8. Politics, public administration, and evidence-based policy

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INTRODUCTION

The catchphrase "evidence-based policy" has been the subject of much debate since at least the 1990s. Appeals to evidence-based policy, or similar terminology, have been used copiously by politicians, especially Tony Blair, Al Gore, Tony Abbott, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Helen Clark, and many others. Vigorous – and sometimes vitriolic – dialogues have been pursued in academic circles for many years, emerging mainly after the year 2000 and continuously expanding since then. Most recently, dedicated academic journals, advocacy groups, and think tanks have appeared in support of evidence-based policy, while at the same time voices of criticism and skepticism continue to grow louder and more confident.

At the surface level, it is difficult to see what might be so controversial. If public policy were not based on evidence, what else could it be based on? Religious dogma, racial prejudice, and partisan strategy, among other options, are all obviously less desirable information sources for important public decisions than evidence. Understandably, "evidence-based policy" is therefore a highly effective political slogan.

Critics, however, point out that what constitutes evidence is not always agreed upon by all affected or interested parties. Claims to evidence can actually be a means of suppressing minority voices, entrenching bias, locking out particular forms of knowledge, and, ironically, justification for political decisions already reached.

Unfortunately, after many years of public and academic discourse, this debate has ossified. While the overall output, in terms of academic publications, think tank and consultant reports, and new political campaigns, continues to grow, the messages themselves are no longer developing. In fact, there are really only four main arguments in favor of evidence-based policy, and four against. These arguments repeat themselves, sometimes illustrated by novel case studies, but not much gets added to their force or substance at each new iteration.

Fortunately, scholarship on evidence-based policy can be made more productive if the various arguments can be made to work together. But first, as I will elaborate below, scholars will have to address the relationship between administrative and political actors in the policy decision making process, and they will have to recognize the importance of the principle of accumulation of knowledge. Without these two elements, the entire enterprise is at risk of stagnation.

ARGUMENTS IN FAVOR OF EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY

Academic scholarship in support of evidence-based policy can generally be organized into four arguments. This is not to say that there are only four *possible* arguments – indeed, many

more arguments are possible. However, these are the four most commonly employed, and they are so common that other points of view barely attract any attention at all. All four arguments take the position that evidence-based policy is desirable, achievable, superior to alternative methods of policy decision making, and also superior to the status quo, in which policy decisions are seen to be insufficiently derived from adequate evidence. All four arguments contend that evidence-based policy decisions will produce more effective, more efficient, more sustainable, and more equitable social outcomes, but they provide different views on how evidence is to be used, who should use it, and to what purpose.

The Research-to-Policy Pipeline

Arguments from this perspective claim that more research evidence (quantity) or more conclusive research evidence (quality) should be produced so as to provide decision makers with a more solid evidence base on which to support policy decision making. Alternatively, some arguments in this vein claim that good quality research already exists in adequate quantity, but the problem is getting that research into the hands of decision makers. In either case, the problem is seen as an inadequate direct supply of high-quality research to decision makers.

Often, these arguments are made in reference to a specific policy problem or issue area. For example, Just and Byrne (2020) discuss various ways that research on consumer food behavior, such as how people choose between options at the grocery store, might better inform policies to address obesity, child nutrition, and food sustainability. Other arguments are more general and cut across policy areas. Some authors refer to entire jurisdictions: Andrews (2017), for instance, details the evidence-to-policy process in Wales, and argues that research evidence provided by experts is a critical input for effective government decision making in that jurisdiction. Others discuss methodologies for producing evidence. One popular, ongoing debate involves the importance of randomized controlled trials, in which a particular policy intervention is applied to a group over a set period of time, and the results are then compared with a similar group whose members did not receive the intervention. While there are probably as many voices urging the expansion of randomized controlled trials for informing policy decisions (e.g. Doleac 2019) as there are voices who caution against a blind faith in randomization (e.g. Deaton and Cartwright 2018), all of these arguments adopt the perspective that improving the supply of evidence will enable superior policy decision making and better policy outcomes.

Many of these arguments place the responsibility for improving research, or for communicating research evidence to policy makers, with researchers, who are mainly university-based academics (e.g. Poot et al. 2018; Richards 2017). But authors adopting this position rarely acknowledge that academic researchers lack the training, aptitude, or experience for creating policy advice and are insufficiently rewarded by their institutions for their outreach to governments. Researchers also have no professional responsibility for governance – that is the purview of duly elected political officers and appointed administrative staff in the public service.

A growing number of authors avoid this problem by supposing that the communication of research to policy makers – often called knowledge translation (Grimshaw et al. 2012) or knowledge brokering (Smits et al. 2018) – is best achieved by independent actors in specialized roles, whose job is to gather research evidence from the people who create it and communicate it to the people who need it for purposes of making public policy. Many of these analyses model this activity with the "two communities" approach, which sees researchers and

policy makers separated by different languages, pressures, rewards and incentives, schedules, and core motivation for action (Caplan 1979). These arguments claim that the highest priority in improving evidence-based policy is overcoming barriers in communication between researchers and policy makers (Poot et al. 2018; Richards 2017). However, the two communities model generally presupposes a homogeneous policy community, which empirical studies have suggested is unrealistic (e.g. Newman 2014).

Policy Capacity

A second argument supportive of evidence-based policy is one that pertains to improving the capacity of public agencies to process information for purposes of policy making. The argument is that most public sector organizations are dangerously understaffed and under-resourced when it comes to collecting policy-relevant information, processing that information into a format that makes it useful for policy decision making, and communicating the resulting advice to superior (often, political) decision makers. Many authors conclude that organizational change, including cultural change (Cherney et al. 2015), improved education and training (Newman et al. 2017), and expansion of personnel (Hahn 2019: 535) are the keys to better use of research evidence in policy decision making.

Policy capacity arguments are similar to research-to-policy pipeline arguments, in that both arguments understand the problem to be one of inadequate use of information. However, whereas pipeline arguments call for more information, better information, and better communication of information, capacity arguments call for better infrastructure at the point where information is being used. This is a major point of difference, because from this perspective, the onus is on the government to improve policy decision making, not on outside actors like academic researchers.

Policy capacity arguments generally focus on only one aspect of the policy process: the processing of information. This makes it difficult for these arguments to explain how the system came to be deficient in the first place. If policy outcomes could be improved by simply boosting the capacity of advice-creating agencies to process information, why does this continue to be a problem? A focus on advice creation ignores the political dynamics – like the influence of conservative parties espousing a contraction in public service personnel as an austerity measure to curtail public spending – that have shaped the structure of public agencies in many jurisdictions.

A Focus on Implementation

A third school of thought argues that it is more important that evidence be used to support decisions on how policies should be implemented, and less important for helping decide which policies to choose in the first place (Breunig 2018: 73; Khosrowi 2019: 53). For instance, when the Canadian government decided to legalize the recreational use of marijuana, it made a political decision held up by democratic support through the election of Justin Trudeau's Liberal party to government in 2015. However, the details of how this policy would be implemented, including where legal marijuana would be sold, where it could be legally used, how it would be kept out of the hands of children, and so on, were not provided during the election campaign in which this policy was promoted. The technicalities of implementation were left to administrative staff to work out (see Engel 2017), and this is where research evidence would,

according to this perspective, be most useful (for a more in-depth discussion on these points, see Newman 2017). More specifically, the kind of evidence used in these instances would arise from the evaluation of previous or existing programs in the same or similar jurisdictions (Weiss 1999).

The advantage of this argument is that it separates the normative aspects of evidence-based policy (i.e. what policies should be chosen, how political objectives should be defined, which populations are to benefit, and which other populations must compromise) from the administrative aspects (i.e. which policy instruments are to be used to deliver the chosen policy efficiently and effectively). This works to address the concerns of scholars who caution that support for evidence-based policy will result in the rise of an anti-democratic technocracy (e.g. Triantafillou 2015). The disadvantage is that this argument precludes the possibility that decisions about implementation frequently require normative prescriptions and are founded on political objectives as well. For example, Millar et al. (2019) use the case of a social program to support single parents to re-enter the workforce in Ireland to show that even seemingly administrative aspects of policy implementation can require significant political decision making. In the end, it may be more difficult to separate political decisions from administrative decisions, even at the implementation stage, than these authors will freely admit.

Addressing Root Problems

The fourth most common argument promoting evidence-based policy is the notion that evidence is most useful when it is mobilized to address fundamental social problems, rather than, say, modifying existing programs or focusing on secondary issues. Gamoran (2018), for example, argues that policies intended to improve education outcomes for black Americans would not be successful – no matter how much evidence is deployed – unless the fundamental issue of entrenched racial discrimination in the education system is addressed first.

This line of thinking is descended from a much earlier debate, in which commentators reacted to Lindblom's (1959) view that policy problems could never be resolved through holistic targeted strategy, but could instead only be addressed by incremental changes at the margins. Dror (1964), among others, disagreed, arguing instead that holistic, or even radical, policy problem-solving was possible and even warranted in many cases. Foreshadowing the current debate on the use of evidence, Dror commented that "increasing the knowledge and qualifications of policy-practitioners" and "setting up special 'think units' for the improvement of conceptual analytical tools" were essential to improving the "rational" components of the policy decision making process (1964: 156 – although he also refers to "extra-rational" aspects in this discussion as well).

The core of this argument is appealing, in that it seems to explain why research evidence may not have had as much of an impact on policy outcomes as it would be expected to have, even when it is used by policy makers. However, on closer inspection it becomes apparent that the designation of what is a root problem is somewhat arbitrary. How deep into the phenomenon must one go to reach the root, and how does one know that this is the right level to act on? At some stage it becomes unfalsifiable, and one could always argue that evidence use is not improving policy outcomes because the problem is not fundamental enough.

ARGUMENTS CRITICAL OF EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY

Similarly, there are four main arguments critical of evidence-based policy. All four critical perspectives argue that evidence-based policy is impossible, although they give different reasons for this point of view.

Evidence Is Subjective

A popular argument in the scholarly literature is that evidence-based policy is impossible because there is no such thing as objective evidence. Authors adopting this perspective argue that all facts are subjective, and therefore all decisions of a public nature are based on values and not truths (e.g. Lancaster and Rhodes 2020: 4–5). Some authors argue that statistical data in particular are open to manipulation (e.g. Neylan 2008). Others take a more extreme view, that reality itself is unknowable in any objective fashion (Luton 2007).

A corollary of this argument is that anyone who advocates for evidence-based policy is actually advocating for one particular set of values over others, which are claimed to be facts. The implication is that a call for evidence-based policy is actually a strategic move to suppress opposing voices, rather than an appeal to improve society through public intervention informed by data (Packwood 2002: 267).

A further corollary of the same argument is that government intervention is ineffective in producing desired outcomes (Biesta 2007). If evidence is subjective, then it is impossible to prove that government action can ever have an effect on social outcomes. Primary data (gathered before an intervention is designed) and program evaluation (gathered after an intervention is implemented) are equally meaningless as facts, reflecting only values in a process that many have satirically labeled, "policy-based evidence" (Strassheim and Kettunen 2014).

Of course, it can be difficult to excise all values and biases from any presentation of facts, but these arguments do still possess some inherent weaknesses. First, even if facts are always value-laden, not all sets of values are equally meritorious. Social outcomes in which children die in mass school shootings, in which people require expensive hospital resources to deal with the consequences of smoking tobacco, and in which the incidence of domestic violence is on the rise are all worse for society than scenarios where these are not happening. To say that the data represent values, not facts, is equivalent to arguing that the values that prefer no children dying in school shootings are equivalent to the values that prefer children to continue to be at risk in this manner.

Second, government interventions certainly do have an effect on society, and different interventions produce different outcomes, as the various national responses to the COVID-19 global pandemic illustrated vividly (Lau et al. 2020). Given then, that government intervention can result in particular outcomes, and that some outcomes are better for society than others, it stands to reason that some interventions – in other words, policies – are better for society than others. That being the case, there is merit in trying to find out which policies produce which outcomes, and further advocating for policies that improve society.

The Hierarchy of Evidence

A second argument contends that advocates of evidence-based policy insist on an unreasonable hierarchy of evidence, where some forms of knowledge are given more authority than others.

Certainly this hierarchy is pervasive in the health sciences, where data from randomized controlled trials are placed at the top, followed by systematic reviews and meta-analyses, then studies based on observed correlation, then qualitative data from case studies, then expert opinion (Elamin and Montori 2012). Critics argue that evidence-based policy is impossible when perfectly valid data from qualitative studies, especially interviews that reveal the lived experience of people closely affected by a policy issue area, are discounted, discarded, or dismissed (Khosrowi 2019; Lancaster et al. 2017).

Like arguments refuting the existence of evidence, as described above, arguments objecting to a hierarchy of knowledge are making claims about the ability of those in positions of power to use appeals to evidence as a means of suppressing opposing voices. The difference between the two is that the latter set of arguments admits to the existence of objective evidence, but protests that some forms of evidence (notably, quantitative data) are unfairly magnified at the expense of other forms (namely, qualitative data). This is a valid concern, especially in an era in which statistics and other forms of quantitative data are somewhat fetishized. At the same time, research that is based on small numbers of individuals recounting their experiences from personal memory – useful though it may be for some specific purposes – cannot be as generalizable as research that spans large numbers of individuals across broader populations. Rather than arguing for the credibility equivalence of various kinds of data, it might be more accurate (and more helpful) to argue that different studies can make contributions to knowledge in different ways. I will return to this point in the next section.

Policy is Political

Probably the most common argument critical of evidence-based policy is that policy can never be based on evidence because policy itself is inherently political. Facts and evidence may exist, but they are inconsequential in the policy making realm, where the dynamics of politics determine the outcomes of public debates. Policy decisions are, according to this point of view, mainly about settling differences between rival political interests, assembling coalitions, garnering majority support, and other political activities – not about designing and implementing the "best" policy strategy based on scientific evidence. Evidence-based policy is not possible, according to these authors, because rational-logical problem solving is just not how public decisions are made (Cairney 2016; Décieux 2020; Fleming and Rhodes 2018). A "two communities" imagining of research and policy is also common here – but these authors take the position that the gap is too wide to be bridged (e.g. French 2018).

However, authors arguing that evidence-based policy is impossible because policy is political almost never offer an alternative solution. "Politics", even in the most democratic of countries, does not operate in a perfect pluralist liberal utopia, in which all voices have equal say and the biggest groups representing the most people rule the day while still completely preserving the rights and safety of minorities. Rather, it is a highly problematic maelstrom in which things like wealthy partisan benefactors, elite boys' school chum networks, powerful lobbies, media-based influencers, ideologues who set agendas and manipulate the public, illiberal culture war baiting, far-right microparties holding the balance of power, and so on, control decision making and cause widespread suffering and inequity. Surely improvement is possible. Evidence-based policy may not be a panacea, but those who argue that "policy is political" are avoiding the tougher questions about how else we should address the pervasive failings of modern democratic governance.

Rules Do Not Extend Across Individuals

A slightly more obscure fourth argument contends that evidence-based policy is by definition impossible, because for every policy problem there can be no single solution that works for every individual. The best that can be achieved is a policy that will be beneficial for some people, but not all – and may in fact be harmful to some others. From this point of view, evidence-based policy can never be implemented in actual practice. Instead, policy based on evidence about whole populations is applied as a default, and case-by-case exceptions are made as necessary. The argument is that this is not really evidence-based policy at all – it is case-by-case judgement, which is the opposite of evidence-based policy (Anjum and Mumford 2017; Bal 2017).

WHAT'S MISSING?

Scholarship on the use of evidence in policy making has become so focused on the specific points of contention outlined above, that scholars have lost sight of the bigger research questions. Are we, as scholars and as citizens, generally satisfied with public policy decisions in advanced democracies? How can decision making be improved? Who is responsible for effecting this improvement? In situations where politicians feel they cannot follow the recommendation that evidence suggests, how could they determine a "second-best" solution? We cannot begin to answer these questions without giving attention to two key issues, which have been mostly avoided by the bulk of scholarly writing in this area to date.

Administration and Politics

As discussed above, some of the arguments relating to evidence-based policy focus on administrative aspects of the policy process, while others target the political, but none adequately accounts for both. The vast majority of analyses use the term "policy maker" without elaborating on who that might be. Does this include administrators as well as politicians? Is a conservation scientist working for the Department of Environment the same kind of policy maker as a Minister of Natural Resources? Most of the writing on evidence-based policy is silent on the difference between these types of actors, instead lumping them together as anonymous members of the "policy" community, which is seen as being collectively responsible for decision making.

In reality, the distinction is highly significant. If the people who use evidence to inform decision making are not identified, then it is impossible to determine how evidence can be used better. Knowledge translation, for instance, may be a useful strategy to target public sector research scientists, but it may be entirely inappropriate in the context of departmental chief executives. Improving policy capacity may help with planning and implementation within a department, but it may have little effect on decision making at the ministerial level. On the other side of the debate, arguments that policy is inherently political do not account for public sector activities in which huge numbers of public servants in non-partisan roles either make decisions under predetermined bureaucratic rules and processes or craft advice for senior administrators or political decision makers.

Instead of attempting to capture the entire policy decision making process under a single label, it may be more realistic to recognize that public policy comprises multiple processes, roles, and dynamics. Public sector science agencies, like Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation or the Canada Space Agency, spend significant budgets on research and development, most of which is geared toward public policy applications. Planners and project managers working in government departments make administrative decisions in the delivery of public services like roads, schools, and health care. Regulators, for instance in the European Commission's Department of Health and Food Safety, create and enforce rules that govern industry and protect citizens. Internal auditing and review agencies, like the United States' Office of Management and Budget, provide advice and conduct evaluations of existing government programs. Political actors, such as elected officials but also including senior administrative executives who may be political appointees, make decisions that may be influenced by partisan forces, political ideology, strategies to win votes, or other dynamics. Judiciaries affect policy by interpreting laws in ways that constrain public decision making, and litigating through the courts is yet another way to influence the direction of public policy (Gerston 2010: 52–53).

I do not mean to imply that some aspects of policy decision making are more evidence-based (or conversely, more political) than others. Likewise I am not suggesting that these activities are completely discrete or that they fit together neatly like pieces of an engineered device. There are numerous ways for the various parts of policy decision making to overlap, operate in isolation, or contradict each other. The point is that policy decision making is a massive undertaking, activated by huge resources of personnel working in numerous roles, and constrained by multiple simultaneous dynamics – including both administrative rules and processes and political or partisan considerations. Any analysis of "evidence-based policy" would have to specify what aspect of "policy" the author wishes to examine, and the discussion would have to be tailored to that activity. Analyses that group all parts of the policy process under "policy making" – as many currently do – are not contributing much to the debate.

Accumulation of Knowledge

A substantial amount of scholarship on evidence-based policy is devoted to debating the superiority of one particular form of knowledge over another. Doleac (2019) for example, argues for more randomized controlled trials and places them at the top of the hierarchy of knowledge. Deaton and Cartwright (2018), on the other hand, provide an exhaustive review of the limitations of randomized controlled trials. Lancaster et al. (2017) argue that, in their research area of drug policy, an emphasis on quantitative data privileges elite observers with no firsthand knowledge of drug abuse and crowds out the voices of actual drug users, whose lived experience might better inform policy. Conversely, Breunig (2018: 73) cautions against anecdotal reports, and instead defines evidence as "quantifiable information pertaining to the costs and benefits of a policy".

The crucial fact that these authors have not acknowledged is that different research methods produce different kinds of information and are rarely in competition. Randomized controlled trials are good for demonstrating causality and also for quantifying average effect – but they are not at all useful for determining the personal experience of the people receiving the intervention. Average effect is important for many policies, because it allows for a quantification of costs and benefits: if the policy is rolled out across a population of x million people, and it

costs y dollars per person, and produces z outcome, it may be possible to use this information to calculate some form of value in money terms. Qualitative interviews with recipients of the intervention, like drug users in the example given above, can give an in-depth account of how people experience the intervention personally, which is a kind of detail that a quantitative assessment of effect through a randomized controlled trial cannot provide. These two different forms of information can be combined to produce a fuller picture of a policy's outcomes on society.

Politicians may find it convenient to brandish single studies supporting their viewpoints, as if that is all it takes to settle a debate. More accurately, knowledge is an accretion heap that has material added to it piecemeal, and at varying speeds. Individual studies should be interrogated for errors and omissions, beyond the academic peer review process, and evidence of a particular effect or outcome can build up as multiple analyses are logged and added to the corpus of knowledge, in a process Pawson (2002) calls the "realist synthesis". Single studies are rarely conclusive in any meaningful sense.

CONCLUSION

All of the arguments in support of and critical of evidence-based policy have merit. Too often, however, they are written in needlessly adversarial tones. Instead, these arguments can, and should, be made to work together.

Good research is critical. However, values, prejudices, and biases must be identified, and normative prescriptions recognized for what they are. Quick answers are unlikely to appear; instead, knowledge builds up over time, and the results of individual studies should be questioned, investigated, and verified or refuted by further scholarship. Different forms of knowledge and different methods of collecting data can be constructively combined to produce fuller pictures of policy-relevant phenomena.

Furthermore, public policy is a complex, multifarious endeavor that comprises many different activities performed by numerous actors in varying roles. Some of these actors and activities are administrative, and some are political, and they will use information in diverse ways. There is no single strategy for improving the use of evidence in policy making. Communicating research will work in some contexts, whereas organizational change will be necessary in others. Still other aspects will require lobbying efforts, public education, or media campaigns.

It is possible to bring all of these points together to form a single narrative. If we are interested in improving outcomes in society, we must recognize that it is possible to improve the system that uses public intervention to influence these outcomes. Better information, and better use of information, are both achievable, and can contribute to better outcomes. However, this will necessarily only happen as smaller pieces, addressing various different aspects of a policy problem, and aimed at different public sector activities and processes, are put together constructively rather than combatively.

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