusion: It is never the policy that is tested but only some treatment or program undertaken in the name of the policy, together with the experience of that treatment or program by the target group and other affected stakeholders. For example, it may be the policy of the federal government to ameliorate the condition of the poor, but that policy (stated in this case as a goal) can be effected in a variety of ways (e.g., by distributing cheese, by welfare payments, by job programs, or by negative income tax rebates). When the question of results is raised, it is the effects of these various programs that can be evaluated, not the policy. The mere fact that numbers of treatments or programs are found to be ineffective in no way reflects negatively on the policy (although one might despair over finding a means to implement it).

From this distinction we may immediately move to another. If evaluation is the process for assessing alternative policies-in-implementation (and the way they are experienced as well), but cannot be used to evaluate policy directly, then what can we say about policy analysis which may be defined as the process by which policy decisions can be illuminated and informed? Clearly policy analysis cannot be equated with evaluation. It is instead a

process that arranges possible policies along some value continuum (or, in our pluralistic society, along multiple value continua on which a given policy alternative can and probably would assume different priorities).

Policy analysis is essentially a value-based enterprise. Whether or not a policy of ameliorating the condition of the poor is a good or useful policy depends on value-judgments, not scientific data. Policy analysis's closest cousin is what is commonly called a needs-assessment. Despite the pretensions of many needs assessors that it is a purely scientific process, it is also heavily value based (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

Not only is it the case that policy analysis and evaluation are two distinguishable processes, it is also true that neither can be equated with research. (The phrases "policy research" and "evaluation research" are prompted primarily by the need to provide respectability and legitimation to activities which are usually--especially in academia--labeled as "applied research" or even "mere service," and bear little weight in promotion and tenure judgments.) The end products of research are new insights and understandings; the end product of evaluation is a judgment of the merit and/or worth (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) of a treatment or program and the end product of policy analysis is a series of prioritized policy options (together with the value systems that give rise to the weightings).

The question "What happened as a result of a policy?" is thus essentially imponderable without additional stipulations. We must be clear which level of policy definition we intend. The question cannot be tested in relation to policy-in-intention any more than theories can be directly tested, rather than the hypotheses stemming from them.

USE OF AN OBSOLESCENT INQUIRY PARADIGM

Thus far we have ignored the fact that to pose a question such as "What happened as a result of a policy?" is to declare allegiance to the positivist paradigm of inquiry, for that paradigm is the only current one that takes cause-effect relationships seriously. It is common knowledge that this paradigm is under fire and facing a possible revolution, in the Kuhnian sense (Kuhn, 1970). My colleague Yvonna Lincoln and I have explicated the problems of this paradigm in multiple places (but see especially Lincoln & Guba, 1985) arguing that they arise because of the nature of the assumptions or axioms that undergird positivism, which is becoming harder and harder to accept as meaningful. The issue is too complex to be dealt with here. Suffice it to say, however, that the positivist approach asserts a realist ontology. It rests on the assumptions (and please note that they are assumptions, neither provable nor disprovable) that there exists an objective reality "out there" going on about its business irrespective of the interest that anyone may display in it; that reality is regulated by certain natural laws (the generalizations of which positivists are so fond); and that many of those laws take the form of cause-effect linkages. Furthermore, positivism asserts an objective epistemology on the assumptions that the inquirer (would-be knower) can maintain an objective (non-interactive) posture in relation to the knowable, and that it is possible to conduct an inquiry in ways that protect it from value-impingements (biases) so that one can put questions to Nature itself and Nature itself will answer.

The emergent paradigm that goes under various names such as naturalistic, hermeneutic, interpretive, ethnographic, constructivist, and even qualitative (an egregious misrepresentation) makes quite opposite assumptions. It asserts a relativist ontology on the assumptions that all

reality is mentally constructed and that there are as many realities as there are persons to contemplate them; that there are no general or universal laws that can be counted on in every situation but that the action or behavior noted in any context is uniquely determined therein; and that all elements of a context are continuously involved in "mutual simultaneous shaping" in ways that render the concept of cause-effect meaningless. Further, the emergent paradigm assumes a subjective (in a non-pejorative sense) epistemology, so that inquirer and respondents mutually shape their constructions in a hermeneutic circle throughout the inquiry, and thus literally create the "reality" which the inquiry may finally mirror. In that creation, values play a crucial role; inquiry cannot be value free, but it does not follow that inquiry cannot have "validity" (see Guba & Lincoln, in preparation). All inquiry is ideological; it should be openly ideological but it need not be blatantly ideological.

Let us consider the question "What happened as a result of policy?" in light of this paradigm difference. First, it should be evident that if policy analysis is indeed a value-based process, then it makes little sense to utilize an inquiry paradigm that is putatively value-free. (We may note in passing the irony that the claim of value independence that characterizes positivism is itself a value claim.) Value questions cannot be settled by a value-free methodology in principle. Inquiry conducted as in a hermeneutic circle that is sensitive and responsive to different value positions is clearly preferable to one that asserts that its data are untouched by human values.

Second, policies surely fall under the heading of constructed realities. They do not exist in Nature, but are devised by people; they are in every sense of the term socially constructed. The fact that one can distinguish between policies-in-intention, policies-in-implementation, and policies-in-experience, is itself ample evidence for that assertion. Moreover, the conditions (need, problems, and opportunities) to which the policy is intended to be response are also socially constructed realities. For example, being poor is as much a state of mind as it is an "objective" level of deprivation; many so-called poor attest to the fact that they did not think of themselves as poor until someone so labeled them. To conduct inquiries rooted in a realist ontology and objective epistemology, while trying to determine what policies are needed (or useful or productive) in relation to some conditions when both policies and conditions are patently not objectively real, is an in principle mismatch of serious proportions.

Third, the question of whether cause-effect relationships can be established is, to say the least, moot. Even such avowed positivists as Cook and Campbell (1979, p. 10) (although they would prefer to be called post-positivists, having given up naive realism for critical realism) acknowledge that "the epistemology of causation ... is in a productive state of near chaos." Policies-in-implementation take their place in a context that existed before their arrival and that will continue largely on the course on which it was previously set. No doubt the policy will impinge in some respects, but the policy is in turn impinged upon by contextual factors already in existence. What emerges, both in the context and in relation to the policy, depends on the specific interaction. Many elements enter into that interaction, and each of those elements (including the policy-in-implementation) interacts with all the others in ways that change them all simultaneously. At the same time, a state of affairs is produced that we, as outside observers, choose to label "outcomes." The outcomes have no directionality (cause to effect) and there is certainly no compulsion to produce particular outcomes. Indeed, the outcomes may be totally

morphogenetic, unpredictable from the immediately preceding state of affairs, as in catastrophe theory in mathematics (Schwartz & Ogilvy, 1979). As Nurmi (1974) has pointed out, all the elements may be "contingently necessary" in the sense that they have a place in the synergistic relationship in which all are involved. But, the resulting shape is "circumstances relative" in that there is a plurality of shapers (over-determination) with each become meaningful (or not) in ways that depend entirely on local circumstances. Thus, it is impossible to abstract cause-effect linkages which can be asserted to exist necessarily and universally (laws of Nature), and which, when understood, can be used to refine a program or treatment to whatever extent may be desired or made possible by resource allocations. Thus the question "What happened as a result of a policy?" is in principle unanswerable.

SOME DIFFICULTIES

There are several major difficulties that accompany the use of the obsolescent inquiry paradigm. First, this approach places the matter of accountability in an erroneous light. Lee Cronbach (1980, p. 4) has noted that "a demand for accountability is a sign of pathology in the political system"; he might well have added that it is also a sign of pathology in the inquiry paradigm. For if there are causal linkages mediated by natural laws, and if those laws have been established via scientific inquiry, then there is no excuse why things should not work as intended and why interventions should not inevitably produce the good results intended. If they do not work, someone is at fault. It may be the inquirers who have misapprehended the natural laws; the policymakers who have misapplied the results; the implementers who have not followed treatment specifications; the sponsors who have not provided sufficient resources; even the "beneficiaries" who are not sufficiently motivated or persist in holding values that are inconsistent with those undergirding the intervention. Applied inquiry, including evaluation, can determine where the fault lies and what can be done about it with all the certainty that science can bring.

Of course that view is rejected in the new paradigm. The inherent uncertainty, not only of human behavior but of "natural" actions, makes the whole question of accountability moot. Instead of making accountability the equivalent of culpability, it transforms accountability into a matter of particular synergisms that require art as much as science to manage. Implementers of treatments and programs cannot directly cause any effect; they can but mediate the process, introducing enablers and blocking or masking possible harmful elements, to whatever degree wisdom and resources make possible. Excluding only blatant laziness or incompetence, managers are no more accountable for outcomes than are any of the many other interacting, mutually and simultaneously shaping elements that comprise the context.

A second difficulty associated with uncritical adherence to positivism is that policies are rendered legitimate and unassailable on the grounds of their scientific defensibility, thereby rendering all other possible value constructions not only erroneous but irrational. If policies can be defended on the grounds that they are supported by objective inquiry based on the operation of immutable natural laws, then those policies must be accepted. After all, Nature's laws cannot be abridged. The prevailing stance of policy analysts is to displace moral, ethical, and even pragmatic criteria by deference to the single criterion of scientific defensibility. The effect of such a value stance is to make the policy declarations of the

scientifically buttressed policymaker unchallengeable. But note that it renders the policymakers themselves victims as well. Policymakers cannot make policies that are inconsistent with scientific findings; the process of policymaking is reduced from a highly volatile political interaction to a technical, reasoned, empirically constrained deduction. The policymaker who persists in balancing off empirical information with political and other value considerations is labeled "irrational," with all the pejorative force that label carries in our scientific society.

Finally, continued adherence to the obsolescent positivist paradigm effectively impoverishes and disenfranchises the many stakeholding groups affected by any policy decision. These groups typically have no input into the analytic process. They do not determine what questions are to be asked or how they are to be answered. The typical analyst continues to act as if he or she were part of an anointed priesthood, alone competent to know what the relevant questions are, and alone competent to apply scientific methodology (which largely arcane) to their resolution. Very often the findings are reported only to the client or sponsor--the putative policymaker--who can suppress or distort them. Cronbach's (1980) observation that the withholding of information is tantamount to disenfranchisement is germane. When one recognizes the fact that the withheld information is often regarded by analysts and clients alike as a privileged revelation direct from Nature itself, the enormous power of positivistic policy analysis to impoverish becomes starkly apparent.

What is my conclusion? I am persuaded that policy analysts make an egregious error in attempting to answer the question, "What is a result of a policy?" First, policies cannot be directly tested; only programs or treatments mounted in the name of a policy can be tested. The worth of a policy is assessable only by induction, from a number of different operationalizations, and there can be no definitive final answer. Further, policies are value statements, and so policy analysis cannot take the form of evaluation but something more akin to a needs assessment.

Most importantly, I conclude that policy analyses cannot be conducted reasonably within the limits posed by the positivist inquiry paradigm. A value based entity cannot be effectively explored through a putatively value free epistemology. Scientific defensibility cannot be permitted to supersede the many moral, ethical, and pragmatic criteria that a society, especially a pluralistic society, has a right to expect in policy determinations. And in all events, the notion that policies can fruitfully be conceived as causes whose effects can be validly assessed should be repudiated.

Without these adjustments, I fear that policymakers will continue to demand a kind of accountability which does great injustice to the accountable, will continue to find their own hands tied by claims of "natural" lawfulness that supersedes all other standards, and will be witting or unwitting accomplices to the improverishment and disenfranchisement of large groups of stakeholders.

But I do not wish to be construed as a nihilist. Because we readmit in-principle an irreducible uncertainty into our planning and acting is no reason to abandon all hope for rational determination. The fact that perfect planning is not possible is no reason not to plan at all. Because policy determination is more art than science is no reason not to augment the policy process with relevant empirical information. At the very least, the renewed realization of uncertainty ought to make us more humble. We are not an anointed priesthood with objective and value free methods for arriving at TRUTH; instead we are collaborators with policy setters and

policy implementers in doing the best we can in a given situation. The art of the practitioner is once again accorded respect; the distinction between basic and applied inquiry disappears. Indeed, I personally find that possibility challenging.

REFERENCES

Cook, T.D., & Campbell, D.T. (1979). *Quasi-experimentation: Design and analysis issues for field settings*. Chicago, IL: Rand McNally.

Cronbach, L.J. (1980). *Toward reform of program evaluation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Guba, E.G. (1984). The effects of definitions of policy on the nature and outcomes of policy analysis. *Educational leadership, 42*, 63-70.

Guba, E.G., & Lincoln, Y.S. (in preparation). Types of inquiry.

Guba, E.G., & Lincoln, Y.S. (1981). *Effective evaluation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Guba, E.G., & Lincoln, Y.S. (1982). The place of values in needs assessment. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 4*, 311-320.

Kuhn, T.S. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (2nd ed., enlarged). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (in press). Research, evaluation, and policy analysis: Heuristics for disciplined inquiry. *Policy Studies Review*.

Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Nurmi, H. (1974). Causality and complexity: Some problems of causal analysis in the social sciences. *Annales Universitatis Turkensis, Ser. B*, Turku, Finland.

Schwartz, P., & Ogilvy, J. (1979). The emergent paradigm: Changing patterns of thought and belief. *Analytical Report #7, Values and Lifestyles Program*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.