

Evidence and Policy Making: The Evaluator's Contribution

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Questions

1. How are policy and evidence related?
2. What implications are there for policy makers, and what policy makers are asked to do?
3. What does this mean about the need for expertise in the evaluation of evidence?
4. Why do evaluation reports so often end up languishing on a shelf?
5. Is there a possible value-add evaluators might provide?

Policy, evidence and policy makers

A story about baby DVDs ...

- Question: Does a baby learn language well from baby DVDs?
- Answer from some research: “No” (Zimmerman, Christakis, & Meltzoff, 2007)
- Big business. Baby Einstein DVDs expected to earn \$1 billion for Disney by 2010
- Big business AND early childhood implies a potentially important issue for policy makers

A litany of difficult issues

- the outbreaks of SARS, foot and mouth disease and CJD;
- climate change;
- planning for an avian influenza pandemic;
- managing water resources;
- balkanisation in Europe;
- terrorism;
- persistent poverty;
- illiteracy;
- innumeracy;
- the uptake of fallout from Chernobyl into the food chain

Query:

If a policy maker went to look at the evidence on these, or other important issues, what state of affairs might they find?

The gaps,
irreconcilabilities,
inadequacies
and general screwiness of

Evidence

Evidence

- Is messy and difficult
- Is one of the best things we have: 'What matters is what works'
- BUT is isn't, and can't be, the only thing which goes into policy making

- Evidence-*informed* rather than evidence-*based* policy
- EVIDENCE +
 - Ideology
 - Need
 - Community acceptance
 - Available skills to implement
 - After-cost gain

The situation?

Messy and difficult for the policy maker,
and possibly something that presents
an opportunity for evaluators

My third question:

What does all this mean about the need for expertise in the evaluation of evidence?

Knowledge-in-depth vs. in-depth knowledge

Meta-knowledge versus expert knowledge

Two examples:

- Early childhood
- Cognitive gymnastics and schooling

and so...

What about evaluators?

What are the risks?

[T]he idea that evaluation is atheoretical and can therefore be done without reference to theory about the domains in which it works ... is not absurd. A great deal can be done using a combination of deductive logic and a set of social-scientific and statistical tools. But it follows, first, that professional evaluators often do not make use of helpful theory in the domains where they work, usually because they neither understand nor are aware of it, and, second, they are unaware of the theoretical assumptions they build into evaluations. (Arnold, 2005, p. 35)

The ability to assess the quality of evidence available is a fundamental prerequisite for informed policy-making. A number of different initiatives aimed at assessing the quality of evidence have been developed as examples of “brokering”. Brokerage agencies vary in type and can be designed to **increase effective communication regarding the research and policy interface, evaluate proposed changes and policy recommendations, and assess the implementation of these programmes.**

(Paraphrased from Burns & Schuller, 2008)

The challenge

Strengthening and marketing
our
knowledge-in-depth

The gain

Growth in what we can deliver
for our policy maker clients

House of Commons Science and Technology Committee

There will be many situations in which policy is primarily driven by factors other than evidence, be they political commitments or judgments (eg the minimum wage), moral standpoints (eg stem cell research), or urgent responses to circumstances or policies on which there is little empirical evidence to go on. If evidence-based policy making is to retain credibility, it is essential that it is not abused

Where there is an absence of evidence, or even when the Government is knowingly contradicting the evidence—maybe for very good reason—this should be openly acknowledged. (HoCSTC, 2006, p. 47)