

Problematizing the 'evidence-based' policy paradigm

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‘Evidence-based policy’ & ‘implementation science’

- Efforts focus on production of ‘gold star’ evidence and the generation of ‘policy relevant research’
- Evidence-based policy scholarship - ‘bridging the divide’
- Increasing uptake of ‘evidence’ in policy
- Implementation science - promotes the integration of evidence into policy and practice, and understanding how social contexts shape the delivery of ‘evidence-based interventions’

Problematic ontological assumptions?

‘Evidence-based policy’ assumes:

- i. That a particular kind of knowledge (called ‘evidence’) is inherently useful and superior for policy decision-making;
- ii. That the thing we call ‘evidence’ is fixed and stable;
- iii. That this thing we call ‘evidence’ sits outside of the policy process thus perpetuating the ‘two communities’ dichotomy

‘Implementation science’ approaches tend to imagine:

- i. That ‘interventions’ remain fixed and stable, with the same effect potential wherever they are implemented;
- ii. That ‘policy problems’ are self-evident, out there, waiting to be solved

These approaches fail to capture the interrelationship between science and the social in the *making* of these phenomena.

Rather than taking ‘evidence’ and ‘interventions’ as a fixed and stable objects, what if we thought about how these ‘things’ are enacted through policy processes and implementation practices?

Theoretical resources

- Carol Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to be?' (WPR) poststructuralist approach to policy analysis
- The 'ontological turn'
- Science and technology studies (STS) approaches (Law, Mol, Latour)

Performatively constituting 'evidence' as a 'tool' for 'use'

- One 'performance':
 - The enactment of the notion of evidence as 'tool-like'; as a thing to be 'used'
- What might this performance imply?

‘Evidence’ as a ‘tool’ for ‘use’

“They *used the evidence* that I had collected in the best way that they possibly could to put their policy position paper out there and then *they used it* in the way - I mean they are expert advocates so *they know how to use research evidence* in particular kinds of ways and *they used my research evidence in the way that they knew would get them what they aimed for.*”

(Interview 21; Researcher)

‘Usefulness’ and instrumentality

“I work with the researchers, with community based organisations, to *get the evidence that’s needed*. And I know sometimes their evidence might be different to what I need. Because I have an understanding of how things work, and how decisions are made, and *what sort of evidence will be considered*, and the weighting of different evidence bases. So for me, it’s presenting as strong a case as possible.”

(Interview 23; Policy maker)

‘More useful’ and superior knowledge

“*You can’t make policy decisions based on interviews of ten people* and these are the quotes that they provide. You know, you need to look at it from a population perspective, and epidemiology comes into it. *Numbers do play a part of it.*”

(Interview 23; Policy maker)

“I think that *they’re seeking a certain kind of knowledge* from this, they want a certain kind of evidence and it was just the kind of evidence that we just could not provide them because of the budget, because of the design of the [study], and *the evidence that they wanted was not qualitative interview evidence, they want some key bits of what they might think of as hard data* that they can take to their Director.”

(Interview 21; Researcher)

Room for other knowledge(s) to be ‘made as’ evidence?

“There were a number of older women, who were the family - the parents - of dead drug users who were responding [to a survey], [telling] their stories of their experience of overdose and how it had shaped their lives many years afterwards. Their kids had died when they were adults and they'd grown old and they were still – it was really moving, and the impact – *I don't know if this is a policy thing* - but the impact on individuals of losing loved ones, it can never be – it gets really hard to – *it's a really big thing, and it's really hard to capture that as a piece of evidence to inform policy*. We do trials, and we do the things that we've talked about.”

(Interview 16; Clinician)

So where does this leave us?

- Challenges the assumption that a particular kind of knowledge ('evidence') is inherently useful and superior for policy decision-making
- The thing we call 'evidence' is enacted and legitimised in policy processes
- 'Evidence-based policy' is a social as much as a technical phenomenon; it is a *political* enterprise
- Focus shifts from 'how do we achieve this thing called "evidence-based policy"?' to 'what is this thing called "evidence-based policy" that we hope to achieve anyway?'

A critical social science of implementation science?

- New work... What might this mean for how we think about ‘interventions’?
- How interventions are made to ‘work’ depends on the relations between multiple local actors and social systems
- Need to focus on:
 - i. the processes through which evidence is made;
 - ii. how local actors and social systems shape the translation and constitution of interventions implemented;
 - iii. the effects of intervention implementation.
- Need to bring questions of ontology into ‘evidence-based policy’ ‘implementation science’

Thank you

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