

Using Evidence: How Research can Inform Public Services

What have we learnt over the past decade about evidence use in policy and practice settings? This is the core question tackled in a recently-published book on Using Evidence. What follows has been abstracted from an article published on the 'Policy Net' website.

The phrase 'evidence-based policy' can be misleading because it tempts us to think of policy options being shaped by research evidence, and even of research playing a decisive role in the choice between competing options.

Such a view emphasizes particular types of evidence: evidence on 'what is the scale of the problem?', and evidence on 'what works?' in ameliorating such problems.

Yet studies of policy repeatedly show that evidence is rarely used in such a direct and instrumental fashion. Instead, research often enters policy debates in much more indirect ways: for example by shaping what is seen as a problem in the first place; by destabilizing current framings of the problem set; or by challenging orthodox approaches to interventions.

These more complex and subtle types of evidence draw on a wide range of research which covers, for instance, basic understanding about the structuring of society and the nature of social problems (including their sources and interrelationships); and a better understanding about social programme implementation, client experiences of those programmes, and the sources and causes of implementation failure.

Even when 'what works' evidence is used explicitly, it may be being used tactically or politically, for example, to advance a position, buttress previously

taken decisions, or derail customary debates.

While such uses may be derided as 'misuse' (especially by researchers), they at least admit to the possibility that evidence might have influence rather than irrelevance. They also point to alternative strategies for improving the use of research.

Strategies to improve the use of research

The dominant model of research use envisages individual policy-makers and practitioners consciously seeking out and keeping up-to-date with research, and then applying the evidence they thereby glean in their day-to-day work.

This means that we know much less about the potential for research to enter policy and practice at the organizational or systems levels—for example through protocols, guidelines and regulatory frameworks, although the evidence we have suggests such uses of research may well be important.

We need to move beyond individualized framings of research use and capture what using research might mean within wider organizations and systems, and for groups and communities as well.

While action on the supply and demand side of evidence, and attempts to bridge or integrate between these are welcome, there may be more that

we can do to promote research use. Research may influence policy indirectly as well as directly, through many non-official routes, such as advocacy networks, that effectively limit the potential for government control of evidence, its interpretation and use.

The agenda for action is extensive, although there is still much that we need to know. And action is important; research and research use matter because wide-ranging yet constructive debate and dialogue that draw on research offer the best chance of enhancing knowledge and practice in public services.

Reference Nutley, S. M., Walter, I. and Davies, H. T.O. (2007), *Using Evidence: How Research Can Inform Public Services* (The Policy Press, Bristol).

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<http://www.publicnet.co.uk/features/2008/04/18/using-evidence-%e2%80%93-where-have-we-got-to-and-how-do-we-go-forward>

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