

Policy Evaluation

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Using Empirical Evidence

The analysis of social policy is often 'positivist', at least in the methods it uses.

Positivism has been the subject of withering criticism, particularly in sociology

Arguments about 'social reality' are now more likely to be made in terms of 'critical realism'

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Empirical Evidence & Social Policy

Facts are seen through particular perspectives; the received wisdom of one generation becomes the misconception of another

In a field like social policy, theory is meaningless without some reference to empirical problems; but equally, empirical issues acquire their meaning for us only because we are able to relate them to some kind of theoretical understanding.

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Empirical Evidence & Social Policy

Aristotle describes alternative forms of knowledge: **episteme**, science or generalised knowledge; **techne**, or applied knowledge; and **phronesis**, or practical wisdom.

Social policy depends heavily on phronesis – precepts drawn not from reason, but from experience. But....

The voice of experience is not always the voice of wisdom.

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Evaluating Social Policy

The first thing that one needs to do in order to evaluate a policy is to establish some sort of criterion by which it can be judged.

The sorts of criteria which are most often used are fairly straight forward:

- ✓ Does this policy meet needs?
- ✓ Does it have other benefits?
- ✓ Is it worth what it costs?

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Summative evaluation

Summative evaluation is the evaluation of a whole policy or process, focusing on the impact of policy.

A summative evaluation reviews each of the later categories to see whether or not the operation of policy is consistent with the aims.

The impact of policy is most usually assessed by asking whether the policy has done what it set out to do.

But summative evaluations may also take into account unintended consequences

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Formative Evaluation

Formative evaluation is undertaken at intermediate stages in the policy cycle to see

- ✓ whether guidelines have been followed
- ✓ whether an agency is ready to start work
- ✓ whether an agency is being properly managed
- ✓ whether contract terms have been complied with.
- ✓ process evaluation

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Methods of Evaluation

The central question behind many assessments of policy is whether a policy or an agency delivers what it is supposed to deliver. Evaluation research is research which is done to assess the value of a programme or activity.

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Indicators of effectiveness and the 'black box'

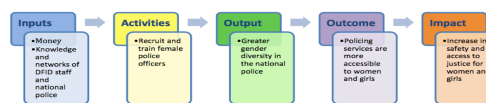
The simplest test of effectiveness is done by considering indicators of what the activity has done,

and comparing these indicators with the aims.

The available data is usually classifiable in terms of inputs, outputs and outcomes.

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Figure 1: An abbreviated theory of change for a specialized gender desk project



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Benchmarking and performance indicators

Indicators of performance are used to test progress, and to achieve specified targets or standards.

A benchmark is a standard, used to check an agency's performance against an ideal

Standards relative to other agencies; or standards within the same agency over time.

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Action research

Action research is primarily used in policy-making.

Researchers are both examining processes and, at the same time, making decisions about them.

The basic model is one of constant experimentation; researchers try out a range of methods, see what works and what does not, and try to select likely approaches.

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Control trials

Control trials compare outcomes in different situations, so that differences between the environments can be distinguished from the effects of the policy.

One option, the randomised control trial, works by assigning some subjects to a treatment group and others to a control group which is not treated.

The approach is most commonly used in medicine for the trials of new pharmaceuticals.

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User Perspective

The stated aims of a policy can implicitly override the concerns of users

Users' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the service, their perspective on quality and performance, and their experience of delivery are part of the standard assessments of outcomes.

Complaints from users are an important source of information, and close examination of critical incidents makes it possible to identify what has gone wrong, and how to set it right.

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Approaches to evaluation

The literature on evaluation has been characterised by two main approaches.

On the one hand, there has been a methodology dominated by quantitative, scientific, non-normative analysis.

On the other, there is a qualitative, naturalistic, descriptive approach.

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Table 19.1 Policy analysis in practice

Key stage	Indicative questions to consider while resolving the issues in the light of:
Aims and goals	What is the public service or agency supposed to do? How will we be able to tell if they have achieved their aims?	The policy process Strategic objectives
Assessing the situation	What is happening? What is the evidence? What do stakeholders and key actors have to say? What is likely to happen in the future?	Aims and values
Methods	What is being done, and how? What are the constraints? What resources are there? Are the methods consistent with the aims? What happens if nothing is done? What might go wrong?	Aims and values The assessment of the situation
Effectiveness, efficiency and equity	What are the costs? What are the benefits? Are the methods cost-effective? How can costs be reduced, and benefits increased? Who gains, and who loses?	Aims and values Methods
Implementation	Is the way things are done appropriate to the task? Does the process meet the criteria and standards applicable in the field? What is going wrong? What else might go wrong?	Aims and values The assessment of the situation Methods Effectiveness, efficiency and equity
Evaluation	What impact does the policy have? What do those affected think? Has the policy met the criteria established to meet its aims?	Aims and values The assessment of the situation Methods Effectiveness, efficiency and equity The process of implementation

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