RECOMMENDATIONS: GETTING THE BIG TICK (CAN EVALUATORS LEARN ANYTHING FROM THE POLICY WONKS?)

Lis Cowey, Natalie Froese and Nick Davies

Introduction

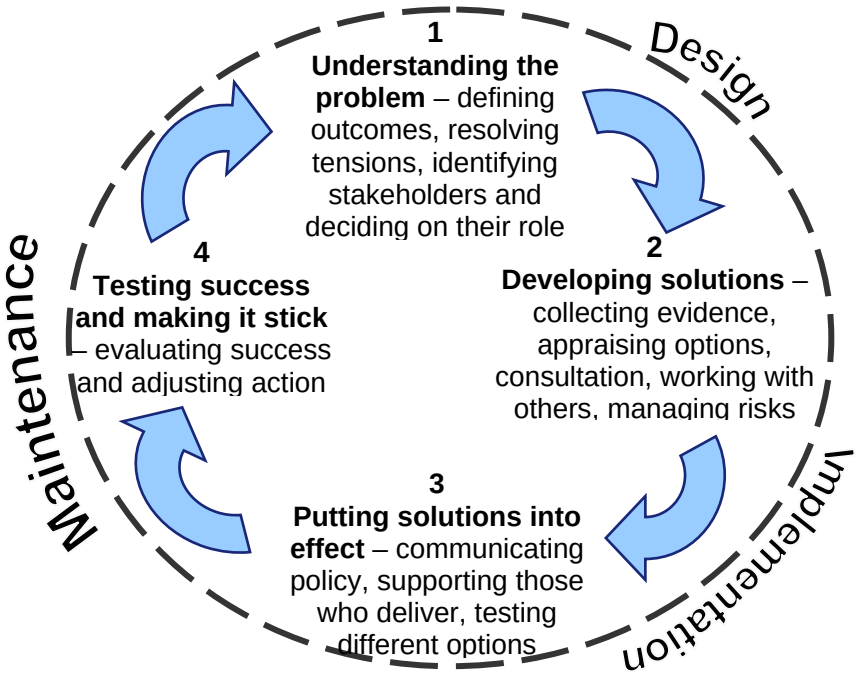
Evaluation is part of a complex 'value chain' – otherwise known as the 'policy-implementation-evaluation cycle. The cycle, where it works well, operates through testing, influence and adaptation. This paper, like many before it, and many at this conference, focuses on how evaluators can seek to 'optimise the value' from their evaluations, from the point of view of various stakeholders. It focuses on policy stakeholders and is written from the perspective of a policy advisors who have worked with and drawn on evaluators.

If evaluators want their work to be influential with policy stakeholders, they need not only to be skilled at their own craft and to understand the craft of policy advice, but they need to be prepared to willlingly shift from 'pure evaluator' to 'policy partner as the opportunity or need arises. That is not to say we support 'sanitizing' or supressing findings that might be unpalatable to policy mandarins. It is the professional responsibilty of evaluators to report findings fairly and not resile from them even if these are likely to be unpopular. Instead, this paper presents a new way of thinking about the policy-evaluation interaction, and explores how evaluators can become more strategic in how they position themselves, their evaluations and their findings in the policy context to increase their influence.

We first describe the craft of providing policy advice and how theoretically the policy cycle interacts with the evaluation function, identifying some features common to both. We focus on elucidating some of the requirements that government policy analysts are placed under, as a basis for thinking about how evaluators can hone reports to be influential. We then examine the evaluation function in more detail, and summarise the different 'value' position styles of evaluators and their practice. Building on this idea we suggest that viewing these different position styles as a continuum of styles of action rather than a categorisation of types of evaluator can allow evaluators to more deliberately and effectively engage with the policy cycle, linking in as part of the value chain, while at the same time preserving their professional integrity as evaluators. In so doing, it is possible for both policy stakeholders and evaluators to learn more from each other about how to optimise the value of policy and programmes as well as of evaluation itself.

The policy-evaluation cycle

Much has been said and written about the policy-evaluation cycle, and the stages that this entails. It is not the purpose of this paper to review this work, however, the following diagram depicts the basic structure of the cycle:



National Audit Office UK (2001) Modern Policy Making: Ensuring Policies Deliver Value for Money

Evaluation can, of course, focus its inquiry at any or all stages of the above diagram, although it is typically conceived as occurring following design and implementation. Evaluation can and does illuminate issues such as whether a policy problem is correctly specified or still relevant; whether the implementation option chosen was appropriate; whether risks have been adequately managed; whether implementation has been correctly undertaken; and whether desired outcomes were achieved.

There are choices for evaluators about how far they wish to engage with the policy / implementation parts of the cycle beyond delivery of their report. From a policy perspective, having evaluators involved in testing or contributing to policy advice reduces the likelihood of misinterpretation, and from an evaluator's perspective, it can reduce the likelihood of misuse of their findings.

The policy advisor's role

So what is 'policy' and what is 'policy advice'? What value does policy advice itself create? Outlined below is an account of the policy advisor's role, which shows both its distinctiveness from, and commonalities with evaluation.

At its most basic level, policy has been described as "the translation of government's political priorities and principles into programmes and courses of action to deliver desired changes"[1]. The stuff of policy-making is resolving conflicting priorities and managing risks at a range of levels, within a finite set of resources. Policy advice has been notably described as "client-

[1] NAO UK (2001), *Modern Policy Making: Ensuring Policies Deliver Value for Money*

oriented advice relevant to public decisions and informed by social values"[2] The function of policy professionals, reduced down to its most basic level, has been described as to, "collect and use data and information; discuss issues and options with others; and communicate their conclusions and recommendations[3]. In plying their craft, policy advisors can draw on a wide range of evidence and other material, and can often place high degrees of weight on other, non-evidential factors, such as sets of principles drawn from synthesis of a range of sources, including political goals of the incumbent government.

Let us open up the 'black box' of policy analysis and examine what it really is – or at least should be – as a basis for thinking about how evaluation can interact with and influence it. There are differing views as to what constitutes quality policy advice. Some have likened the role of the policy analyst to that of an architect: "the analyst works to a client's requirements, under certain environmental and budgetary constraints. Quality of advice is not only a function of the piece of advice itself, but of how well it fits into its environment, and how pleasing it is to those who use it or observe it." [4] Of course there is a risk that this can be interpreted as meaning that good policy analysis is about telling Ministers what they want to hear.

While such activity is evident from time to time, policy professionals, no less than evaluators, should not be in the business of sanitizing or white-washing their advice. The professional code that New Zealand policy analysts are expected to abide by is clear on this point. According to New Zealand's Code of Conduct for the state services, "Free and frank advice is not always the advice Ministers wish to hear. In giving advice, we must be sensitive and responsive to Ministers' aspirations and objectives. At the same time, we should have regard to the concept of public good and concern for the public interest. Our advice should reflect both a wide appreciation of relevant subject areas and our consideration of affected communities.[5]

Of course, it is expected that timing and the form in which the advice is presented is approached with care. As part of that, provision of good advice to Ministers is viewed as not only advising on what NOT to do, but also presenting realistic alternatives. After all, as noted above, policy is about action, not inaction.

As with evaluation and research, policy advisors recognise that judgments about what constitutes quality or 'successful' policy advice cannot be made on the basis of its short-term impact. Rather, factors such as the cost, implementation and effects of the implemented policy need to be taken into account over a longer time period[6]. In a similar way, it is instructive for evaluators to consider not only the immediate reaction to their work, but the potential for more durable impact. While the focus of this paper is about maximising the initial impact of evaluations, it is important not to lose sight of the potential longer-term influence that evaluations can and should have, and design evaluation reports with this in mind.

As Wolf (1999) notes, analysts are trained to focus on public action and to present options that include various forms of public action to decision-makers. Typically, they are required to provide reasoned advice on which option is preferred. In its most nutshell form, the requirements for accessible policy recommendations have been formulated as the following:

[2] Weimer, David L and Aidan R. Vining (1992) *Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice* 2nd ed, Prentice-Hall, Engelwood Cliffs, New Jersey
[3] Wolf, Amanda (1999) "Building Advice: the Craft of the Policy Professional", Working Paper no. 7, p 7, State Services Commission, New Zealand , http://www.ssc.govt.nz
[4] ibid
[5] New Zealand Code of Conduct for the State Services (2007) http://ssc.govt.nz
[6] Department of Labour (2001) "Guide to excellent policy advice"

- What should the decision-maker do?
- Why should they do it?
- How should they do it?[7]

These three questions can also be applied when evaluators formulate recommendations arising from their own work. In formulating recommendations, policy professionals typically present explicit criteria for recommendations; clearly describe the preferred alternative, and its likely implications in terms of cost etc; outline an implementation strategy, and discuss limitations and potential unanticipated consequences. To carry Wolf's architecture analogy further, policy recommendations have to be based on consideration of both their technical feasibility and potential implementability. However, unlike architects, policy analysts are also required to have regard to political aspects, for instance, likely political opposition, or the likelihood of gaining necessary political support. After all, policy making is in the end a highly pragmatic craft: it is about the art of the possible.

An important feature of the policy craft, as noted by Wolf (op cit) is that policy develops iteratively. The above diagram illustrates that point, although, of course, it provides a stylised view. In practice, policy making is a messy process and cannot be understood as a linear process, or even a smooth cycle in most cases. It has been notably described as "muddling through". It is worth thinking about the impact of evaluation in these terms: that is, considering how evaluations might be built to illuminate a number of points – and occasional back-peddlings on the policy cycle.

The evaluator's role

A central question for all self-reflective evaluators is how best to engage with the messy reality of politics and processes for making policy choices. Numerous papers have lamented the marginalisation of evaluation in all too many policy processes, and a number of formulae for redressing the problem have been identified. The problem is a complex one with potentially multiple solutions. Notably, Sankar et al[8] identified the importance of organisational culture and organisational values around learning as being critical determinants of the level of evaluation influence. Such issues must not be overlooked. Unfortunately, however, it is not straightforward for evaluators themselves to influence this state of affairs. In considering this problem we have sought to focus on what, if anything, evaluators themselves can do to achieve greater influence within the policy-evaluation cycle, although we would not wish to assert that evaluators can, themselves, solve the problem.

In considering the question of what evaluators can do, it is important to acknowledge the rich diversity of both evaluators and evaluation types, particularly differences in orientation to the question of values. Segone[9] identifies three types of evaluation approaches: value neutral evaluators; value sensitive evaluators and value critical evaluators. Segone's typology is as follows:

[7] Weimer and Vining (1992), cited in Wolf op cit.
[8] Sankar, Meenakshi "And around we go again? Getting off the linear policy cycle", Paper presented to the 2007 International Conference of the Australian Evaluation Society
[9] Segone, Marco (2004), "Evidence-based Policy Making", in *Bridging the Gap: the role of monitoring and evaluation in Evidence-based policy making, Romania, UNICEF*

- Value-neutral evaluators ("**social researcher**). Under this approach, an evaluator's function is seen as providing neutral, objective, impartial information. The 'judgment' function is considered to be under the control of others such as politicians and programme planners. A key challenge for the evaluator is to insulate themselves against political influence – not by ignoring it necessarily, but by 'knowing the enemy" as a basis for arming against it. For example, Segone cites Turpin's approach that involves uncovering motivations behind wanting the evaluation; using established scales and instruments wherever possible, being clear about limitations and methodology;: talking to all people involved; having peer review procedures; and making use of expert panels.
- Value-sensitive evaluators: (**professional expert)** Under this approach, it is acknowledged that evaluation and politics cannot entirely be separated – especially the judging aspect of it, however the evaluator should stay separate from the political component. Under this model, Segone observes (citing Chelimsky 1987), the challenge for the evaluator is to understand the political system in which the evaluation operates, and the information needs of policy actors who use evaluations. This model requires evaluators to devote time to negotiating, discussing, briefing, accuracy-checking, prioritising and presenting. Segone identifies two variants of this model:
  - *Evaluation as quality assurance or a steering instrument for management*. This approach can be relatively technocratic, for example, forcused on measuring quality, efficiency, value-for-money analysis, or evaluating performance against success indicators in achieving targets. Evaluation tends to use measures of quality and performance through prefabricated schemas and formulae.
  - *Evaluator as expert dialogue partner or 'critical friend.* Under this approach, the evaluator explicitly acknowledges evaluation and politics can't be entirely separated. Here, the evaluator is responsible for making their own professional perspectives visible. Variants of this approach include evaluators such as MacDonald, who assumes that power is distributed among interest groups and that the evaluator's duty is to serve the public's right to know. Another allied approach is the deliberative democratic approach of House and Howe (1999, 2000), which stipulates that the evaluation process must be based on full and fair inclusion of all relevant stakeholders and represent the views of socially disadvantaged groups although it doesn't require those views to be endorsed by the evaluator. Yet another approach of this type is that of Cousins and Whitmore (1998) who posit practical and transformative evaluations, whereby the evaluator carries out technical evaluation tasks, and stakeholders define the evaluation problem, set the scope and interpret data emerging from the study. Such an approach is often used with the aim of radical social change and clarifying values that shape evaluations.
- Value-critical evaluator: **(the politically engaged evaluator)** sees politics as integrated with every-day life and considers it is not possible for the evaluator to take a neutral position. Under this view, the evaluator embraces the inherent connection between evaluation and politics. Evaluations of this sort are often informed by ideologically-oriented

methodologies from feminist or critical theory traditions, with moral and ethical standpoints made explicit by the evaluator in the interests of transparency.

While Segone's typology appears to have been generated with big "P" politics in mind, we believe it also provides a useful frame for thinking about evaluation in relation to narrower questions that are the bread and butter for many professional evaluators. All government funded evaluation relates to policy or programmes which have a strategic aspect to them, that is, they raise questions about choices and power relationships involved in decision making about the selection of goals and how far and how fast to undertake actions aimed at achieving those goals.

Considering Segone's typology in this light, it provides a useful tool for thinking about evaluators' operating style, rather than merely a set of alternative – and potentially opposed - philosophical positions. The advantage of considering it in this way is that it can help illuminate the question of how evaluators might "optimise value" for stakeholders – particularly policy advisors and decision makers. It enables us to explore how – and under what circumstances – an evaluator might adapt their practice to maximise their influence with policy stakeholders. It is not the purpose of this paper to focus on the rights and wrongs of any one of these points on the continuum, but rather to focus on questions such as:

- Under what circumstances would I want to move along the continuum in either direction to maximise influence with policy stakeholders, and
- What are the requirements for effective practice at each point?

A strategic framework for targeting influence

To be influential, you need to meet a need, and at times there are tradeoffs to be made between arms-length neutrality and evaluation that is an integrated, responsive policy tool. The table below sets out, from a policy perspective, the differing benefits and risks of the three key points on the continuum of value stances an evaluator might take.

A policy perspective on the benefits and risks of different evaluation approaches

The "position" or approach taken by evaluators	Benefits of methodology	Benefits of the product	Risks
"Value neutral" – politically / strategically neutral, with political and strategic considerations not included in frame of reference	technical analysis centred around programme impacts or processes, grounded in theory and best practice, free of influence.	Conclusions that contribute to technically defensible findings and contribution to knowledge on a relatively narrow set of policy and design questions. May influence wider debates over time. Of particular benefit where there are clear and unambiguous policy objectives	The evaluation might inform about what doesn't work, but could fail to illuminate alternatives, leaving policy decision-makers exposed in the case of negative findings. Policy clients may not understand the policy implications of the findings, particularly if of a technical nature In a fast-moving policy environment, contextual changes

			can quickly make findings obsolete
"Value sensitive" - politically / strategically aware, but the political priorities and judgements are taken as given	Also includes environmental analysis – not just of programme operations or effects, but the wider ripple effects and stakeholder perspectives. Some balancing of wider contextual factors and judgement on priorities is provided, within the boundaries set	Recommendations – based on an understanding of the context and its limitations. Can include judgements of, say, quality and efficiency, or advice as 'critical friend' / educator. Of particular benefit where policy objectives, and the relationships between them, are more complex Provides assistance in identifying what needs change, and how this might be undertaken	Possible incompatibility between the weight evaluators and policy makers place on different contextual factors and priorities. Potential unrealistic expectations among some stakeholders about the extent that the work will influence what "should" happen.
"Value critical" – seek to influence political / strategic priorities and judgements, become part of the policy / strategic process.	Broadest type of analysis which puts findings in an even wider context, yet applies very specific (subjective) judgements to those findings. Typically the benefits are likely to be reaped on a longer time-frame than for the value sensitive approach or the value neutral	Observations may be a useful way to provide policymakers with the information and tools they need to provide advice about what "should" be to inform developmental thinking	Potential scope creep and raising unrealistic expectations among some stakeholders about the extent that the work will influence what "should" happen. Difficult to discern extent to which evaluator's expressed views and values derive from personal values or factors relating to the evaluation itself, potentially undermining the value of the evaluation exercise itself. Little pay off in the short term, and thus may be difficult to justify as a funder in the normal course of events

Reflections

In our experience we have observed at both first and second hand the way in which evaluators choose to move – or not to move – along this continuum, and some impacts from this. The reflections below focus on the first two categories as those with which we are most familiar, leaving largely for others the question of operating effectively as a value-critical evaluator.

Example: choosing not to move from 'value neutral'

In this large public sector organisation in the United Kingdom, a strategy was established that included full government funding for employers to participate in an existing public sector initiative. It was thought that the lack of participation was due to the cost relative to the private

sector benefits that could be captured by it, based largely on theoretical considerations. The initiative was launched, and national-level targets were signed off by the Government. The Prime Minister's Department was very focused on target achievement, and much public sector activity was devoted to measuring and monitoring progress towards the targets.

Meanwhile, the sizeable research and evaluation division of the Department was asked to initiate research to test the problem definition on which the initiative was based, which, in essence entailed evaluation of the initiative. The job was to verify – on an empirical basis - the main reasons for the low participation levels by means of an intensive employer survey. The survey concluded relatively early in the life of the new government funding scheme, and indicated that the problem was misconceived, sheeting the low level of employer participation home to the low quality of the programme itself. This was inconvenient timing for policy decision-makers, who effectively ignored the findings and proceeded with implementing the programme in the hope of hitting the targets that had been set.

Researchers, despite being part of the same Department, persisted in putting forward their conclusions from time to time, but were met with deaf ears and their findings suppressed. In that instance, we observed that they chose not to engage with policy advisers on the question of whether, if at all, their findings might assist with adapting the policy to address some of the issues they had identified in the evaluation. In our view, an opportunity was lost to have influence because they went no further than to answer the question asked of them: is the problem rightly specified? If they had been prepared to engage with policy makers on how the programme could have been improved, based on their evidence, there was a chance that the social utility of the combined programme could have increased.

Example: a value critical stance

Our firm was contracted to undertake an evaluation of a number of independent bodies affiliated to a large international organisation. The goal of the evaluation was to pilot test a methodology for reviewing whether the bodies were sufficiently well aligned with the strategic goals of the parent organisation, and evaluating their effectiveness, . The context was of a highly complex, international political nature.

The methodology adopted by our firm entailed investing significant resource to understanding the political context, through interviews with key influencers and stakeholders that probed the nature and level of concerns about both organisations and the key players involved, and perspectives on the factors that had contributed to the current situation.

Through the process of intensive engagement used in the evaluation, the project team was able to develop a highly nuanced view, and won the trust of a client seeking to manage a highly complex problem. The firm was asked by the client to take the next step and write the policy paper on proposed changes resulting from the evaluation. Continuing involvement in this way

meant we could avoid the risk of evaluation findings being misinterpreted, but us to be prepared to step beyond a pure 'evaluation' role when circumstances required it.

Considerations on effective practice

Bringing both policy and evaluator perspectives to bear, the following section proposes a set of considerations for evaluators on the what might be required for effective practice at each point along the continuum.

	Requirements from a policy 'user's perspective	**What this means for the evaluation**
Value neutral position	Present in plain language the key points decision-makers should know Understand the reasons for wanting an evaluation Design your evaluation to respond to the client's time-frame	Include policy decision-makers in interview schedule to clarify perceptions about the expected utility of the evaluation and processes it might inform Test key findings early with the client and key stakeholders to ensure intelligibility Design evaluation so that early release of some information is possible if client's context changes
Value sensitive position	Be prepared to engage with policy makers to ensure you understand as far as possible all the salient features of the organisational, strategic and political context Understand expectations of stakeholders Draw out the implications for action (What should decision-makers do differently to make a programme work better?) Identify what the findings suggest are potential 'levers' to address issues Be clear about priorities for action or change, based on the findings, relative to strategic opportunities	Include policy advisors on governance / reference structures for the project Ask stakeholders explicitly about the organisational and political context in scoping phase Include policy decision-makers in interview schedule to clarify perceptions about the expected utility of the evaluation and processes it might inform Include as an explicit line of inquiry questions for stakeholders on alternative approaches, and suggestions for specific changes or improvements within the boundaries set Test key messages with the client, not to sanitise, but to enable you to couch in terms that maximise impact and clarify priorities that match with the context Facilitate discussions with policy makers on alternative courses of action, based on the evidence gathered
Value critical position	For short-medium term influence, be prepared to invest in building working relationships with policy professionals to ensure the context and opportunities for influence are well understood and can be	Partner with key influencers in conduct of and communication about the evaluation Build in processes for sharing findings in diverse contexts

utilised effectively	Be transparent about the underlying value position of the evaluation

Conclusion

Evaluation plays a critical role in the policy process. Maintaining clear boundaries between policy making and evaluation creates the dialectic needed to ensure policy ideas are rigorously tested and adapted in light of evidence. These should be maintained. However, this paper suggests that there are a number of grounds for believing that there are some significant commonalities in what is required of both policy and evaluation professionals, which can be exploited. Further, it argues that using strategies for greater engagement with policy stakeholders can create greater opportunities for evaluators to increase value – either through identifying ways in which policies and programmes can change, or assisting in identification of different and better approaches. The framework proposed in this paper provides a starting point for evaluators keen to seize such opportunities to consider how they can design evaluation processes and products to meet policy stakeholders' needs.