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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Debating the politics of evidence-based policy

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The debate on the relationship between research and public policy has experienced a remarkable revival in recent years. Although many of the core issues and arguments have not changed, the nomenclature certainly has: in a previous era of scholarship (e.g., Caplan 1979; Weiss 1979; Beyer and Trice 1982), the subject was referred to as 'research utilization', but nowadays it is usually labelled 'evidence-based policy'. This is a subtle difference, but one that has important implications for how problems (and proposed solutions) are understood.

These three recent books (by Paul Cairney, Gerry Stoker and Mark Evans, and Justin Parkhurst) provide some excellent examples of the current state of the scholarship on this subject. Taken together, they offer a good platform for launching a discussion on evidence-based policy—and research utilization—because they largely agree on the basic assumptions that underpin the debates, even if they offer different prescriptions for what should be done. But more importantly, these books also demonstrate some of the missed opportunities to move the debate beyond the things that were said in the 1970s and early 1980s. While the literature is clearly expanding, the debates seem to have reached something of an impasse.

There are ways that this discourse can be advanced, both intellectually and practically. But before that can happen, the problem needs to be articulated better, and the key actors responsible for addressing the problem need to be identified. If progress is to be made, we will need a clearer picture of what we are debating and why we are discussing it in the first place—as well as a better understanding of who should be involved. At present, even in the best scholarship on evidence-based policy, these points frequently remain hazy.

2 | THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE DEBATE

Stoker and Evans, Parkhurst, and Cairney, like the wider scholarship on this subject, start with the same basic assumption: getting research to inform public policy is a challenge, because policy-making is political, not systematic. Decisions made in the public sector are the result of efforts to balance competing societal interests, resolve power conflicts, and appease groups with widely divergent values, not the end-point of a linear, rational, instrumental

exercise. Research evidence is just one influence on a complicated decision-making process, and not necessarily the most important one, either.

The authors further agree that anyone who demands that policy be more 'evidence-based' probably doesn't fully understand the political nature of policy-making. Parkhurst, in the preface to his book, argues that 'the vast majority of work on the subject has failed to engage with the political nature of decision making and how this influences the ways in which evidence will be used (or misused) within political areas'. Stoker and Evans write that the 'rhetoric can imply that choices are entirely technical but nothing could be further from reality in democratic policy making' (p. 21). Cairney is the most emphatic among these authors on this point: the evidence-based policy argument, 'that there can and should be a direct and unproblematic link between scientific evidence, policy decisions, and outcomes', is 'naïve' (p. 2), and advocates of evidence-based policy lack 'knowledge of key aspects of the policy process' (p. 4).

These authors (again, like the wider scholarship) also agree that there is a basic gap between those who produce evidence and those who use it for making policy decisions—although they disagree about the extent of this gap and what can or should be done about it. According to this shared perspective, researchers and policy-makers are so vastly different that any expectation of a direct link between research and policy is a fantasy. Researchers have an incentive to publish, not to influence policy. Policy-makers have deadlines that need to be met, and cannot afford to wait for the results of a three-year study that may not even target the specific policy problem they are looking to address. When the politics of policy-making is added into the mix, the gap appears to be so fundamental that it cannot be crossed by researchers (Stoker and Evans) or perhaps not by anyone at all (Cairney).

This perspective was made famous by Nathan Caplan in the late 1970s (Caplan 1979). At the time, it was referred to as the 'two communities' thesis. This label has fallen out of favour, but it should be noted that many scholars who say they are not taking a two communities approach still very evidently are (see Banks 2016, for example). Stoker and Evans adopt this approach explicitly, and so does Cairney, who writes that even if researchers spent more time and effort broadcasting their research, it 'could help some policymakers become more familiar with the work, but not more interested in it, or more able to understand it enough to know why it would be relevant to their aims' (p. 60). Parkhurst seems to be less enthusiastic about the two communities concept, but his discussion of the subject in chapter 2 and his support for knowledge brokering strategies and 'evidence advisory systems' (chapter 8) suggests a two communities understanding.

But this is where the agreement ends. The three books propose very different solutions to the problem. The contributors to the Stoker and Evans volume collectively offer an array of methods that social scientists can use to enhance social research or to make it more relevant for policy-making, such as the use of systematic reviews (chapter 3) or cluster analysis (chapter 9). They also describe some alternative techniques that decision-makers can use to incorporate research into public policy, such as co-design (chapter 13) and randomized controlled trials (chapter 4). Parkhurst argues that what is needed is a whole new framework for using evidence, or as he calls it, a system of 'good governance of evidence'—one that ensures that the use of evidence in policy-making is appropriate, accountable, transparent, and contestable. According to Cairney, scientists who wish to have their research influence policy need to learn to play the politics game, by framing 'evidence to fit policy agendas', 'forming coalitions with other influential actors', or exploiting 'windows of opportunity' (p. 129).

In summary: as in the broader literature, these authors agree that there is a divide between researchers and policy-makers, that promoters of evidence-based policy are misguided, and that in any case the political nature of public policy makes a direct link between research and policy unlikely if not impossible. Their three prescriptions for getting research into policy correspond to the three most commonly offered solutions: (1) make research, or at least package it, so that it is more useful for decision-makers (Stoker and Evans); (2) make efforts to institutionalize some form of knowledge transfer (Parkhurst); and (3) get political (Cairney).

3 | BUT WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

If it seems as if some steps have been skipped, it's because they have. None of these authors has given us a clear picture of the actual problem that evidence-based policy is meant to address. Yes, empirical studies seem to confirm perennially that policy-makers do not, on the whole, rely on academic research (Caplan 1979; Lester 1993; Belkhodja et al. 2007; Newman 2014). But why should this matter? Why do some people want to bring together evidence and policy at all?

Is the problem one of research utilization (or probably more aptly, research non-utilization)? In other words, should academics be concerned that their research is not being used to inform or influence public policy? Should they feel slighted, mistreated, ignored? This is the classic formulation of the problem: academics and other professional researchers spend vast resources and most of their time producing knowledge, much of which is potentially highly relevant for public policy, and yet policy-makers do not seem to be using it. There is a sense that 'knowledge worth producing is worth using' (Rich 1991, p. 320) and a desire to ensure that 'the social sciences matter' (Weiss 1980, p. 25). Academics who 'aspire to policy influence' need to find ways to get their voices heard (Mead 2015).

Or is the problem one of absence of evidence in policy-making? In this conceptualization of the problem, policy that is informed by research is inherently better than policy that is informed by other sources of information (such as ideologies, religious dogma, inherited prejudices, myths, or the will of powerful elites). There is no shortage of policy decisions that affect real people's lives: take, for example, the funding of medical services, the acceptance of refugees, investment in renewable energy generation, or whether or not to support rebel militias in foreign countries. Proponents of evidence-based policy argue that when these decisions are informed by research, the outcomes of the policies will be more successful, more sustainable, and will benefit more people (e.g., Chalmers 2003). Or perhaps more importantly, policy that is evidence based is said to be more likely to accomplish whatever policy goals the decision-makers are trying to achieve. This is sometimes known as the 'what works' agenda (Davies et al. 2000).

The difference appears to be semantic at first glance. In both cases, the obvious solution is to increase the quality and quantity of evidence in policy-making (and perhaps to improve the quality and increase the frequency of its use as well). However, the mechanism used to approach these solutions will be different, depending on how the problem is defined.

Framing the problem as one of 'research utilization' puts the onus on researchers to do more to make their research have an impact. While this perspective may be popular with university vice-chancellors and government funding agencies, it is problematic because it relies on academics—political outsiders with the wrong skills base, no institutional connections, and little strategic acumen—to act as the key players in ensuring that evidence gets used. The inevitable prescriptions for empowering academics to do this involve knowledge translation activities, packaging research to make it appear more useful, and having academics engage in politics—which is what Parkhurst, Stoker and Evans, and Cairney prescribe. The research utilization perspective also reinforces the two communities imagining of the situation, which, as I have argued elsewhere (Newman 2014; Newman et al. 2016), is deeply flawed and probably counter-productive.

On the other hand, framing the problem as one of 'evidence-based policy' does not require researchers to be the main proponents of evidence. If evidence is good for policy—that is, if it is true that more and better evidence, applied correctly, will improve policy outcomes and ultimately improve people's lives—then policy-makers should be the ones to ensure that policy is based on evidence. Presumably, the people who make policy have a responsibility to do it well. From this point of view, the debate is not just about how to get evidence into policy; it is also about who the policy-makers are (are we referring to administrative decision-makers? Policy area specialists within the bureaucracy? Judges? Legislators? Political executives?), how they can be supported to use evidence more, and what role might an informed, concerned public of citizen stakeholders play in demanding better decision-making.

As mentioned earlier, the suggestion that policy-makers ought to use research more instrumentally when making policy decisions is often argued to be 'a mistake, based on insufficient knowledge of the policy process'

(Cairney, p. 20). But this is only true under the research utilization perspective, in which researchers and policy-makers are two components of a closed system and where the ideal outcome is a 'direct link' between science and policy. It is true, as these authors argue, that public policy is a complex, political endeavour that requires the interaction of numerous (often non-cooperative) actors and the balancing of highly divergent sets of values, and that some kind of direct pipeline between research producers and research consumers is likely to be impossible. However, if it is also true that some policy decisions are inferior decisions, and that there might exist alternative policies that are demonstrably better, then it is reasonable to investigate how these inferior policies might be more systematically avoided. Imagining the problem as one of evidence-based policy, in which research has a role in making policy outcomes better (regardless of whether or not researchers are involved in the process), places the responsibility for improving policy on the shoulders of the policy-making system rather than on the researchers themselves.

And what is wrong with wanting to improve the policy decision-making system? The straw man that this literature draws out in every instance is that promoters of evidence-based policy are pushing for some kind of automated technocracy where 'evidence' dictates policy decisions. Parkhurst's example of drug treatment for male sexual dysfunction (pp. 19–20) is a case in point: according to 16 studies, Viagra works! Therefore it must become policy. I am unaware of any serious observer who would make this argument. Cairney's assessment (chapters 3 and 4) that these idealists exist and that they come predominantly from the health and environment policy areas is ultimately unconvincing. Even the most rationalist academic analyses do not argue for the removal of human decision-making from the policy process. All analyses agree that the policy process is fundamentally—and legitimately—political.

What academic promoters of evidence-based policy do argue is that some policies are better than others, that it is in some cases possible to determine (or at least suggest with a low probability of error) that some decisions will result in outcomes that will benefit society more than the outcomes of other decisions, and most of all, that there are some persistent flaws in the system that allow inferior decisions to appear more often than they should. These flaws in the system, according to this argument, can be repaired by finding ways to use research to inform policy decisions within the policy-making process. Researchers are an important part of the knowledge supply chain but they are not, according to this perspective, the main actors responsible for improving the quality of public policy.

Cairney's case study on tobacco control, which is intended as an example of how the complex political system prevented a direct link between research and policy, is actually a persuasive argument in support of evidence-based policy. This section of the book (pp. 67–72) demonstrates very effectively that tobacco control in many countries was a slow, incremental, brokered series of policies that required major cultural attitudinal change, lobbying, coalition-building, changes in government, changes in economics, and other dynamic forces that have nothing to do with evidence, and which in any case took decades to appear. Cairney's argument is that this is the normal way that policies get made in a developed democracy. It is not an evidence-based process.

I, like many others, find this outcome to be unsatisfactory. According to the UK Office for National Statistics, even after decades of policy intervention there were still 474,000 hospital admissions for smoking-related health problems in England in 2015–16, and in 2015, 79,000 people died of smoking-related illness, representing 16 per cent of all deaths in that year (NHS Digital 2017). If there is a vast body of public health research upon which policy might be built that can address this issue, should we be satisfied to wait another four decades for this information to trickle down to action? For proponents of evidence-based policy, the answer is no.

In some cases, there is good reason to believe that policy decisions have actually had negative consequences for target populations, as well as for the general public. In some American state jurisdictions, for example, studies have demonstrated that abstinence-only sex education may actively contribute to, rather than help lower, teen pregnancy rates (Stanger-Hall and Hall 2011). Nationwide in the US, tough-on-crime legislation over the past four decades has made the American prison population the largest in the world, with nearly 3 per cent of the entire population of the US now involved in some way in the criminal justice system (Kaeble and Glaze 2016). But studies have shown that tougher sentencing practices are not necessarily linked to lower crime rates (Durlauf and Nagin 2011). It is worth investigating how pathological policy decisions such as these come about, and how they might be avoided.

Ultimately, of course, important policy decisions—perhaps all policy decisions—are political decisions. I do not mean to imply that there is evidence that should override democratic values. However, using an appeal to democratic values as a counter-argument to improving evidence-based policy, as, for instance, Cairney does on pages 127–29, ignores two major issues that deserve to be addressed in this context.

First, modern democracies are not pluralist utopias in which citizens' voices are listened to seamlessly or proportionately. Powerful elites in many countries unfairly control the levers of decision-making and manipulate the policy agenda in ways that are anything but democratic. I doubt if anyone observing the first few months of the administration of American president Donald Trump would argue that they are witnessing a 'representative democracy in which people elect politicians to make decisions on their behalf' (Cairney, p. 128), much less a system whose agents 'balance' evidence with a 'greater certainty that they are *doing the right thing*' (Cairney, p. 129; emphasis in original). The extreme polarization of politics and the increasing emphasis on partisanship that many countries are currently experiencing should, I think, indicate that democratic mechanisms need to be adjusted in many jurisdictions around the world. The system has some flaws, and the argument that proponents of evidence-based policy do not understand the system disregards the possibility that they understand it well, and are instead seeking change.

Second, the appeal to democracy or to the political nature of the policy decision-making system overlooks the fact that political decision-makers do not usually have any relevant expertise, and the decisions they make are more statements of principle than policy by design. Political decisions must be supported by administrative advice (and action) to bring them from campaign promise to reality. One recent and palpable example of this is the Canadian government's 2015 election promise to legalize the recreational use of marijuana. The political decision to legalize marijuana does not require evidence for legitimacy. But the vast array of questions that need to be answered in order to make this policy promise happen, such as where legal marijuana will be sold, how much consumers will be allowed to buy, and what kind of age restrictions will be in place (see Engel 2017, for example), will be handled by the bureaucracy in its administrative capacity, and here, evidence is crucial. Administrators who are educated, informed, and have the capacity to engage in long-term strategic decision-making will produce better policy; evidence-based policy-making may not have an impact on whether or not Canada legalizes marijuana, but better access to evidence and the ability to use it will allow Canadian administrators to produce better marijuana legalization policy than administrators who are understaffed, under-resourced, and lack the training and support to use research to craft policy advice.

4 | CONCLUSION

Following the academic discourse that arose in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Stoker and Evans, Parkhurst, and Cairney (and many others involved in the current debate over evidence-based policy) have framed the problem as one of bridging the gap between the separate communities of researchers and policy-makers. This unfairly places the burden of resolving the problem in the hands of an ill-equipped group of academics, operating outside the political system. The natural responses to the problem, as seen from this point of view, are to empower academics to better translate their research to policy-makers, as the contributors to the Stoker and Evans volume suggest, or to make adjustments to the system to institutionalize knowledge transfer, as Parkhurst argues. From here it is also easy to conclude, as Cairney does, that evidence-based policy is simply impossible unless academics are willing to play the politics game. These are all arguments that have been proposed repeatedly throughout the decades since the research utilization literature first appeared, but at this point it does not seem that the debate is advancing any further.

By reframing the problem in terms of policy-makers' responsibility to improve the policy-making system, it is possible to re-imagine the debate as being about how to reform the democratic process of decision-making in the public sector in a way that improves the quality of public policy and, ultimately, the quality of people's lives. I do not claim to know the answers to the questions of how this might be accomplished. But I do believe that many

people are engaged in the wrong debate. Instead of arguing about how to bridge the gap between researchers and policy-makers, we need to modernize the debate by relocating it to the realm of the political. What kinds of decisions qualify as policy decisions? What is the appropriate relationship between politics and expertise? Are there components of the policy process that can be improved, and how? What effect will investment by the public sector in long-term strategic research capacity have on policy outcomes? These are the questions we need to start asking.

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