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International and Interdisciplinary Insights into Evidence and Policy

Edited by Linda Hantrais, Ashley Thomas Lenihan
and Susanne MacGregor

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**Linda Hantrais, Ashley Thomas Lenihan
and Susanne MacGregor**

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International and Interdisciplinary Insights into Evidence and Policy

Contributors to this highly original book address the many questions raised by researchers and policy-makers about the complex and often uneasy relationship between evidence and policy from an international and interdisciplinary perspective. They explore both the institutions acting as evidence brokers and the different methods used to collect, assess and use evidence in a variety of national and international settings, by drawing on their experience of working in international contexts and in different disciplinary and policy environments, and in some cases analysing their own involvement in the evidence-based policy process. The policy areas covered range from national and state level economic and social policies more generally to specific areas of intervention, such as EU bio-fuels targets, the Active Ageing Index, mental health and media, the construction of second-language learning policies, microfinance and alcohol policy. The authors highlight the strengths and weaknesses, the use and abuse, or successes and failures, of different institutional and methodological approaches to evidence-based policy. They consider what elements of the lessons learned might be transferable across national and cultural boundaries, and if so under what conditions. This book was originally published as a special issue of *Contemporary Social Science*.

Linda Hantrais, FAcSS, is Emeritus Professor of European Social Policy at Loughborough University, UK, and Visiting Senior Fellow at the London School of Economics' Centre for International Studies. Her research interests span international comparative research theory, methodology, management and practice, with particular reference to public policy and institutional structures in the European Union, and the relationship between socio-demographic trends and social policy.

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Contemporary Issues in Social Science

Series editor: David Canter

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Alfred Uhl

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Foreword

To use the language of youthful social media Evidence-Based Policy is ‘trending’. The EU, UN, Council of Europe, the OECD and most developed economies all make use of organisations that collate, analyse and make available high-quality socio-economic and demographic data for international comparisons and use in policy development. Some of these organisations act as honest brokers, reviewing research and making recommendations. One of the most powerful is the UK National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) where its review of cost benefits of treatments influences directly whether they are provided by the NHS. In social science the Dutch Central Planning Bureau has a similarly powerful influence on government policy, but generates the research activity itself.

This search into the evidence base for policy and practice is becoming a topic for study in its own right. These studies are revealing the complexities of the interaction between social science research and policy-making. For although it may be assumed that research simply gives a rational basis for decision-making it is becoming apparent that there are many aspects of this interaction that are not straightforward.

These complexities are unravelled in this fascinating collection of 12 papers brought together by Linda Hantrais and Ashley Thomas Lenihan from LSE, and Susanne MacGregor from LSHTM. The papers review the interactions of many different social science disciplines with a variety of policy issues from places as varied as India, across the EU and the Global South.

For example in examining policies to reduce problems caused by alcohol consumption, Franca Beccaria from Eclectica in Turin, points out that social science insights have been ignored in favour of broad brush epidemiological studies. In other words, a number crunching approach has led to attempts to reduce aggregate levels of alcohol consumption. Yet social research demonstrates that problem drinking relates to specific people in particular situations. Social research would lead to a policy focus on risky and harmful drinking rather than attempts to reduce alcohol use overall.

This advocacy of a change in policy emphasis illustrates how embedded policies are in the way they are formulated. Often these formulations come out of traditions that have no distinct scientific basis. For example in alcohol reduction policies, Alfred Uhl of the Austrian Public Health Institute in Vienna points out that the Protestant-dominated, Nordic countries rely on reductions in supply, through high prices and limited outlets. By contrast policies in Southern European countries, with a strong Catholic tradition, emphasise problematic alcohol use and treatment for alcoholism. These differences of course make a European-wide unitary policy difficult to agree and even more difficult to implement.

Such considerations illustrate the challenge of generating neutral, directly effective policy relevant research. As Maren Duvendack, from the University of East Anglia, and Kate Maclean, from Birkbeck College, state ‘evidence can never be apolitical’. They consider the research exploring the benefits of microfinance programmes. They show that emphasis on broad-scale quantitative methodologies, such as the relationship of microfinance uptake to children’s

schooling, labour supply, fertility and nutritional status, ignore many of the negative consequences that can only be garnered from face-to-face interviews. These include the experience of debt in cultures where it is problematic, making the exclusion of oppressed minorities and support for domineering hierarchies more entrenched.

The rich qualitative issues that Duvendak and Maclean emphasise are less attractive to policy-makers than the apparently clear and confident recommendations that come from economists. This is illustrated by Edwin van de Haar's account of the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, where he works. This boasts a long tradition of advising government. Van de Haar claims his bureau is taken seriously because in times of uncertainty policy-makers cling to 'the magic of numbers'. Unlike many organisations reviewed in this volume, the Netherlands Bureau does much of the research itself, rather than interpreting the work of others. This presumably helps them to formulate projects in ways that are relevant to policy-makers but also gives them an edge in making sense of the results. Yet, interestingly, there are attempts by some governments to do more to explore what people feel and think by putting less emphasis on the economics of human activity. The UK government even carried out a major survey of wellbeing as a way of attempting to shape policy by what people feel rather than what they can buy,

The question of what sort of research is appropriate or acceptable for policy-makers is coming to the fore in the UK as a network of 'what works' units is being set up around the country. Dan Bristow and his colleagues from Cardiff University discuss what works for 'what works' units, and conclude that different local contexts can require quite different forms of evidence. Practitioners may also just not have the time to engage with the evidence effectively.

Without a full consideration of context and of how evidence can be used, policy guidelines can have serious unintended consequences. This is well illustrated by Karen Anderton and James Palmer from the University of Oxford when exploring the impact of EU biofuels targets. Subsequent examinations showed that these targets had deleterious effects on food prices, food security, deforestation and the loss of biodiversity. Anderton and Palmer make a strong case for policy recommendations to be part of an ongoing iterative process, not a one-off recommendation. That way the evaluation of any evidence-based interventions becomes an integral part of the research process.

The iterative research process can also help to highlight the way any intervention has been framed, as illustrated with the internationally significant examination of the second-language learning policy in Estonia. As Tatjana Kiilo and Dagmar Kutsar from the University of Tartu demonstrate, the government policy of encouraging Russian-speaking Estonians to develop fluency in the Estonian language can be supported from arguments dealing with nation-state building and national identity, or it can be presented as of value for developing social cohesion and improving employment opportunities. These different contexts raise different sorts of research questions and require different social research methodologies to answer them.

What is true of framing of issues within Estonia is even more relevant when attempts are made to compare the implications of social science evidence across different countries. This special volume with international examples of research shows just how challenging it is to extrapolate the results from one country to another.

The message, then, that emerges from all the papers in this volume is that most, probably all, government policies require evidence derived from social science in order to be rational and effective. But this is not a simple one-way process from researchers to policy-makers. The contributions here make clear that social scientists need to be aware of the political and administrative constraints on what research is relevant, and policy-makers require an informed understanding of the limits of what scientific evidence can provide.

Professor David Canter
Series Editor

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Evidence-based policy: exploring international and interdisciplinary insights

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The relationship between international evidence, politics and policy is never straightforward. Politicians sometimes cite comparative findings from social science evidence collected and analysed by international organisations to support policy proposals without sufficient understanding of contextual factors. The media may exploit data from such studies to highlight national policy successes and failures. Academic literature on evidence-based policy is often more interested in identifying policies that work than in investigating the reasons why policy solutions might, or might not, be effective if transferred to other regions. This article explores some of the issues involved by examining the relationship between evidence producers and users in different institutional settings, drawing on case studies in health and social policy to illuminate the complexities of the policy process. In considering possible conditions for successful policy learning across time and space, the authors stress the critical need to take account of socioeconomic, political, cultural and disciplinary contexts.

Introduction

Today globalisation impacts the policy process in challenging ways. International studies recognise the need for evidence to address cross-border policy issues, such as the spread of disease, migration, organised crime and climate change, while national issues, such as ageing and addiction, have become shared concerns (Rehm, Taylor, & Room, 2006; Suzman, Beard, Boerma, & Chatterji, 2015). International agencies are increasingly called upon to produce evidence of the impact of their work, and to formulate and implement policy, heightening debates over what types of research methods and research evidence are most useful and desirable to support the policy process (United Nations Evaluation Group, 2015). The rise of technology and ease of global communication have made the transfer of ideas and information simpler and faster, and facilitated international collaboration. The lowering of barriers to the movement of individual researchers between national agencies, international organisations and research institutes globally has facilitated the activities of issue and advocacy networks, and intensified the flow of knowledge across borders (Stone, 2004).

Often the problem with evidence usage is one of translation: how to match the evidence supply to demand in a way that is both appropriate and consistent. The supply of potential evidence is frequently diverse, widely dispersed and not necessarily framed in a way that is useful to policy-makers. When targeted, timely and relevant evidence does exist, technical language and academic conventions may make it difficult for policy-makers to follow, and the purveyors of evidence may not have the right access or platform to reach front-line decision-makers (Choi et al., 2005; MacGregor, 2005; Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007).

The questions for those concerned with improving evidence-based policy are then how to join the supply and demand for evidence successfully, and how to provide a smooth transition between knowledge and practice. The relationship between research and policy-making is never easy to manage, especially when the evidence base is international and intended to be policy relevant (Hantrais, 2009). Countries differ in how they do, or do not, value and utilise national and international social science research in formulating and evaluating policy programmes. This article contributes to the wider debate by demonstrating how international and interdisciplinary approaches can impact the evidence-based policy process. The authors explore the many ways in which social science evidence is collected, analysed, communicated, assessed and fed into policy in a variety of socioeconomic, cultural and political environments. They draw on examples in the areas of social and health policy to analyse how and why policy research conceived and implemented at national and international levels may, or may not, achieve impact in specific temporal and spatial contexts, while also attempting to assess whether policy solutions adopted in one locality offer useful lessons for policy-makers in other regions.

The internationalisation of evidence-based policy

Since the Second World War, numerous international organisations and agencies have been created whose remit includes gathering statistical data on demographic, socioeconomic and political trends in countries under their jurisdiction for use in policy development at the international level. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN) and its agencies, the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), for example, were collaborating to collate, analyse and make available high-quality socioeconomic and demographic data across their member states for this purpose. While the capacity to gather and process such large amounts of scientific data has vastly improved, it is still outstripped by demand for truly comparable and reliable annual aggregated and disaggregated data in policy-oriented research.

Although notoriously difficult to collect, evaluate and interpret, the exercise of comparing national and international trend data to inform and underpin policy development nevertheless remains worth the effort. The reasons why policy-makers have become more attentive to social science evidence drawn from international data sources are well documented (Hantrais, 2009; Lenihan, 2013; Lunn & Ruane, 2013). Robust quantitative and qualitative data from international surveys and studies carried out in different countries can serve to draw attention to underlying socioeconomic and political processes, and to the possible consequences of adopting different policy choices, thereby leading to better policy outcomes. Comparisons across national boundaries of trend data and policy developments can also help policy-makers improve their understanding of financial and political constraints on social spending in response to the demand for greater accountability and transparency, while opening up opportunities to exchange information about both the policy process and policy solutions tried and tested elsewhere (Zaidi, 2015).

Mounting interest among international organisations in social science research on global topics, in conjunction with the growing need to demonstrate the cost-effectiveness and policy relevance of the research that they fund, has drawn attention to methods and evaluation techniques.

The focus has shifted not only to the production of high-quality national and international social science evidence, but also to the assessment of policy outcomes. Policy impact analysis and assessment have become an integral part of the planning process in many countries around the world. Since the early 1980s, the International Association for Impact Assessment has published its own international interdisciplinary journal, *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal (IAPA)*, which focuses on many of the topics addressed in this article, namely ‘environmental, social, health, sustainability, and/or other assessments of projects, programmes, plans and policies’ (see <http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/tiap20/>).

The United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG), established in 2003 as a successor to the United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on Evaluation, serves as:

a coordination platform for global and country-level evaluation cooperation and learning ... to tap into the knowledge they need to build national evaluation capacity [by bringing] the most credible evidence available to implementing and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the next 15 years, with cost-effective, appropriate and continuously improving policies and programmes. (UNEG, 2015, p. 3)

The *Norms for evaluation in the UN system*, published by UNEG in 2005 (see www.uneval.org/document/detail/21) have, for instance, been used worldwide by 69 UN agencies to assess the impact of their work on gender equality and human rights.

For social scientists engaged on European projects, international data sources have become an essential benchmarking tool, allowing monitoring and measurement of the performance of national governments as they strive to meet national and international targets. The European Commission, for example, recognised the importance of demonstrating the costs and benefits to policy development of drawing evidence from publicly funded research in its 2007 Green Paper, *The European Research Area: New perspectives on the future of science in Europe* (Com(2007)161 final). The paper stressed the need for scientific evidence-based policy-making, and called for a wide debate on how science should inform policy-makers, and how policy-makers could be persuaded to take science seriously.

The Central and Eastern European countries that joined the EU from 2004 were required, as a condition of membership, to enhance their evidence-based decision-making capacity, exemplified by Estonia’s response to the OECD’s 2011 Public Governance Review, which identified shortcomings in their processes (Kiilo & Kutsar, 2015). Recognition of the importance of this type of capacity building in other international contexts is illustrated by the fact that the UK’s Department for International Development (DfID) not only provides funding support to enable countries such as India to conduct large-scale surveys to assist their Government with planning and policy formulation (Kattumuri, 2015), but also supports capacity building for government officials internationally. DfID works in partnership with national bodies and research centres in several African countries to deliver advanced courses for people involved in health policy and research, training them to access, understand and use systematic reviews on the effects of health-care interventions to inform and improve their decision-making (see <http://www.cochrane.org/what-is-cochrane-evidence>).

Research funders, exemplified by the EU’s Framework Programmes, increasingly recognise that (social) scientists need training in presenting the results of their work in plain language accessible to a non-specialist target audience. The EU’s Directorate General (DG) for Research has progressively strengthened its role, not only in commissioning policy-relevant research, in consultation with the policy DGs, but also as a facilitator of communication and information sharing between projects and key actors, requiring engagement between researchers and stakeholders at European and national levels at every stage in the process (Feerick, 2008, pp. 7–12).