## RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

# Evidence-Based Policy-Making: The Elusive Search for Rational Public Administration

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*Evidence-based policy making has been criticised as a revival of the 'rationality project' in which democratic politics is regarded as rent-seeking and a deadweight loss to society. In response, the evidence-based policy movement has failed to articulate a defence in which the rationality animating the policy process is situational and contextual rather than unique and authoritative. This article traces the movement's motto – 'what works?' – to the American pragmatist movement, whose influence on Harold Lasswell and New Labour in the UK was substantial. This article argues that the ambition for evidence-based policy-making should be seen in terms of the transition from a single, unique and universal rationality toward multiple rationalities that vary according to different policy making contexts. Interpreted in such terms, evidence-based policy making can avoid several of the main criticisms, and offer strong potential to contribute to solving policy problems.*

**Key words:** *evidence-based policy*; *rationalities*; *implications for policy makers*

The ambition for evidence-based policy-making (EBPM) has acquired prominence in Australia since 2007. In an address to senior public servants in 2008, the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd observed that, 'evidence-based policy making is at the heart of being a reformist government' (Rudd 2008, quoted in Banks 2009:3). The Australian Public Service Commission (2007) and the Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government Administration (2010) – aka the 'Moran Review' – have also highlighted the need for better evidence in policy-making. The Chairman of Productivity Commission, Gary Banks (2009:2) argues that: 'It is as important that we have a rigorous, evidence-based approach to public policy in Australia today as at any time in our history'.

EBPM is understood here as a normative theory of policy choice, according to which policy decisions should always be based on the best available evidence. In turn, this theory supports a number of different practical models aimed at finding processes, tools, methods and data to help provide evidence for governments to make better decisions. Although this analytical starting point is only one among many available interpretations and conceptualisations of EBPM, it allows discussion of evidence-based policy making to be abstracted from any particular jurisdiction or time period; notably the initiatives of the New Labour government in the UK after 1997. The ambition to base policy on evidence reaches back at least as far as the origins of the policy sciences; as Weiss et al. (2008) point out it used to be called 'knowledge utilization' in the 1960s and 1970s when the US Federal government, as part of the War on Poverty, started funding substantial social science policy research.

There is a vital but often underspecified aspect of EBPM: how do those involved in the collective endeavour of making policy discuss, locate, analyse, evaluate and weigh the evidence that is available? This article argues that some notion of rationality is an essential component of any answer to this question. Most of the academic literature conforms to

the view of Nutley and Webb (2000:25) that EBPM '...fits well with a rational decision-making model of the policy process'; however the precise nature of rationality in EBPM is neglected (eg Davies et al. 2000; Sanderson 2002).

The introductory part of the article briefly considers the option of 'thin' rationality and limited policy-maker agency in EBPM; in the widely-used Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) technique for example, evidence is assumed to 'speak for itself'. Whilst there are obvious attractions in this formula approach to policy-making – in terms of giving the theory of EBPM the ability to deliver determinate recommendations for policy-makers – the elision of CBA and EBPM has served to ferment many of the criticisms of EBPM as elitist and undemocratic, technocratic and modernist, and a revival of the 'rationality project'; which Stone (2001) describes as the minimisation of political agency in policy making on the grounds that politics is variously 'pure' rent-seeking, a dead-weight loss to society or a factor increasing the transaction costs of implementing the correct policy.

The main contribution of the article is in the subsequent sections, which argue that a broader and more convincing rationality in EBPM can be developed by recognising that its motto – 'what matters is what works' (Tony Blair, many times) – can be traced to the renaissance of philosophical pragmatism in the social sciences. Pragmatism can support the notion of EBPM even in situations of ambiguity of values and uncertainty over means.

The relationship between policy context, rationality and evidence is then explored using a pragmatist perspective. Four specific policy rationalities are set out for the purpose of investigating the different roles of EBPM. The argument is developed that the reach of EBPM is far broader than its exclusive association with technical rationality implies; and this recognition could help support the development of a rich array of models of EBPM in Australia in which public judgement in assessing different types and level of evidence is essential.

## In Search of Rational Policy Making

The idea of rationality has been central to Western intellectual culture since the Enlightenment. The concept of rationality in policy making has its clearest expression in Lasswell's vision of the 'policy scientist for a democracy' (Lasswell 1948; 1951) and in the many variants of the policy cycle model: here policy-makers systematically collect and utilise the best scientific evidence to indicate the seriousness and causes of a problem and then recommend the best alternatives based on the scientific evidence and normative beliefs about desirable ends.

Almost since Lasswell's work in the early 1950s, however, the concept of rational policy making has been regularly condemned as variously elitist, undemocratic and modernist (Farr et al. 2006). An important consequence of the conceptual difficulty of rational policy making in a democracy has been the separation of policy analysis from political analysis, mirroring a distinction in Lassell and Kaplan (1950: xi-xix) between the manipulative and contemplative standpoints in the policy sciences. Policy analysis qua manipulation engages in rigorous, specialised and what it sees as 'value free' policy work of the form 'to get X, do Y'. EBPM tends to be associated with this form of analysis for policy. The contemplative focus on the process of democratic inquiry – the political analysis of policy making – sees rational policy emerging from public processes of reasoned argument, and sees the ambition to democratise policy making as underpinning rational policy making. This is seen in the rise of academic work on deliberative policy analysis and – in practice – with schemes for participatory, consultative and citizen-focussed governance.

EBPM is associated with identifying the best decision to take; with many critics imputing an exclusively substantive rationality to EBPM. This is often set out in the following general terms: policy making is determined by evidence of the means of policy alongside fixed, unambiguous policy ends. In such terms the evidence is assumed to 'speak for itself' in a manner consistent with the structuralism in rational choice models where homo economicus

follows a logic of choice (Shackle 1961; 1992; Bromley 2008a; Bromley 2008b; Hay 2004). Critics ask: if ends are given and the means to each end are reasonably well-known, then is this a choice at all or is it better described as calculation?

In one sense, this is not a problem for EBPM advocates: as an ideal decision theory it is concerned precisely with identifying the substantively rational action, the unique best thing to do. Instead, the problem for rationality in EBPM is a procedural one: identifying the process to arrive at substantively rational policy. In this way, many of the champions of EBPM introduce an implicit separation of politics as irrational from evidence-based policy analysis as rational, with the former as the antithesis of the latter. Political commitments may limit the evidence collected or policy processes may be characterised by decision-based evidence making. As Schneider and Ingram (2003:165) put it: 'Many policy analysts and evaluation researchers believe there are instrumentally correct answers to instrumentally framed problems; hence, compromises, negotiations, or "pandering" to public opinion only produce policy problems'.

However, for critics of EBPM the absence of substantive rationality, of one best thing to do, due to the inevitable indeterminacy of the policy world renders the entire notion of EBPM implausible. The argument is made that evidence rarely produces unambiguous policy recommendations. Dewey ([1929] 2005) describes how the 'quest for certainty' has proved forlorn, and that the social sciences will never reach a stage of development of being able to produce determining evidence free of uncertainty, risk and doubt. There is a rich and long tradition of work in policy studies detailing how policy actually emerges from interplay of evidence, norms and power (eg Majone 1989; Stone 2001; Weiss 1979; Sanderson 2002; 2009). Lindblom (1990) makes a similar point in his argument that we should avoid substantive rationality being seen as superior to procedural rationality in public policy making, that social science evidence is not able to support consistently a substantively correct answer to policy problems that should be privileged over what democratic processes may deliver in terms of policy choice.

## Evidence Bases for Multiple Rationalities?

The ambition in this article is to establish some progress in developing a plurality of evidence-bases to accommodate two well-known characteristics of policy-making arenas – degree of ambiguity over values in the policy process and degree of uncertainty over how the world works. Both suggest that the idea of single, unique and universal rationality in policy processes should be abandoned in favour of multiple types of rationality appropriate to particularly policy making situations and contexts, in which different forms of evidence can perform various functions. A simple typology of four possible rationalities is presented below.

Whilst in no sense claiming that these four contexts exhaust the concept of rational policy making, they allow the notion to be considered more broadly than the top-left quadrant 'technical' means-end or substantive model of rationality. Each of the remaining rationalities (political, procedural and transactional) involve various ways of reasoning at different stages in the process of agreeing what it is rational to do in that context. Estimating policy outcomes – the standard tool of rational policy analysis – is neither sufficient nor necessary for rational policy making. For example, there is no single, unique political rationality appropriate to the context of certainty over process but ambiguity over values: we reason in this context about ends, we exercise reason about combinations of propositions and beliefs, we agree on rational inferences about how the world works, what it is prudent to agree to do, we reason about the perception and recognition of institutions and so on.

Importantly, however, rejecting the idea of a rock-like foundation for rational policy does not mean that 'anything goes' or that rational policy making is anything we agree it to be. There may be different interpretations and different explanations of the same thing, but in the process of policy inquiry earlier interpretations

can become, in the face of further evidence and more searching questions, less able to be justified. One of the attractions of pragmatism in policy studies is its stress on the process of justification of policy ideas and beliefs, not in terms of approximation to reality but rather how useful they are.

**Pragmatism in Policy Making**

This article argues that EBPM can be rescued from its exclusive association with the top-left of figure 1 through engaging with the pragmatist revival in policy studies. Pragmatists start with a world that is complex, indeterminate and interdependent (Sanderson 2009; Bromley 2008a; Bromley 2008b). The pragmatist approach to policy states that it is only in the context of acting that policy-makers can establish 'what works'. Crucially, 'what works' covers both the ends and means of policy. Pragmatists reject the strict separation of means and from ends, insisting instead that policy making is about choosing between different reasons for action. The point is that ends do not exist outside of the context of action and therefore cannot be stated ex ante as standards for the appraisal of policy options. Policy makers first need to know – through learning and action – what we might plausibly achieve. Those sorts of beliefs provide reasons for action. The identification of correct decision is something which occurs after a consensus has been reached about what it is best to do. The emergent choice is the best choice by virtue of it having been worked out. In alternative terms, what matters is what works in resolving practical problems. As Joas (1993:130) puts it:

> the fundamental premise of pragmatism's theory of action. . .does not conceive of action as the pursuit of ends that the contemplative subject establishes a priori and then resolves to accomplish; the world is not held to be mere material at the disposal of human intentionality. Quite to the contrary, pragmatism maintains that we find our ends in the world, and that prior to any setting of ends we are already, through our praxis, embedded in various situations.

The role of pragmatism in the history of policy studies is not widely acknowledged, an impor-

tant exception is work by Douglas Torgerson (1985; 1995). However it is not difficult to its influence in Dror (1971), Schon (1979) as well as in many of the works of Lasswell and Lindblom. Recent work such as Schneider and Ingram (2003), Coglianese (2003), Farr et al. (2006), Fischer (2009), and Sanderson (2009) have revived interest in this tradition in the study of policy making, and pragmatism is enjoying a revival in social sciences more generally. Its influences on the New Labour movement in the UK are manifold; one of its ex-cathedra canons was laid out in the Labour Party's 1997 election manifesto: 'New Labour is a party of ideas and ideals but not of outdated ideology. What counts is what works. The objectives are radical. The means will be modern' (1997:4). This statement of pragmatism has an obvious ancestry in the work of Dewey.

For pragmatism, rationality of the process is prior to substantive rationality. This is consistent with some important scholars of policy making; for example, Lindblom and Cohen (1979), Lindblom (1990) and Wildavsky (1979) argue that the key element of procedural rationality is not how close it approximates to substantive rationality but is rather a quality of the interactions involved in collective decision-making. For these scholars, the selection of a satisfactory choice procedure is not a purely cognitive exercise but rather relies on interpersonal relationships and communication with critical elements such as debate, consultation, deliberation. In EBPM terms, actors exchange view on data, model settings, and system boundaries and try to reach a joint interpretation of the evidence. The result of the structured process to reach consensus is what Priemus et al. (2008) call 'negotiated knowledge'.

*Political Rationality*

Although scholars have sometimes relaxed the strict informational and cognitive assumptions of rational choice in the renewed interest in the idea of bounded rationality (eg Jones 2001), the underlying structural ends and means rationality still pertains widely in the social sciences and policy schools. But what happens if there

**Figure 1.** Degree of ambiguity/conflict over goals

Degree of ambiguity/conflict over goals



is ambiguity about our goals or values, either individually or collectively? Although not explored here, the influence of Jurgen Habermas's communicative rationality on the rise of deliberative policy analysis has been substantial: this stresses communication rather than individual cognition as important in reaching settled goals and agreeing the process to achieve those goals. Here policy rationality comes out of the communicative context but appeals to competence in communication between citizens and policy experts.

The rise of the EBPM movement over the last decade has coincided with a swathe of proposals for public participation in policy and also the network governance discourse that places stress on partnership, joined up, multi-stakeholder engagement. For Schön (1979) and Schön and Rein (1994), works with strong pragmatist influences, the difficulties in handling intractable social and moral controversies have more to do with problem setting than with problem solving, 'more to do with ways in which we frame the purposes to be achieved than with the selection of optimal means for achieving them' (Schön 1979:255). The framing of problems often depends upon metaphors which generate problem setting and set the directions of problem solving. Metaphors enable us – usually automatically and unconsciously – to make a 'normative leap' from evidence to recommendations, from fact to values, from

'is' to 'ought'. Importantly, such critical interrogation of policy-making does avoid the need for valid and reliable evidence located in a broad and sturdy analytic framework. Far from it: by resisting the exclusive association of the EBPM with the top-left quadrant of Figure 1, the challenge of pragmatist inquiry in renewing an older, critical spirit of policy studies is both to dissect analytically as well as facilitate the redirection policy-making processes. Evidence is central to both enterprises.

Policy controversies may seem intractable; and the evidence *per se* does not resolve them. Instead, they require what Schön calls 'frame restructuring'. The response to frame conflict is by 'constructing a new problem-setting story, one in which we attempt to integrate conflicting frames by including features and relations drawn from earlier stories' (Schön 1979:270). This insight has inspired a rich seam of post empirical policy analysis (eg Fischer 1998; 2003). Schön and Rein's work advocates bridging contending frames through a new, overarching one, a process of frame restructuring. A necessary condition for frame restructuring is 'double vision': 'the ability to act from a frame while cultivating awareness of alternative frames' (Schön and Rein 1994:207). This process of re-framing is theoretically under-specified in their work, but valid and reliable evidence is an important component of the

inquiry which defines alternative frames and common points of reference between frames.

The ideal of consensus looms large in the pragmatist approach to policy analysis. Coglianese (2003) asks whether pursing this ideal is a realistic and effective way of achieving important social goals. In the 'strong' version, consensus is not simply engaging in deliberation and gaining public input in order to establish a more informed policy position but rather represents the objective of firm agreement among all participants with the expectation that this agreement will form the basis for public policy. This demanding standard may inhibit participants from raising issues, leading to unanimity arising from conformity rather than deliberate agreement; there is also the potential for 'groupthink' where some agents involved group processes become reduced in their capacity for independent and critical input. In a weaker version of consensus, unanimity is not required. For example, Bardach (1999) talks about sufficient consensus, an adequate degree of political support to ensure that policy can be effective and move forward. Whilst consensus cannot mean the avoidance of conflicts or denying differences, Rescher (1993) argues that it does not require full agreement as basis for public policy but rather that the overall extent to which agents are seriously dissatisfied is minimised. In other terms, we are searching for 'reasonable' dissensus as the mark of procedural rationality (Keulartz et al. 2002).

Essential to pragmatism is not the strong version above but rather the opportunity for any policy decision to be subsequently revisited, to be evaluated regularly, and to be open to change. Different evidence bases are essential in supporting and encouraging dialogue without consensus; EBPM should be seen as central in supporting lines of communication across policy frames that can survive policy decisions. Continued participation is the key to policy-making rather than consensus. Many of the vehicles of EBPM – where social science research has impact through workshops, policy roundtables, advisory committees, select committees, commissions of inquiry and so on – survive and work without consensus. Procedural rationality is characterised by policies produced by fair, open, competitive political process, not instrumental impacts alone. Political rationality does not require to consensus, but more weakly that all 'losers' in a policy decision continue to enjoy the opportunity to 'fight another day'; an opportunity in some part guaranteed by lines of evidence based communication.

### *Practical Rationality*

With its strong empirical bent, pragmatism has always had had strong links with the development of the social sciences, particularly in the US eg Hodgson (2001) on the origins of 'old' institutionalism in economics, and also Dahl's early work on pluralist theory in political science (see Dahl 1989 for a summary). As discussed above, pragmatism starts with the position that considerations of context and purpose are intrinsic to the determination of what it is reasonable to do, and that a significant shortcoming of the technical conception of rationality has been the presumption that one can deduce, a priori, conclusions that will be compelling or true across all circumstances.

Dewey ([1925] 2008) argued that evidence does not provide determining rules for policy action but only hypotheses for intelligent problem solving. To be practical enough to inform or support policy making practice, evidence available through research must be about what works at the moment or in the near past; policy expertise should be premised on the limits to the robustness and validity of evidence across time and space. Dewey recognised that neither research nor professional action can or should only focus on the most effective means to bring about predetermined ends. Instead, policy researchers and practitioners should also engage in inquiry about ends, and this is inextricably bound to the inquiry into means. Crucially, systematic inquiry into what is desirable is not only experts but broader discussion and deliberation. In a similar vein to Dewey, Head (2008) argues that there are three lenses or kinds of knowledge in EBPM: technical; practical/professional; and political. Despite the problem of their incommensurability,

the three are essential to, and should be equally legitimate within, the process of EBPM in the context of practical rationality.

### Transactional Rationality

In situations of a plurality of values and uncertainty about the means to achieve those goals, how is policy made? A context of uncertainty and difference is the backdrop to Lindblom's influential 'muddling through' view of public administration. The primary question for the pragmatists is how to respond to uncertainty. A premium is placed on the development of flexible critical habits and practices that will enable to cope with contingencies. They advocate practical judgment that shares many of the characteristics of Aristotle's *phronesis*. Dewey argued that today such practical judgment that can only thrive in a democratic community; but what about policy making communities in which there is a strong differences between actors? While pragmatists stress on critical debate and community of inquirers, Lowi has described public policies serving distributive, regulative, redistributive and constitutive functions in the political process. We are left with an ineluctable characteristic of policy making: in the exercise of public authority, some citizens may benefit and others may lose. The key question for this article is whether evidence should have some part in that authority. The argument here is that a public policy in conditions of strong uncertainty, some appeal to transactional rationality (what we can also call reasonableness) is central.

As noted, the working out of a consensus in policy making is essential to the pragmatist approach. The central challenge of pragmatist policy making is to reconcile different policy frames: a multitude of expressions of the *status quo* and normative visions of a better future. A policy frame establishes the platform for policy debate; the language used, the types of power and influence, and the credibility of different kinds of evidence. Policy frames inform the way political actors collectively put forward particular views of the specific issues and how they rationalise policy action. Without substantive rationality, there is no unique correct or right policy frame, instead there may be any number of them; there are multiple rationalities in policy making. To return to Head's (2008) point; in contexts of multiple policy frames, and values on which these rest, a form of policy evidence that is respected and widely accepted in one context may be rejected in another. However, this variation is consistent with policy frames requiring public justification in terms of some basis in evidence. The task for policy-making is to focus on the various reasons for disparate frames with different evidence bases and make progress is through reasoned debate, stressing through critical policy analysis how issues have been framed as policy problems, the contextual conditions that shape how the issue is socially constructed, and the relevant valid and reliable evidence bases.

### Implications for Policy Making

Most definitions of policy instruments refer to some version of the ends-means model of policy making, that is regarding policy instruments (means) and policy objectives (ends) as separate entities. This is generally labelled the 'rational policy making mode', where decisions on policy instruments are seen as choices of means in goal-directed problem-solving processes. The actual selection is considered a neutral, even scientific enterprise of rational policy making. It is here that scholars generally located EBPM (Davies et al. 2000; Nutley and Webb 2000; Sanderson 2002; Head 2008). Better evidence about the consequences of different policy instruments helps policy makers to make better policy decisions. Policy-making is a constrained optimisation problem, consisting of a budget constraint and a series of objectives ranked by preference/importance. Whilst there are some technical issues about relationship between number of instruments and objectives, the stability of relationships means-end over time, and interdependent ends, these are tractable through evidence.

There is a widespread critique of the means-end or policy cycle view of policy making. In terms of EBPM, pragmatism

provides a specific critique of the assumptions made concerning goal formulation. Although unacknowledged, Majone (1989:115) makes a pragmatist argument when he claims that the ends-means separation is often false since 'policy goals are often defined in terms of the available means' and 'when goals are vague or ambiguous and outcomes difficult to measure, the instruments used acquire a significance that goes well beyond their purely instrumental value'.

The policy analyst's language of objectives being traded off against each other to maximise welfare in society, often misses the existence of underlying rationalities held by different network actors and the extent to which they compete. Inspired by the policy frames literature, this article has described rationality as an internally coherent, standardised model of thinking and reasoning about particular policy issues. Rydin (2003:76) discusses the notion of alternative environmental rationalities by arguing that 'the search for legitimation is an inherent part of the policy process' and 'such legitimation takes the form of the demonstration of rationality'.

The acknowledgment of multiple rationalities means that there is no one superior rationality, but rather alternative arguments can be put forward as a consequence of different assumptions, values and criteria. Demonstration of rationality is a rule of the game for participating policy actors to observe. The standard for this is the appealing but vague one of *reasonableness*. This is a minimal requirement is important for the pragmatist approach to policy because it avoids the ascription of relativism: that all policy positions are equally rational and that the concept of rationality does not provide any leverage in differentiating good policy from bad policy. A demand for public rationalisation from policy actors advocating policy is essential for the generic concept of rational policymaking to have any substance. Similarly, Majone (1989:13) emphasises the need to justify and 'provide acceptable reasons for one's choices and actions'. In situations where different policy advocates and public opinion may not agree or even share a common policy frame,

EBPM can help maintain communication across dissensus. As a theory, this requires an explicit openness to different types of evidence, recognition of problem of incommensurability, and sustained engagement with institutions that facilitate deliberation across difference.

## Conclusion

The theoretical development of EBPM needs to accommodate the notion of multiple rationalities. In this article, the notion of 'rationality' whilst related to, is also importantly distinct from, policy objectives as in the means-end view of the policy cycle. Rationalities and the general policy ends discussed in this article are seen as related in the sense that a particular rationality is underpinned by and dependent on one or a set of ends. For example, 'economic rationality' is based on efficiency as an evaluative criterion. However, different rationalities may encompass variables that are not strictly policy ends. For example, issues such as the role assigned to the state and appropriate governance modes will enter many policy making frames. Furthermore, a particular criterion need not be exclusively linked to a particular rationality. It may also be difficult to find rationalities exclusively underpinned by one particular criterion. Indeed, the policy making process is often about reasoning across different rationalities so there must always be some potential overlap for a consensus to be reached or communication maintained across difference. Rationalities, for the purposes of EBPM, are therefore about larger patterns of arguments, which although more strongly tied to one or a few criteria than others cannot be reduced to those.

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