

An experimental mindset for evidence-based policy decision making

Ethical Foundations of Public Policy
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The argument in a nutshell

- EBP is knowledge/expertise-focused
- Users' 'evidence ethics' must complement knowledge
- New evidence strategies are pragmatic and connect experiments producing evidence with experience
- Experiment-mindedness is a learning disposition ethically appropriate for policy evidence users

Evidence-based policy

- An approach to policy development and decision making that privileges empirical knowledge about a problem situation and possible policy interventions
- Ethically justified on consequentialist grounds
 - Methodological corollary: hierarchy of evidence based on study design

EBP challenges

- Information: adequacy, timeliness, trustworthiness
- System: capacity, openness
- Complements: judgement related to values, uncertainty, complexity
- Broader ethical matters: research funding, research ethics, peer review, balance with complementary factors

Experiment

- A course of action adopted in uncertainty whether it will answer a purpose
- A 'disturbance' that is observed as a way to learn

Types of experiment

- Researcher-led experiment
- Policy experiment; natural experiment
 - Whim
 - New intervention
 - Pilot study
- The ‘experimenting society’

Learning from experiment

- Systematic review
- Realist synthesis
- Design experiment
- Pragmatic trials
- Mixed methods

Pragmatism

- Not merely ‘practical’ or ‘expedient’
- A method of inquiry (Peirce)
 - Synonymous with experimental method and everyday learning
- We work out what we think we want as we work out what we think we might be able to get (Bromley)

Three features

- Discomfort/problem/need to act/genuine doubt
 - Socially: common will to act
- Hypothesis and its concrete test
 - Possible explanations acted on
- Observation of consequences
 - Compare and evaluate with respect to problem

Mary Parker Follett

- We evolve a so-called common will
- then we take it into the concrete world to see if it will work;
- Insofar as it does work, it proves itself; insofar as it does not, it generates the necessary idea to make it “common”

Lynelle Briggs

- Ideally, we need systems that are informed by evidence at each stage of policy development, from when an issue is first identified,
- to the development of the most appropriate response,
- and subsequent evaluation of its effectiveness

Experience

- The source of knowledge
- Anchors scientific ‘evidence’ in a ‘mesh of reasons’
- Occasions and integrates thinking, planning, trialling, objective-setting
- Enables us to improve our understanding of external things

An experimental mindset

- Embraces fallibilism
- Rejects sharp dichotomies
- Gives primacy to practice and experience
- Accepts knowledge activities as socially complicit
- Welcomes the evolution of understanding within the constraints the world shows us

Evidence ethics

- Experiment-minded evidence users bring experience into their many efforts to create the futures we want.
- Evidence used seamlessly, by applying continuously a habit of mind which asks not ‘what are the facts?’ but ‘what is the next question?’