

# Applying theories of policy processes to evaluation: the example of evaluating Australia's National Drug Strategy

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the utility of theories, frameworks and models of policy processes for understanding the nature of the evaluation/policy nexus, and for maximising the likelihood that evaluation processes and products will actually contribute to the development of sound social policy. We argue that people evaluating policies and their implementation—especially large, complex social interventions—will benefit from applying a policy lens to their work. Doing so can provide an entry point to the evaluation, help set boundaries, and contribute to evaluation design.

The policy theories that are available include the systems model, the stages heuristic, the rational/comprehensive model, the bounded rationality model, institutional rational choice frameworks, the incrementalism model, the multiple streams model and the advocacy coalitions model. Each can contribute to understanding Australia's National Drug Strategy and potentially contribute to its evaluation.

We conclude that policy theory provides to evaluators insights into the policies that they are evaluating that would otherwise remain hidden. Furthermore, it potentially contributes to focusing the evaluation, interpreting the findings and enhancing evaluation utilisation.

## **Purpose**

This paper explores the utility of theories, frameworks and models of policy processes for understanding the nature of the evaluation/policy nexus, and for maximising the likelihood that evaluation processes and products will actually contribute to the development of sound social policy. It addresses scholars' assertion that 'There is nothing as practical as a good theory' (e.g. Pawson 2003).

## **The use of theory in research and evaluation**

Evaluators are increasingly recognising the special issues involved in evaluating complex, multi-faceted social interventions (a book addressing this topic specifically is under preparation: Schwartz, Forss & Marra forthcoming). Glouberman and Zimmerman's (2002) conceptual work in this area has had significant impacts, and their differentiation between simple, complicated and complex problems and interventions has been taken further by those seeking to modify standard program logic approaches to more adequately address the issues involved in evaluating large scale social interventions (e.g. Rogers 2008). Australia's National Drug Strategy (discussed below) has many of the characteristics of a complex intervention, including self-organisation, emergent properties and uncertainty owing to the operation of feedback loops: changes that occur in one part of the complex system can create unpredictable changes in other parts. This complexity is one of the reasons for giving attention to the usefulness and role of theory in evaluating such interventions. The complexity

means that approaches to evaluation that have been developed for relatively small, simple programs may not apply particularly usefully in these situations.

In discussing policy analysis, Parsons (1995, p. vxi) differentiates ‘analysis in and for the policy process’ from ‘analysis of the policy process: how problems are defined, agendas set, policy formulated, decisions made and policy evaluated and implemented’. The second approach, analysis of the policy process, is our focus. It can be implemented without reference to policy theory or, alternatively, theory can be applied explicitly as a tool for deepening understanding. We argue that applying policy theory to policy evaluation provides an entry point for the evaluator’s work. It has the potential for enhancing understanding of what happened in a complex intervention, what was planned but did not eventuate, unintended consequences of the intervention, goal creep, the level of implementation fidelity, and so on. We appreciate, however, that policy evaluation is an intensely practical activity, with many practitioners having little appreciation of the social science theory that potentially illuminates both evaluation and the contexts within which it is undertaken. Rarely does an evaluation proposal or final report reveal the theoretical underpinnings of the endeavour. Green, writing from a health promotion perspective, argued that

...relatively few research and evaluation reports document fully the theoretical analysis underpinning the development of programmes and exactly how that analysis was translated into action. Even fewer provide a rationale for the selection of theoretical models. Greater transparency about these issues in publications would be of immediate relevance to practitioners, and also contribute to a more general understanding of the process of theory selection and utilization (Green 2000, p. 126).

### **An overview of policy models**

In the discipline of policy studies we find a number of theories, frameworks and models that have potential to enhance understanding of how policy is made. These are some of the most prominent of them (key sources include Birkland 2005; Howlett, Ramesh & Perl 2009; Kingdon 2003; Sabatier 2007):

- The original 1960s *systems model*: ‘A model of policy-making in which [the] public policy process is seen as the product of a system that processes inputs, such as issues, pressures, information, thereby producing outputs, such as laws, regulations, or other statements of policy’ (Birkland 2005, p. 201).
- The *rational/comprehensive model* assumes that policy decisions are made rationally with the aim of maximising social gain and on the basis that all required information is available and considered.
- The *bounded rationality model* posits that people engaged in policy activity act as rationally as possible within the bounds of their capacities and resources. These bounds include lack of time, too much or too little information, and the limits of people’s information processing capacity.
- The *incrementalism model* argues that people engaged in policy activity build on their existing information, particularly their knowledge of what worked (or failed) in the past, rather than seek out and attend carefully to new information.
- The *multiple streams model* suggests that problems get on the agenda and solutions are found when three ‘streams’ combine, namely the politics stream, the policy stream and the problem stream. Their combining creates ‘windows of opportunity’.

- The *advocacy coalitions model* draws attention to the policy communities that operate within particular policy domains, and the power of advocacy groups, the members of which share common values and beliefs.

As with models generally, they are not intended to be prescriptive or predictive. Instead, we see them as tools for understanding how policy is made in a particular context and, importantly, as frameworks for describing a particular set of policy activities and potentially for developing strategies for bridging the evaluation/policy divide.

### **Australia's National Drug Strategy**

We are a team, led by Dr Mary-Ellen (Mel) Miller of Siggins Miller, that evaluated the 2004-09 phase of Australia's National Drug Strategy (NDS). The Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy, the peak decision-making body for the NDS, received the report on the evaluation earlier this year (2009) and has authorised its public release, although that had not occurred at the time of writing. We will therefore not discuss here the findings of the evaluation or other components of the report. Instead, we reflect upon the application of policy theory to evaluating this type of complex national strategy, illustrating the issues from observations about the NDS.

The National Drug Strategy has been operating for over two decades and has changed only incrementally over that period. Its core mission, minimising the harms caused by drugs (both legal and illegal) in Australian society, has remained consistent over that period. Also stable has been the partnership approach in which the health, criminal justice and education sectors work together, as do the government, non-government and private sectors. The core of the harm minimisation strategy is characterised as follows:

The principle of harm minimisation has formed the basis of successive phases of Australia's National Drug Strategy since its inception in 1985...

Australia's harm-minimisation strategy focuses on both licit and illicit drugs and includes preventing anticipated harm and reducing actual harm. Harm minimisation is consistent with a comprehensive approach to drug-related harm, involving a balance between demand reduction, supply reduction and harm reduction strategies. It encompasses:

- supply reduction strategies to disrupt the production and supply of illicit drugs, and the control and regulation of licit substances;
- demand reduction strategies to prevent the uptake of harmful drug use, including abstinence orientated strategies and treatment to reduce drug use; and
- harm reduction strategies to reduce drug-related harm to individuals and communities (Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy 2004, p. 2).

How could the various policy models described above contribute to evaluators' understanding of the NDS as a policy framework?

- *Systematic policy analysis*, being one step in the stages heuristic (Althaus, Bridgman & Davis 2007), has been a feature of the NDS for many years. Typically it entails researchers, public service policy personnel and practitioners collaboratively engaging in environmental scanning, assessing problems from a number of perspectives, identifying policy options and evaluating their relative strengths and weaknesses. This rational process has been frequently used, illustrated by the development of new sub-strategies under the NDS such as the National Cannabis Strategy 2006-2009 (Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy 2006) and the National Amphetamine-Type Stimulant Strategy 2008-2011 (Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy 2008).

- The substance abuse field is characterised by multiple types of evidence. Understanding of the content and processes of the NDS could be enhanced by assessing the degree to which the policy is based on a *rational/comprehensive approach*. Such an analysis would identify the extent to which sound research-based evidence was used as inputs to policy making, along with the quality of the assessment of its applicability in a given situation. It would look for what appear to be irrational policy decisions or implementation modalities (i.e. those that fail to reflect current research evidence covering such things as the efficacy and effectiveness of interventions), seek to understand why this has occurred, and the consequences, as illuminated in the policy models discussed here. This reflects, in part, the observation sometimes made in the substance abuse policy field that ‘what is popular does not work, and what works is not popular’. (School drug education is an example, in that it has widespread support but is usually (though not always) ineffective, and sometimes counter-productive.)
- Understanding the *bounds of rationality* would provide a range of useful insights from policy theory for an evaluator assessing the NDS as a policy framework. It would look for pressures to maintain the harm minimisation approach, challenges facing policy players accessing and using research evidence, the intensely political aspect of drugs policy, the international context, the challenges of change management, and so on.
- The *incrementalism model* would draw the evaluator’s attention to the relative stability of the policy settings of the NDS over two decades, despite significant changes in political and social contexts and in patterns of drug use and drug-related harms. It would lead to an examination of the significant pressures that have been applied to introduce sweeping changes that would abolish the harm minimisation approach (e.g. Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2007) and develop an understanding of why these pressures have not led to significant changes in the nature of the NDS.
- The *multiple streams model* is particularly useful for an evaluator seeking to understand how the NDS framework was established in the 1984-1985 period, how awareness of the problems, combined with political pressure for change and an understanding of the solutions available, converged to create a window of opportunity for introducing a radically new drug strategy. In more recent times, the policy evaluator could apply this model to understanding how, in 2008-2009, the emphasis in drugs policy shifted nationally from illicit drugs to alcohol, particularly binge drinking among young people.
- Finally, the *advocacy coalitions framework*, in combination with the *policy networks model*, would be found useful in understanding the roles of pressure groups (both within the political and administrative arms of government and external to them) in shaping drugs policy. The policy evaluator would seek to identify the policy brokers both within and outside government who negotiate with the advocacy groups, including policy people in central government agencies and in peak NGOs.

The conclusion of this analysis of how policy models can be applied by the policy evaluator to understanding this complex social intervention, and hence enhance the quality of its evaluation, is that a range of policy models helps explain how national drug policies have been made, and the multiple drivers of their implemented. They can also illuminate the reasons that evaluation research sometimes fails to influence policy activity. This reflects the fact that the NDS is multifaceted and that, as a consequence, different components can be usefully understood through different policy

lenses. For some purposes a single model would have high explanatory power, whereas in other cases combining two or more would be more helpful. (We are familiar with examples where bounded rationality interacts—and sometimes conflicts—with the multiple streams that shape policy processes and outcomes.)

### **Conclusion**

A variety of policy models, frameworks and theories exist which can be useful to the evaluator for seeking to understand the determinants of policy, how it is made, the drivers of implementation, and its performance. The discussion above also illustrates that some are more useful than others for a specific evaluative purpose. Viewing the evaluand through a policy model lens can contribute to evaluation design. For example, a logic model mapping exercise that incorporated policy theory would produce something different from that derived from a more traditional approach.

We are not arguing, though, that the reports of policy evaluations written for clients by evaluators should necessarily articulate what policy models the evaluators have found the most useful for understanding a particular situation. As with other aspects of social science knowledge, this potentially forms part of the tool kit that the evaluator uses analytically but does not need to report upon. In other cases, however, it may provide such a powerful explanatory tool that an explicit exposition will be helpful. We hypothesise that people familiar with policy theory could read virtually any evaluation of a given policy and its implementation and identify the policy perspective that was adopted. This would assist in assessing the strengths and limitations of the evaluation strategy, and the utility of its findings for further policy development.

*Key issues for evaluators that arise from this discussion include the following:*

The kinds of policy theory discussed here provide evaluators with ways of seeing policy that enhance their understanding of the policy environment within which they are working. Potential therefore exists for evaluation practitioners to increase the usefulness of their work through greater systematic use of policy theory to aid understanding of the evaluand.

Using policy theory can help the evaluator decide the focus of the evaluation, that is, to set boundaries that direct attention and resources to areas of data collection, data analysis and reflection that will be most productive.

Evaluators can use policy theory to help interpret the findings and provide a framework for reflecting upon the implications of the data collected.

Evaluators can make use of policy theory to maximise the likelihood of evaluation utilisation (and to illuminate the reasons that evaluation research sometimes fails to influence policy activity):

- If the policy environment is one conducive to a relatively comprehensive/rational approach, then standard evaluation strategies that entail developing evaluation questions and indicators, and using the ensuing evidence to answer the questions, should be effective.
- In contrast, an evaluation strategy that assumes a high degree of rationality in policy activity where this is not prominent is unlikely to be productive. Instead, evaluators need to attend to the issue of bounded rationality: understanding the bounds within which policy activity takes place. This is essential if we want the evaluation findings and recommendations to be adopted. Evaluators need to draft their reports, including findings and recommendations, and negotiate them, in a manner that reflects the realities of the policy environment into which they will be injected.

- In some cases only minor, incremental changes to policy and its implementation are possible. Recommendations for sweeping changes in such circumstances will be of no utility.
- Where advocacy coalitions are influential, even determining the nature of policy and its implementation, the evaluation can usefully include change management processes that encompassing working with the advocates so that they feel they have made significant inputs into the evaluation process and contents, understand the evidence base underlying the evaluation's findings and recommendations, and have a degree of willingness to contribute, as appropriate, to the implementation of the findings of the evaluation.
- Evaluation utilisation can also be enhanced when the evaluators gain a deep understanding of the multiple streams influencing the policy domain within which they are evaluating, and develop strategies for harnessing the power of converging multiple streams. Evaluations of large, complex social interventions can be designed in such a manner as to bring together the political, policy and problem streams to facilitate the utilisation of evaluation research.

We conclude that evaluators' use of theories, frameworks and models of the policy process in designing and implementing evaluations, drafting evaluation reports and interfacing with evaluation stakeholders, can be helpful. Applying policy theory (even if it is not discussed in the evaluation report) can assist evaluators to produce findings and recommendations that stakeholders in the evaluation will find helpful. Furthermore, it has potential for enhancing the likelihood that the evaluation processes and products will be used, thus contributing to the development of sound social policy.

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