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Evaluation, Science and Pragmatism

practitioner stances towards evidence-based policy

Abstract

In Aotearoa New Zealand, as elsewhere, the evidence-based policy movement has been one of the most visible recent influences on how policies are described, discussed and debated. It is now commonly taken for granted that good policy work involves using evidence, and that it is important to increase the influence of data and research uptake during policy development. Promoting evidence-based policy has even been used as the raison d'être for the founding of a political party. However, the voices and perspectives of practitioners themselves are often missing from conversations about evidence's role in policy work. Drawing on my doctoral research, this article presents three stances that frame how policy workers approach evidence in their practice.

Keywords evidence-based policy, policy work, policy practitioners, interpretive analysis

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Aotearoa New Zealand has enthusiastically adopted the language of evidence-based policy. Promoting knowledge transfer between research and policy communities, increasing interest in using 'big data' to guide policy decisions, and orienting public research funding towards applied policy goals are all international trends that have been seen here (Head and Di Francesco, 2019; Lofgren and Cavagnoli, 2015). Prominent reports such as those from the prime minister's chief science advisor have set out cases and strategies for government agencies to enhance their use of evidence. Formal initiatives, such as the establishment of departmental science advisors and the Policy Project, have worked to increase evidence use within the public sector.

And yet, what this means for the day-to-day practice of officials is largely missing from discussions, both here and internationally. Promoting evidence-based

policy is simply taken to mean making 'evidence' more prominent, without exploring what that means for practitioners. In this vein, literature tends to focus on structural barriers and solutions, and treat 'evidence-based' as a characteristic of systems and outputs rather than – as in other fields and disciplines – considering it as a mode of professional practice.

This article is based on my doctoral research into practitioner engagement with evidence in policy, and starts from the

and professions, that originated with and was inspired by evidence-based medicine.

While advocating for more data and research use has been a recurrent theme within the policy world, the modern movement specifically referred to as evidence-based policy is generally agreed to have emerged in the United Kingdom in the 1990s (Parkhurst, 2017; Sayer, 2020). Specifically, the 1997 election of Tony Blair's 'New' Labour marked the point at which evidence became a distinctive part

philosophies such as New Public Management (Boaz et al., 2019; Head, 2008; Newman, 2017).

Three broad perspectives characterise explanations of evidence-based policy's appeal: professionalisation, politics and power. Professionalisation positions it as part of the public sector maturing: a recognition of the advantages using research and data brings to policy development and a desire to reduce the perceived influence of special interests and similar factors in the policy process. Politics emphasises the rhetorical value of claims to evidence for politicians and pressure groups, both in claiming legitimacy for their agenda and in attacking those of their opponents.

The power perspective explains evidence-based policy's appeal through a critical social lens. Labelling a policy as evidence-based or claiming it lacks evidence can be used to mask or sidestep its social, political or cultural dimensions (Parkhurst, 2017). Shifting the grounds of debate from the desirability of the policy to the strength of the evidence can also lead to policy processes becoming focused on technical arguments about specific details, assumptions or methodologies. This can marginalise the influence of people without sufficient social and cultural capital to participate in such arguments. Similarly, power can be exercised through defining acceptable and sufficient evidence standards. For example, Sharman and Perkins (2017) highlight how opponents of climate change measures have used claims around evidence quality to prevent policy action.

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point that neglecting the attitudes and perspectives of practitioners will lead to only a partial picture of how evidence is embodied within the policy world. The first part illustrates some complexities of evidence-based policy, discussing its emergence, appeal and critiques. The second part then presents stances toward evidence-based policy adopted by policy practitioners, as identified through semi-structured interviews with officials.

The evidence-based policy movement
Evidence-based policy is not a specific policy technique. Instead, it is a movement or agenda which broadly advocates for improving linkages between policy work and high-quality information sources: for 'putting the best available evidence from research at the heart of policy development and implementation' (Davies, 2000, p.366). In this sense, it is the latest example of a long tradition, which includes the post-war policy sciences model, the 'science of society' social reformers of the Victorian era, the Polizeiwissenschaft of 16th- and 17th-century cameralism, and even the very emergence of the modern (Western) state. In its contemporary guise, though, evidence-based policy is part of a broader 'evidentiary turn' in many fields, disciplines

of government language. The party's manifesto explicitly linked use of evidence with a reformist agenda; the 1999 *Modernising Government* white paper and subsequent publications established its philosophy as 'what matters is what works' (Nutley and Webb, 2000); and in 2000 ministers promised that social science research would no longer be 'irrelevant' to policy – provided that such research accorded with the government's preferences (Hodginkson, 2000).

However, what was initially characterised by Solesbury as 'a peculiarly British affair' (Solesbury, 2001, p.6) quickly became part of global policy orthodoxy. Several reasons have been proposed for this rapid spread, including technical developments, better data and – somewhat paradoxically – growing distrust of expert advice (Powell, 2011; Solesbury, 2001). The movement was also commonly linked to arguments that the public sector must be more productive, competitive and accountable. Given that many evidence-based policy advocates associated using evidence with making services and officials more efficient, some have connected its expansion to the growing influence within government of market-oriented and private sector-influenced approaches and

A contested phenomenon
As Biesta notes, 'it is difficult to imagine an argument against engagement with evidence' (Biesta, 2010, p.492). And yet the evidence-based policy movement has occasioned a possibly surprising level of internal and external debate over even such details as its name (e.g., 'evidence-based' versus 'evidence-informed'). Importantly, those engaging critically with the evidentiary turn do not reject the principle that research and information should inform policy work. Instead, they are best thought of as critiquing the features of evidence-

based policy as a (relatively) coherent movement, highlighting the complexity of evidence use and challenging the types or strength of claims often associated with it (Huntington, Wolf and Bryson, 2019).

One of the most contentious aspects of evidence-based policy is the privileging of certain types of information, methodologies or analysis. A key debate in the field concerns what is often referred to as the 'medical model': establishing evidence hierarchies, usually topped by the results of randomised control trials, to govern what evidence is suitable for policy processes.[1] The evidence-based policy movement has become more inclusive over time, acknowledging that epistemological complexity and methodological pluralism are relevant considerations in policy work, recognising that what constitutes high-quality evidence can vary from case to case, and replacing linear hierarchies with identifying what research is appropriate in particular policy contexts (Nutley, Davies and Hughes, 2019). However, more traditional or hardline approaches continue to command significant sway. For example, Oliver and Pearce (2017) claim that few still argue for the primacy of randomised control trials, yet these were recently lauded as 'rapidly becoming the new normal' in public policy (What Works Network, 2018, p.4). This suggests that, ironically, the more nuanced approach to 'what counts' as valid evidence in evidence-based policy scholarship may not be informing how evidence-based policy is understood in practice.

This issue is particularly salient in Aotearoa New Zealand given both the position of mātauranga Māori (knowledge generated through indigenous forms and methods: see Broughton and McBreen, 2015), and the enshrinement of tino rangatiratanga within article two of te Tiriti o Waitangi. Tauri (2009) points out that the evidence-based policy movement has a Eurocentric tendency, often privileging forms of knowledge without acknowledging their cultural basis. This marginalises both indigenous epistemology and the types of community-focused and emancipatory research required to address the needs of Māori. Similarly, the implication of tino rangatiratanga that Māori should have authority in determining

'what works' for Māori sits uncomfortably with traditional evidence-based policy's assumption that policy responses can be determined by universalisable evidence that can be applied by anyone. Both these points raise the question of who should be responsible for determining the role of evidence in developing policy to meet Māori needs, and who is the authoritative voice in establishing appropriate forms and standards for using it.

of the terminology of evidence-based policy, but revealed a strong commitment to the value of evidence when actually discussing their practice.

For my PhD I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 18 senior officials from three agencies involved in aspects of skills policy. Transcribed interviews were coded and analysed to identify the interpretive repertoires used to engage with the concept of evidence-

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Exploring practitioner stances towards evidence-based policy

In my doctoral research I have focused on how policy workers – the government staff who develop policy and advice – engage with the concept of evidence-based policy. In most fields, evidence-based approaches are treated as forms of professional practice. Evidence-based medicine, for example, does not occur when a doctor simply follows the 'research cookbook', but rather when a clinician combines their expertise, patient circumstances and preferences, and insights from evidence to reach a clinical decision (Haynes, 2002).

In policy, however, there has been a surprising lack of scholarship on practitioner experiences and perspectives (Oliver, Lorenc and Innvaer, 2014). Discussions either address overarching theoretical issues or focus on systems and structures that influence research uptake, meaning that we have little understanding of how officials interpret being told to operate in an evidence-based way. This also means that we may be missing important nuances in how practitioners view the position of evidence within the policy world. For example, many participants in my research were superficially dismissive

based policy (see Huntington, Wolf and Bryson, 2019). Participants were drawn from three broad groups: advisors and analysts developing strategic policy; managers overseeing teams of such officials; and officials focused on developing and generating evidence within agencies (and who worked closely with analysts and advisors, sometimes under shared management structures). Participants were not presented with a specific definition of what the term 'evidence' referred to; such definitions were intended to emerge from the interviews.

This uncovered three key repertoires of practice (what working as a policy official means), three key repertoires of context (influences on the policy environment), and five key repertoires of evidence. Discussion of these repertoires is beyond the scope of this article; instead I present here a set of 'stances'. These represent natural recurring clusters of repertoires across practice, context and evidence, providing a coherent framework that integrates how participants constructed the work they did, the context for that work, and how evidence fitted into that world view. While some participants used a given stance more commonly than another, each

stance was present at some point during almost every interview. This fits with discursive psychology's position that people's understanding of phenomena is not fixed, but rather at different points they adopt different frameworks to serve different purposes (Jorgensen and Philips, 2002).

The evaluative stance

The evaluative stance frames evidence as a valuable input for developing policy, but emphasises that decisions and advice should stem from context-specific assessments made on the basis of professional expertise. The complexity of policy work means that practitioner judgement – involving a combination of analytic, experiential, relational and cultural capabilities – must take primacy: 'it's an adaptive world rather than a technical solution world' (Mark[2]). Evidence is framed as a supplement that can provide a starting point for practitioners' work, or an external reference point that supports reflection on ideas or arguments: 'the data or the research can't give you the answers, but it can definitely point you in a good direction or show some dangers or flaws you might not have thought of' (James).

The evaluative stance is associated with expansive views of what constitutes policy-valid forms of evidence. Participants adopting it referred not only to official data or research, but also the results of consultation, co-design processes and expert opinion (especially reflections on prior experience) as important sources of knowledge, with multiple forms needed to develop good policy. Importantly, this was not framed in terms of approximating a single policy truth through triangulation, but rather as about uncovering different ways of understanding policy contexts: 'one type of evidence will only give you one part of the picture, and to be honest when you look at multiple sources there are usually multiple pictures there too' (Lisa). However, using such information was often positioned as not being formally evidence-based; these sources were referred to as vital but outside the 'academic' or 'scientific' standards of evidence-based policy. Given this, a recurring concern was that the language of evidence narrowed the acceptable basis for policy advice and devalued key sources of information required for good policy conclusions.

The evaluative stance is also linked to a belief that many policy stakeholders, particularly key leaders and decision makers, did not fully appreciate the inevitable nuances and limitations of evidence. A common example of this was the 'magic number' metaphor: quantitative findings – such as returns on investment or estimates of automation-based job loss – taking on a life of their own and being used out of context or without appropriate caveats. In Michelle's words:

> Well, at the moment there's kind of a vogue for 'give us the one number'; you know, the sort of social investment stuff. People always like numbers; they tend to believe numbers, even if the way that you got to the number was total twaddle. I guess people that understand numbers tend to be much more dubious about the final result.

Dialogue, diversity and debate were also important themes. For example, when comparing experiences at two agencies, Rebecca described the organisation with a stronger evidence-based approach as being characterised by argument rather than consensus and by 'better conversations' between contrasting perspectives. Evidence-based work was couched in terms not of identifying truth or adopting the 'right' approach but of extensive discussion and 'a whole bunch of variety'. Similarly, she later referred positively to staff at one agency as having 'ding-dong arguments … about the best way to do stuff … at [previous employer] the people tended to sit at their desks and write papers to each other, rather than having conversations'. Deploying evidence through passionate and active debate was more likely to create good policy outcomes than supposedly dispassionate analysis.

The scientific stance

The scientific stance frames evidence-based policy as a way to remove distortions, biases and inertia in the policy process, in order to reveal correct (or 'most' correct) conclusions. Where the evaluative stance frames 'good' policy outcomes as determined by the professional expertise of the official, in the scientific stance it is the evidence itself that defines desirable actions and decisions. The role of the official is to ensure that policy decisions and settings reflect as far as possible the authoritative messages that can be derived from the body of available evidence.

This stance is associated most strongly with repertoires that position policy work as a technical, problem-solving activity. Reflecting Mayer, van Daalen and Bots' (2004) rational style of policy analysis, practice is seen as a primarily intellectual exercise involving the application of rigorous, disciplined thinking to identify 'right' and 'wrong' answers. In this light, evidence is seen as allowing an analyst to avoid distortions caused by personal bias, influence from vested interests and the like. Peer-reviewed research produced through standardised processes was framed as the most valuable form of evidence, especially 'academic' quantitative findings. This stance also often involved reference to system data as a vehicle for understanding

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and improving performance, reflecting a view that 'information is … one of the strongest agents of change in the system' (William).

A strong current in this stance was barriers and problems involved in deploying evidence. This often related to internal skills and resources, such as agencies not recruiting for or cultivating technical analytic capabilities among their policy staff. Another key aspect, though, was how external stakeholders reacted to using evidence. For example, Peter referred extensively to the problems involved in producing evidence that contradicts influential stakeholders' views, especially given the constraints on officials' ability to respond to criticism:

I think there is very much a suspicion of government, and a suspicion of any evidence that comes out of government, and a belief that it's used to attack the sector. [There's] an intrinsic belief that what the sector is doing is right, and that anybody who casts doubt on that is a pariah, and doesn't understand, and is trying to destroy it and all those kinds of things – which is not the case at all. And so I have spent a lot of my time kind of absorbing hate from various places.

This stance does not represent a technocratic caricature or naïve trust in data. Participants adopting it still recognised that there are unavoidable influences and limits on what can be practically implemented, and that information is often imperfect. But these were acknowledged with a tone of regret; an 'ideal' policy outcome is one that embodies what the evidence said, and having to take other factors into account is disappointing. As Mark stated when describing a major project: 'In the end it was really a very policy driven process which I guess was inevitable. But in a perfect world, in my perfect world, it wouldn't have worked anywhere like that.'

The pragmatic stance

The pragmatic stance focuses on the functional purpose of policy work: specifically that, on a day-to-day basis, practitioners are being asked to develop

policies that need to be implemented. This focus on the end point of policy work distinguishes the pragmatic stance from the previous two, in that it is concerned with evidence not as the basis for policy per se but rather on how evidence practically supports an official to present their advice and conclusions. It also often represented a descriptive rather than normative position: participants adopted it to explain how evidence *is* used, rather than how it *should* be used.

Accordingly, the pragmatic stance is closely linked to repertoires of policy

context, especially those that emphasise ministers and senior management as core influences on policy development. The preferences and capabilities of these figures were usually presented as driving how evidence gets used or the weight given to particular forms. This does not mean compromising on evidence quality or ignoring the results of evidence, but rather recognising that the persuasiveness or relevance of particular evidence types depends on the particular policy context or stakeholders. For example, many participants contrasted the fields of skills policy and health policy, noting that the different issues and 'players' involved meant that different forms of evidence were relevant to generating solutions.

Even more so than the evaluative stance, this stance stressed the partial nature of most evidence, and that the value of a given piece of data or research depended on how it could be used. Evidence that met rigorous formal quality standards might be of little practical value given a sector's pace of change or country-specific details of Aotearoa New Zealand. Conversely, flaws

or questionable assumptions might have to be overlooked in the greater interests of the policy agenda. A recurrent metaphor was 'trading off' the practical requirements of policy development against the types of evidence available, while James referred to this relationship as:

a kind of dance between politics and evidence. Realistically you have to say well, this is our space and these are the things we can and can't change. This is what we want to achieve. We're going to build on what we know from our

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data and our research nationally but also overseas international experience in this area that can be drawn from, and then our advice has to actually be useful for someone.

In some cases this stance incorporated a cynical edge, and it was when adopting the pragmatic orientation that participants were most negative or sceptical about evidence use in policy processes. For example, at one point Rebecca framed evidence-based policy as a way for officials to legitimise or delegitimise their work:

Basically, everyone in Wellington thinks they're doing evidence-based policy unless they disagree with what it is they're doing. [Laughs] … No one wants to think that there aren't good reasons for their positions, and people obviously think that what they're arguing for is the best thing to do, so they say that it's supported by evidence.

This draws attention to the use of evidence for not just external but also

internal justification: 'this work is evidence-based because "good" work is evidence-based and I do good work', or, conversely, 'I am being asked to do "bad" work and if it was evidence-based it would be good, so it must not be evidence-based'. The pragmatic stance does not, though, simply involve rejecting the notion of meaningful evidence use in policy or criticising agencies; it is still a frame by which practitioners engage with evidence in the policy process. It portrays evidence in essentially utilitarian terms: its value lies not in any inherent qualities, but rather in how a policy official can use it within a specific situation.

Conclusion

This article began from the position that, as it is the practitioner who ultimately determines how evidence gets used in policy work, understanding evidence-based policy requires a practitioner-focused perspective. This means taking what Noordegraaf (2010) terms a 'second order' approach, one which focuses on examining practitioners as agents who work as individuals, but within structures that shape and constrain acceptable behaviours and approaches. My research

has embodied this approach by exploring how officials interpret their own practice, the broader policy environment, and the role of evidence within it.

Practitioner viewpoints are not only of interest in their own right, but also have practical implications. For example, criticism of evidence-based policy as a distinct phenomenon (as opposed to the general idea of using information) was associated particularly strongly with the evaluative and pragmatic stances. Common critiques made by interviewees included that the movement was based on narrow conceptions of what constituted evidence, that it devalued debate and experience, and that advocates did not appreciate the realities of day-to-day policy work. At particularly cynical points it was seen simply as a slogan or window-dressing for agencies; what Pollitt and Hupe (2011) might term one of the policy world's 'magic concepts'. This suggests that the way the concept of evidence-based policy is described may resonate well with those who tend towards the scientific stance, but alienate other portions of our policy workforce.

The three stances identified above – and the repertoires that sit behind them –

illustrate the range of ways policy practitioners position not just evidence, but the distinct framing that is evidence-based policy. Within these stances are embodied different positions on understanding the contribution of evidence, definitions of value and practical influences. Exploring such issues, including articulating how evidence use relates to professional judgement and argument, or is defined through context, would seem a fruitful next step in advancing our dialogue on not just getting *more* evidence use in Aotearoa New Zealand's public sector, but understanding what *effective* use means and how it can be achieved.

Acknowledgements

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