Tampering With the Evidence: A Critical Appraisal of Evidence-Based Policy-Making

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ABSTRACT

Recent enthusiasm for evidence-based policy-making in Australia has many sources. So-called 'managerialist' reforms to public administration have been significant, as has the diffusion of particular bio-medical models of research. However, the meaning and practice of 'evidence-based policy' are contested. We offer an account of the design of arguments to identify and critically assess the value of evidence-based claims and their relationship to evidence-based policy. Our critique indicates the very wide range of what can — properly — count as evidence, based on a premise about the irreducible richness and complexity of social reality. We highlight the importance of being thoughtful about the assumptions that shape policy research questions and 'warrant' the conceptual connections that constitute knowledge claims. We illustrate our arguments with a policy research case study on juvenile crime.

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Introduction

'Evidence-based' policy-making discourse is popular among a diverse range of policy communities. Following the United Kingdom, there is growing interest in evidence-based policy-making in Australia. The evidence-based policy movement raises important questions for those interested in public affairs and the politics of policy-making in Australia. Does current enthusiasm for evidence-based policy imply that policy-making in the past has not been based on empirical evidence? What weight can — and should — policy-makers give to 'research evidence' in the (necessarily political) process of policy-making? What kinds of evidence do promoters of evidence-based policy advocate? Are their conceptions of 'evidence' narrowly based on conventional scientific methods that privilege certain forms of methods and knowledge over others?

We cannot possibly canvass answers to all these questions here. We aim to critically appraise the emergence of evidence-based policy discourse in Australia, addressing a fundamental question about whether evidence-based policy will live up to its promise as an idea whose time has come (Young et al. 2002). In addressing this question, we define and explore the origins of evidence-based policy in the field of social policy.

Finding a clear definition of evidence-based policy is difficult. In much of the policy literature, the meaning is considered self-explanatory or is defined simply as the systematic appraisal and review of empirical research findings. The term 'evidence-based policy' is based around two sets of related assumptions, 'one referring to the way in which policy is made, the other to the evidential nature of social science itself' (Young et al. 2002, p. 215). We consider both dimensions of the term here. After exploring competing ideas about the nature of the policy process, we examine the foundations of evidence-based claims. We demonstrate the role played by assumptions about the nature of the social world in the architecture of arguments. We illustrate our arguments with a short case study that criticises the use of research evidence in juvenile justice policy. The case study shows that the assumptions underpinning current juvenile justice research in Australia preclude what might be considered a reasonable and democratic evidence-based approach to policy-making in social policy.

The politics of policy-making: Where does evidence fit?

It is difficult to imagine anyone arguing that policy should be based on anything but the best available evidence. The concept of evidence-based policy has an intuitive, common sense logic, which partly explains how it has become naturalised in a diverse range of policy settings. As Tilley and Laycock argue 'rooting policy in evidence has all the appeal of motherhood and apple pie. The rhetoric is cheap and easy' (2000, p. 13). The term acts as a catch phrase for 'scientific', scholarly', and

'rationality', which taken together can be understood as an attempt to modernise policy-making and professionalise human service practice.

Tensions in evidence-based policy discourse concern the relative value of research and other kinds of evidence as inputs into policy-making. This debate can be characterised as a continuum, with the *rational actor* model of policy, where research plays a major role in policy development at one end; and the *political* model, where research is just one input in the policy process — and often not the most influential — at the other (Cook 2001). Of course, many social scientists and policy-makers sit somewhere near the middle of this continuum. Arguing that policy-making is *inherently* political, Nutley et al. (2002, p. 2) prefer the term 'evidence-influenced' or 'evidence-aware' as a more realistic view of what can be achieved. Here we briefly explore the different dimensions of this debate, paying particular attention to the practicalities and politics of the policy-making process.

There is nothing particularly novel — or controversial — about the idea that policy should be based on evidence, but what can properly count as evidence in policy-making processes *is* contentious. The UK Cabinet Office described evidence as:

> Expert knowledge; published research, existing research; stakeholder consultations; previous policy evaluations; the Internet; outcomes from consultations; costings of policy options; output from economic and statistical modelling (1999, p. 33).

However, Nutley et al. (2002) note that in practice the public sector in the United Kingdom uses a more limited range of evidence, specifically: research and statistics, policy evaluation, economic modelling, and expert knowledge. This comment on the preferred forms of evidence uncovers the potential problems of adopting a narrow view of what counts as valid knowledge.[1] Lay forms of evidence, such as social service user input and public consultations, are placed further down the hierarchy of evidence. If knowledge operates hierarchically, we begin to see that far from being a neutral concept, evidence-based policy is a powerful metaphor in shaping what forms of knowledge are considered closest to the 'truth' in decision-making processes and policy argument.

Formal hierarchies in policy communities are also potentially important factors in framing policy problems and solutions. Ministerial advisers, senior public servants, and other 'insiders' or 'policy elites' have greater access and authority in decision-making processes than members of the public or service users. University-based researchers may have limited knowledge of government policy-making processes, and so limited capacity to make the most of research findings. In rejecting and

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1 We use the term 'knowledge' to refer to the act of *interpreting* 'evidence'.

sorting information, all policy makers make complex judgments about the sorts of institutional interests represented in the policy-making process. In formulating policy positions, for example, departmental staff must take into account the views of relevant Ministers, previous policy directions, and, increasingly, the views of treasury and finance departments.

Knowledge of the policy process is itself an important resource, which raises the issue of knowledge management and the capacity of policy-makers to analyse research results and to distinguish between good and dubious research findings. As many policy-makers will attest, a major problem in policy-making is not whether there is enough evidence, but of managing the excess of information and possible players (Perri 2002). In conjunction with tight time frames, the most readily available evidence comes to be used in formulating advice and argument. On the other side of this equation are the long time frames involved in empirical research, which can limit the potential impact of research on immediate policy problems.

Being able to frame the definitions and approaches to social problems depends on the location of policy actors and their ability to gain access to research, to analyse results, and to have direct impact on policy processes. A position of speaking authoritatively grants actors 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu 1991) in policy communities, which adds weight to any evidence presented. Being in a position to speak the 'truth' can therefore be as important as what constitutes the truth. Further, a wide array of external vested interests may be committed to a predetermined outcome irrespective of the evidence. These same interests may drive the undermining of sound science to forestall the policy implications that would necessarily follow (Rosenstock & Lee 2002).

The issues raised here come under the political model of policy-making, where research interacts with values and vested interests to determine policy outcomes. One theme that emerges from this brief conceptual and practical discussion is that it is not possible to draw simple or linear relationships between 'evidence' and policy outcomes. How evidence-based policy is taken up by policy-makers and researchers in the human services will depend on the context in which it is practised and the ongoing effects of its disciplinary origins.

The origins and context of evidence-based policy

The term 'evidence-based policy' has evolved from the concept of evidence-based practice, both of which were preceded by evidence-based medicine. It is worth briefly examining these developments, as this legacy of ideas informs definitions of evidence-based policy both overseas and in Australia. Evidence-based medicine (EBM) is the process of systematically finding, appraising, and using research findings as the basis for clinical decisions. The 'golden standard' of evidence gathering in medicine is the randomised controlled trial (RCT), which compares

treatments with placebos to determine the most effective intervention (The Cochrane Collaboration 2003). The Cochrane Collaboration, established in the United Kingdom, has been at the forefront of the push for systematic up-to-date reviews of all relevant RCTs of health care (Trinder & Reynolds 2000). The results of these systematic reviews are posted electronically on the Cochrane Library to form a searchable database.

In the United Kingdom and in the United States, policy-makers and clinicians increasingly use the principles of EBM to identify the most appropriate and effective way to promote health and to treat illnesses; in this sense EBM has both *educative* and *clinical* functions (Solesbury 2001). The logic of EBM has spread out of acute medicine into allied health professions and the related areas of social work and human service practice (see McDonald 2003). Yet the take up of EBM has not been met with universal approval. Some commentators suggest that evidence-based medicine threatens to constrain other forms of scientifically-based research and promotes a narrow range of research methodologies (Reynolds 2000, p. 32). These comments are directly relevant to debates about the value of evidence-based policy, as the disciplinary and methodological roots of the 'evidence-based' discourse in acute medicine have implications for how these ideas are transferred to other areas of professional practice, such as policy-making in the human services.

Researchers and policy activists in the United Kingdom have been driving the evidence-based policy movement, aiming to systematically mobilise and use social science research. Researchers have established The Campbell Collaboration, a sibling organisation of The Cochrane Collaboration, to conduct systematic reviews 'of the best evidence on the effects of social and educational policies and practices' (The Campbell Collaboration 2003). Beyond making systematic reviews electronically available for policy practitioners, some also see evidence-based policy as a way of bringing social science research and researchers much closer to governmental decision-making processes (Parsons 2001). Indeed, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the United Kingdom's leading independent agency for funding research and training in the economic and social sciences, has become involved. In 1999, for example, the ESRC provided a three year grant of 1.3 million pounds to the Evidence Network — the UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice, which has similar objectives and methods as The Campbell and Cochrane Collaborations (see Evidence Network — UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice 2002). The Cabinet Office Centre for Management and Policy Studies in the United Kingdom has produced several strategic documents aimed at 'modernising the policy-making process', in which evidence-based policy figures large (see, for example, Cabinet Office 1999).

The emergence of evidence-based policy is linked to the instrumentalist mood of managerial reforms that have infiltrated public administration practices in many

western democracies over the past three decades. Trinder argues that the managerialist emphasis on value for money and 'the focus on effectiveness and efficiency is a central driving force behind evidence-based practice and policy' (2000, p. 19). Under both managerial reforms and evidence-based policy a similar technocratic logic operates, concerned with procedural competence rather than substantive output.

Alongside these developments, however, there has been vigorous debate in the United Kingdom about how the move to evidence-based policy is affecting relationships between universities and government decision makers, intellectual property rights, and academic freedom.[2] According to one commentator, for example, 'the Economic and Social Research Council has been subjected to the demands of government science policy that views academic research as a means to economic and social development, much more than a cultural end in itself' (Solesbury 2001, p. 4).

In the United States, the US Coalition for Evidence Based Policy aims to 'promote government policy-making based on rigorous evidence of program effectiveness' (2002, p. 1). The sorts of 'rigorous evidence' the Coalition promotes consist of 'randomised controls' to ascertain effectiveness based on evidence-based approaches that 'have produced extraordinary advances in human health' (2002, p. 1). The Coalition suggests that 'in social and economic programs, by contrast, government programs are often implemented with little regard to evidence, wasting billions of dollars and failing to address critical needs of our society' (US Coalition for Evidence Based Policy 2002, p. 1). In this approach to 'evidence', the term takes on a new meaning as a resource-rationing tool, which goes beyond the educative and clinical purposes Solesbury identifies.

In Australia, policy makers working in both the community and government sectors are increasingly using the language of evidence-based policy. However, unlike in the United Kingdom, there is no formal coalition or central co-ordinating centre to move this agenda forward at a Commonwealth Government or State Government level. Nonetheless, within and across government departments there are signs that evidence-based policy is being actively promoted in different fields of social policy. In 1998, the Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services was talking about the need to translate evidence-based medicine into evidence-based policy, defined as assisting the provision of safe, cost-effective, and beneficial treatments (Whitworth 1998). Again in the health field, the National Health and Medical

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2 Both Liberal Democratic politicians and sections of academia have publicly raised concerns about the increasing practice of government departments amending research reports before publication and contractual conditions that insist researchers seek departmental permission before speaking publicly to the media about research findings (British Educational Research Association 2001).

Research Council (2003) offers Practitioner Fellowships on the basis that they contribute to 'evidence-based policy development in Australian health systems'.

Evidence-based policy is also being taken up in other areas of public administration. The Department of Family and Community Services (DFaCS) Annual Report 2000–01 refers to evidence-based policy, by way of 'making administrative data more accessible to the Minister, DFaCS staff and the Australian community' (DFaCS 2001). In the area of income support, Centrelink's 2002–05 Business Plan makes a case for Centrelink's being 'a key player in developing and delivering evidence-based policy solutions for customers, client agencies, community and government' (Centrelink 2002). A Commonwealth Department of Education, Training & Youth Affairs publication on *The Impact of Educational Research* on school education quotes a senior official who argues that 'schools will only accept changes that are strongly evidence-based' and that 'research helps to depoliticise educational reform' (2000, p. 190). Clearly, some Australian policy-makers see research evidence as a neutral and objective policy tool that is above political ideology.

Increased targeting of social policy programs and the shift towards 'outcomes based funding' in the non-government human services sector also provides fertile ground for evidence-based discourse. Non-government welfare agencies must increasingly quantify what they are doing, what works, and why. In the human services, evidence-based policy cannot be separated from a broader political context 'where efficiency becomes the primary political value, replacing discussions of justice and interest with discussions of what is possible and practical, with means rather than ends, with methods rather than truth' (Smith & Kulynych 2002, p. 163).

Australian research institutes, funded by the Commonwealth Government, are also adopting the language of evidence-based policy. The Australian Institute of Family Studies was funded in the 2000–2001 Federal Budget to undertake a Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. According to the first paper on the project, 'the Strategy is based on a holistic approach to problem identification, prevention and early intervention, and a commitment to evidence-based policy and practice' (Australin Institute of Family Studies 2002). Winter and Seelig (2001, p. 6) have promoted the idea of evidence-based policy and research in Australian housing studies as involving the use of 'evidence for policy formation'. Young et al. (2002, p. 216) refer to this conceptualisation of research-policy relations as the knowledge-driven model, where it is assumed that knowledge leads, or at least should lead policy.

Some political actors in Australia have also been drawing on the concept. In federal politics, for example, Labor Party frontbencher Mark Latham has been talking up evidence-based discourse in welfare reform:

> The myths of the welfare state are based on old ideological ways of thinking, a struggle between government-first and market-first policies.

> It is now clear that both approaches are flawed. The world has moved on. Welfare policymakers need to look beyond the old Left and the new Right to those evidence-based policies that can end the human tragedy of poverty (2001, p. 7).

For Latham, evidence-based policy represents tool or metaphor for going beyond political ideology. He treats evidence-based policy as a neutral concept where 'hard facts' will speak for themselves in addressing 'human tragedy' and politicians and policy makers will act accordingly based on the best available evidence.

This brief account of how evidence-based policy has entered the Australian social policy discourse is not comprehensive; however, it illustrates different manifestations of the concept of evidence-based policy and the inroads it is making into public administration and social policy in Australia and other parts of the western world. Developments in the United Kingdom and to a lesser extent in the United States and Australia can be seen as part of a 'modernising' agenda where policy-making scholars and practitioners aim to be more scholarly, scientific, and above all else rational. In this respect, 'the resurgence of evidence-based policy-making might be seen as a re-affirmation of the "modernist" project, the enduring legacy of the Enlightenment, involving the improvement of the world through the application of reason' (Sanderson 2002, p. 1).

The architecture of evidence-based claims

In this section we take a step back from surface debates about evidence-based policy and explore the deeper dimensions of what constitutes evidence-based claims. Following Toulmin (1958, see also Toulmin & Janik 1978) we suggest that the core features of all evidence-based arguments consist of the following irreducible elements:[3]

- an implied or identified question
- a claim or proposition that such and such is the case or that such and such explains or renders intelligible
- the evidence adduced in support of that claim or proposition
- a set of assumptions that have assisted in a) shaping the question, b) selecting what will count as the relevant evidence and c) which then link the evidence to

[3] We have modified Toulmin's analysis slightly to draw out the essential points upon which a critical and reflective appreciation of more robust — and less robust — claims can rest.

the claim by means of conceptual processes that warrant the proposed link between the claim and the evidence actually advanced.

Assumptions of a very wide range and character underpin all of the elements that go into a complex structure of policy arguments. Fundamental to all evidence-based 'arguments' (evident, for example, in a fully developed research article or project) are the following elements:

$$\underline{\text{Question/s + Evidence = Knowledge Claim/s}}$$
$$\text{Assumptions}$$

The prospective material available as evidence to support a given claim is as rich and varied as the world itself. Possible sources include photographs, literary texts, official files, autobiographical materials like diaries and letters, the files of a newspaper, and ethnographic and participant observer accounts. Recalling the hierarchy of knowledge we discussed earlier, the mountains of quantitative secondary social and epidemiological data collected by government agencies and the no less voluminous primary quantitative data collected by researchers from their experiments, clinical trials, and interview or questionnaire-based social surveys are typically valued highly as 'objective' or 'hard' data. On the other hand, qualitative data such as ethnographic accounts and autobiographical materials are more frequently devalued as 'subjective' or 'soft'.

In practice, the major social science disciplines go a long way towards prescribing — and proscribing — the approved/non-approved kinds of stuff that is acceptable as evidence. Social science disciplines also sanction the rhetorical techniques used to frame evidence being adduced. Some evidence 'sits around' in the world waiting to be 'discovered' while some, especially in the social sciences, is invented or constituted by the research practices of the social scientist. In ethnographic fieldwork, evidence is collected in — and consists of — the researcher's systematic observations. However, far more elaborate constitutive practices may be involved in research where the key research categories (such as unemployment) have no obvious empirical referent. In these cases the data has to be constituted out of responses to questions following on from a processes referred to as 'operationalisation', which takes a non-empirical concept and gives it some empirical representation.[4]

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[4] Unemployment is a complex state conventionally represented — and since the 1950s officially understood — as an involuntary lack of paid employment. Unemployment is not an objective state of affairs akin say to the number of chairs in a room. Accordingly, to establish useable data, agencies like the Australian Bureau of Statistics conduct a sample survey based on the operationalisation of the concept. Operationalisation involves generating benchmark criteria such as age, availability to work, and so on. It also involves making ontological assumptions (for example, about the involuntary state of being unemployed), and methodological assumptions (for example, about the validity of sample surveying, error rates, and so on). The

Whether a naturally occurring phenomena or a research artifact, the stuff of the world only becomes 'evidence' when 'it' is constituted and inserted into a research practice and then deployed in the framework of an argument. This obtains whether the evidence is the text of a poem, the files of a newspaper, the data from a carefully designed psychology experiment or clinical trial, or a massive data base assembled from a social survey. In determining what is to count as evidence and the 'discovery' or selection/presentation of evidence, assumptions about the nature of the social world play a fundamental role.

What are assumptions?

In an existential sense we acquire the stuff that becomes 'assumptions' through the ordinary processes of living in, and acquiring stories and theories about, the world. Assumptions provide the stuff that makes up the great systems of belief we adhere to in varying measures of consistency, exclusivity, or eclecticism. Our reliance on all sorts of assumptions helps us to focus on those things we already know or wish to know so that we can see what we need to see in order to make our case about the state of affairs. The circularity of this proposition explains in part why so many of us are so resistant to and not persuaded by 'evidence' that relies on other, often divergent or antagonistic assumptions, while the same evidence merely confirms what people wedded to those assumptions already know. Both critics and proponents of evidence-based policy rely on deep assumptions and big narratives; our project here is to draw out the assumptions of evidence-based policy and expose them to some critical probing. In a more formal sense, as we go about constructing knowledge claims or doing research, our use/selection of assumptions act as a filter to deal with the overwhelming 'there-ness' of the world.[5]

Assumptions are difficult to identify because they are not usually there to be heard or read or seen in the usual way that other elements or an argument are there. In their very nature they are rarely if ever explicitly articulated. Metaphorically, assumptions constitute the silence between the notes of music being played such that the combination of sound and silence constitutes the melody of a piece of music. The stuff that makes up 'actually existing assumptions' typically include: beliefs about the basic nature of social reality, the reality of nature, the character of history, or the

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criticism that the reported 'unemployment rate' does not accurately or objectively reflect the 'true state of affairs' is simply an error of thought. The only judgment possible in this circumstance is to establish whether or not the method of data collection is consistent with the operationalisation of the concept. This of course is not an argument that new assumptions ought not to be or might not be devised leading to new kinds of data.

5 To this extent we clearly accept the force of older arguments against the mainstream empiricist belief in raw data or 'physically objective' sense data and accept with Popper (1972) that there never can be 'context-free', atheoretical 'facts' or 'value free' data.

qualities of social reality or the human condition; and methodological or epistemological propositions about what credible knowledge looks like, or how we are best advised to do our research and what kind of disposition researchers should adopt.

We can identify assumptions in social scientific research by asking simple questions:

- What kind of question is the researcher asking and/or what kind of answer is s/he looking for? Is the question descriptive? Taxonomic? Analytic? Interpretative? Explanatory? Evaluative?

- What assumptions about the nature of the world does the author make in determining what kinds of evidence will be relevant?

- What kinds of assumptions does the researcher rely on to warrant their posited links between the evidence evinced and the claims made?

These analytic questions help identify the core assumptions that hold the architecture of an argument together.

A case study of evidence, argument, and assumptions: Researching 'juvenile crime'

In the following case study we extend our discussion of the role played by assumptions in policy-oriented social research. Without for a minute calling into question the evidence deployed in the research project we scrutinise, we demonstrate the role played by assumptions in selecting the kinds of evidence or in warranting the use of evidence to underpin the policy conclusions the researchers argue for.

In pursuing crime prevention and policing policy research, criminologists and sociologists continue to rely on some long-standing constructive schemes. We illustrate this in the following analysis of the Commonwealth Government's National Crime Prevention project report *Pathways to Prevention* (1999).

What kind of question is being asked/what answer is being looked for?

In characterising the nature of the problem — 'juvenile crime' — and their approach to it, the authors of *Pathways to Prevention* embrace a progressive crime prevention framework informed by what we characterize as an enlightened social scientific research project committed to social inclusion and citizenship (National Crime Prevention 1999, p. 5). Equally firmly they reject what they call a conservative 'law and order' diagnosis based on 'single-cause' explanations like bad genes or dysfunctional parenting. They also reject simple punitive responses like increased police powers and mandatory sentencing. The authors argue that:

> the roots of criminal offending are complex and cumulative ... embedded in social as well as personal histories. To uncover significant risk factors that are the facilitating conditions for entry into a criminal career requires a life course perspective that views each young offender as someone who is developing over the life course and in specific social settings (National Crime Prevention 1999, p. 4).

On this basis, the report develops a case for 'crime control' strategies based on the promise to reveal 'scientifically persuasive evidence ... that interventions early in life can have long term impacts on crime and other social problems such as substance abuse' (1999, p. 5).

Apply the simple heuristic outlined above, we can see clearly how this policy research works. The authors of this report assume that an explanatory-cum-predictive question is both sensible and answerable. They begin with the premise that it is both desirable and possible to ask what factors can be isolated or identified to establish what groups of people are most likely to be at risk of becoming delinquents or even serious adult criminals. Researchers in the broad church of positivist social science have always aimed to produce inductive generalisations that are both explanatory and predictive.

What assumptions are the authors making?

This approach to framing the research question rests on Durkheimian assumptions about the nature of social reality and its conceptual representation. That is, the researchers assume *inter alia* that 'crime' and the 'crime rate' are objective and stable 'social facts'. They further assume that actors are constrained to act in ways which structural variables like socio-economic status, education level, sub-cultural contexts, biological factors, or family status impel them.

These researchers take for granted the categories of 'crime' and 'criminality'. Politicians and the mass media often define the crimes of the urban poor, particularly 'street crime', as a more serious and consistent threat to social order than the crimes of government or corporate officials. (Accordingly, breaches of corporate law are dealt with by civil courts or commissions of inquiry rather than the more stigmatised criminal courts.) This approach avoids questions about how systems of crime control are assembled to manage crimes of the urban and rural poor, and overlooks evidence of how crime is pervasive across all sections of the population (Bessant et al. 1998). In this way the report adds weight to the technocratic approach to juvenile crime control in which calculations of risk are central to the design of preventive programs in supposedly 'crime-prone' neighbourhoods and communities.

Crime has long been constituted by conventional criminologists as conduct associated with 'the poor' the 'urban working class' and/or 'young people'. All that

remains for the criminologist is to record, catalogue, classify, and report on the nature and extent of the 'crime problem' (Garland 1997).[6] *Pathways to Prevention* struggles ineffectually against this conventional assumption. On the one hand it argues that the conservative 'law 'n' order' tradition is 'exclusionary, presupposing a core of 'decent people' distinct from a criminal element that must be contained if it cannot be excluded' (National Crime Prevention 1999, p. 2). This is a problem because as 'progressives' they know that the 'developmental perspective is inclusive, embedding potential young offenders in their families and embedding their families in the wider society' (National Crime Prevention 1999, p. 5).

This approach to the 'who' question; that is, who commits crime, in turn helps to identify the kinds of evidence held to be relevant. In this case the researchers assume that the evidence will need to reflect long term dispositional factors best uncovered by longitudinal research.

How is the evidence linked to knowledge claims?

The report identifies different types of offenders, ranging from the non-offender to the 'serious offender'. This kind of research neither identifies or defends its assumption that the clustering of attributes according to certain 'types' of offenders depends on the knowledge claim that each member of the assumed group actually shares a uniform set of 'tendencies', and that the population falls neatly into such a set of sub-groups. Is the differentiation between the 'normal' child as against the inherently 'anti-social', 'serious', and 'at risk' offender anything more than an exercise in stereotyping? These typologies are caricatures more reminiscent of 'popular' stereotypes found in popular psychology than the nuanced result of considered empirical research (Bessant et al. 1998).

The taken-for-granted character of the 'crime problem' compounds the view that only working class, young, poor people, and members of the 'underclass' do crime. The report makes no effort to understand the point of view of those caught in the flux of social change. Rather, the language and conceptualisation of the report transforms those who are 'at risk' into docile, even silent subjects distinguished only by their potential for disorder.

The authors of *Pathways to Prevention* derive 'risk factors' from numerous longitudinal studies. Risk factors include 'genetic and biological characteristics of the child, family characteristics of the child, family characteristics, stressful life events and community or cultural factors' (National Crime Prevention 1999, p. 11). They are also heavily —

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6 This approach to the study of crime characterised not only the individualistic focus of neo-classical criminology at the end of the nineteenth century but also the early sociological forays into 'street corner' crime and delinquency associated with the Chicago school of the 1920s.

yet silently — dependent on longstanding views about the essential nature of adolescence. Yet contrary to both commonsense and the 20th century research on life-cycles, there is no biological basis for the ways the categories 'childhood', 'adolescence' and 'youth' have been either constituted or understood (Griffin 1995).

In their table of risk and protective factors the report's authors identify a long list of psycho-bio-medical antecedents under the heading 'Child Factors'. These include: premature birth, low birth weight, disability, low intelligence, difficult temperament, insecure attachment, poor social skills, lack of empathy, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Under 'Family Factors', 'Life Events', and 'Community and Cultural Factors' they include a broad assortment of risk indicators. Along with aspects of family form, structure and functioning, the authors refer to significant events associated with family life (like separation, divorce, and bereavement) and the nature of school experience ('deviant peer group', 'poor attachment to school', inadequate behaviour management, and so on). Under 'Community and Cultural Factors' the authors cite structural problems (socio-economic disadvantage, neighbourhood violence and crime, and so on) and cultural matters such as male portrayals of violence and other forms of violent cultural expression.

The report spares no effort in seeking to reveal the vast number of factors that place some people 'at risk'. Yet the very scale of the multiple and imbricated factors that the report posits as risks of offending is a weakness rather than a strength. The lists of 'at risk' factors, conceived in narrow developmental terms, are so wide ranging as to render any attempt at prediction extremely difficult, a point the report tacitly acknowledges (1999, p. 138–9). The key lists (under the headings of individual, family, community) are like giant nets that capture entire populations of children, young people, and their families who may now be considered a potential risk to social order.

There is a fundamental problem with the assumptions at work in the constructive scheme used in the *Pathways to Prevention* report. The persistent search for the predictive factors that 'cause' crime either directly or stochastically has been largely fruitless. Katz epitomises this point:

> Whatever the validity of the hereditary, psychological, and social-ecological conditions of crime, many of those in the identified causal categories do not commit crime. Many people who do commit crime do not fit the causal categories. Many who do fit the background categories and later committed crime, go for long periods without committing or attempting to commit the crime to which the theory directs them (1988, p. 5).

The Report makes it plain that the kinds of crime, and the kind of population in which they are interested, are the crimes of the urban poor. The population under

study is thus identified in terms of criminogenic ('at risk') 'life styles'. State officials direct their attentions towards this population, irrespective of whether intervention is desired or warranted. The authors of *Pathways to Prevention* do not attempt to theorise the connection between policing (in its broadest sense) and criminalisation, or to examine the practices that have led to such an intense scrutiny of those living in poverty in urban areas. Rather, the report identifies a crime problem, and proposes a technical approach to risk management to fix it. Problems of government mismanagement and the failure of 'social responsibility' in catering for the ravages of economic and social restructuring or the failure of governments to invest in social and physical infrastructure are glossed over entirely.

The report also overlooks the researchers' own moral and political values. The proposition, found in much of the qualitative research literature (see Blaikie 1993) that personal and social values inevitably inform the research discourse is ignored. As Caspi et al. (1995) point out, categories like 'inadequate parental supervision', 'impulsivity', 'sluggishness' or the all consuming 'at risk' category, may reveal more about the ethno-centric and class-centric views and prejudices of the researchers than they do about the world to which they are applied.

The point to draw from this discussion is a rather simple one: no evidence claim underpinning evidence-based policy arguments can be considered detached, value free, and neutral. We have also argued that while policy and research can be based on 'evidence', not all evidence is equal, nor equally robust. And in a modest critique of some long standing conventional thinking, we have suggested that not all empirical social scientific argument is 'empirical' in the conventional sense of the word, in which 'empirical' mean a knowledge claim that refers to whatever is real. As Pierre Manent argues, all such attempts to 'know' reality are underwritten by the 'sociological viewpoint' they rely on, and which:

> adopts the viewpoint of the spectator. The viewpoint of the spectator is all the more pure and scientific in that it accords no real initiative whatever to the agent or agents, but considers their actions or their works as the necessary effect of necessary causes (1998, p. 54).

We think it would be better if social researchers paid more attention to a social phenomenology of 'action', 'feeling', and 'experience' (Katz 1988) situated in real figurations (Elias 1987). This approach could provide the core conceptual and 'empirical' focus for reconstituting and reviving social policy research and formation.[7] Such a reconstituted social science would be less preoccupied with

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[7] The scholarship of McDonald (1999), Bourgois (1996), and Tourigny (1998), for example, show how ethnography, particularly that which engages with the experiences of marginalised people, can be inserted into social policy debates. Its significance lies in ethnography's capacity to draw connections between the micro (intra-organisational and interpersonal) and macro

fussing about securing its guarantees of truth or objectivity and be more preoccupied with recognising and developing the capacity for 'practical judgement'. However our intention here is not to mount an argument about how to do this or why it would be worth doing. Our aim has been to challenge apparently naturalised notions of 'evidence' and to highlight some of the problems of adopting narrow methodological and conceptual conventions in policy research. In this process, we need above all else 'to think what we do' (Arendt 1958).

Fundamentally, we think it is important to recognise that claims about the nature of the social world are based on assembled sets of assumptions about the relationship between the lived world and its human inhabitants. These sets of assumptions cobbled together and articulated through language form the sorts of arguments that are advanced as 'facts'. Language is very important because we take our account of policy problems and solutions from these representations. As Majone (cited by Fischer & Forrester 1993, p. 2) argues: 'As politicians know only too well, but social scientists often forget, public policy is made of language. Whether in written or oral form, argument is central in all stages of the policy process'.

Conclusion

It should be clear that we are not opposed to the idea of evidence-based policy and we are not suggesting that policy-making is a completely irrational affair where multiple forms of evidence have no relevance. On the other hand, if advocating evidence-based policy means proposing that policy-making can be reduced to the technical calculation of effectiveness and costing of well-defined policy options then the answer must be 'no' (Perri 2002). There is a risk that 'evidence-based policy' will become a means for policy elites increase their strategic control over what constitutes knowledge about social problems in a way that devalues tacit forms of knowledge, practice based wisdom, professional judgment, and the voices of ordinary citizens.

The transferability of the principles of evidence-based medicine into the human services is questionable. Providing social care, for example, is difficult and complex. It is certainly possible to evaluate the impacts of professional judgments and draw some conclusions about 'what works', but it is much more difficult than testing drugs in the medical field (Lewis 2002, p. 9). Parsons argues that what works is often not a question of facts or evidence so much of values: 'This requires a policy process that is open and democratic and which can facilitate a process of deliberation and public learning, rather than control' (2001, p. 104). Knowledge about 'what works' in a

(policy and legislation). Ethnography's capacity to engage in micro-analysis 'provides the often-missed grounded analysis with implications for policy and practice of myriad kinds' (Lyon 1997, p. 12).

particular policy field should not be overly prescriptive or narrowly defined in terms of seemingly 'objective' scientific criteria.

What is urgently needed is critical reflection on the assumptions that some social researchers constitute and pass off as 'evidence'. In offering an analytic for this purpose, we have tried to assert a more critical understanding of policy processes and a more encompassing and ultimately democratic definition of what can count as 'evidence'. Important challenges remain about the means and capacity to realise a more 'evidence-informed policy'. Policy-making is a contested and contingent practice, and stakeholders assert various forms of knowledge in the context of material and hierarchical power relations. Accordingly, as Nutley et al. remind us 'The relationships between research, knowledge, policy and practice are always likely to remain loose, shifting and contingent' (2002, . 10).

Equally important, the shift to evidence-based policy is no guarantee that either good research or good policy will automatically eventuate. Simplistic models of evidence-based policy-making and practice fail as either accurate descriptions or effective prescriptions (Nutley et al. 2002, p. 10). As Solesbury puts it, 'Emphasising the role of power and authority at the expense of knowledge and expertise in public affairs seems cynical; emphasising the latter at the expense of the former seems naïve' (2001, p. 9). Research evidence potentially has the most impact when there is sufficient political will and an organisational culture that values all form of 'evidence', but many policy case studies attest to the fact that policy-making is rarely a case of rationally identifying a policy problem and using research evidence to develop and implement a policy solution (see Bacchi 1999, Marston 2000). The possibility of realising evidence-based policy will depend on organisational cultures where decision-makers value research inputs. The extent to which this culture exists is likely to vary over time and from one policy community to another. The case of Australia's current refugee policies is an example where independent research is attributed little value, and consequently has very limited impact. In contrast, Australia's quick and well co-ordinated response to the HIV/AIDS crisis in the early 1980s demonstrates the potential of having researchers, different levels of government, social movements, and service users working in an environment that values the latest research. Within research communities and within government, the disregard of past research can also be a matter of ignorance or fashion (Solesbury 2001). We must not forget that there are some facts that government would rather not know, or would rather forget (for example, the role of Australian governmental authorities in the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families).

It does not necessarily follow that rational decision-making or professional policy-making produces better outcomes than those based upon hunches, intuition, or whatever can be meant by 'unprofessional policy-making' (Parsons 2001). We agree with Nutley et al. that improving the use of evidence in policy will involve (1) a case-

by-case agreement as to what counts as evidence and in what circumstances; and (2) 'effective *dissemination* of evidence to where it is most needed and the development of effective means of providing wide access to knowledge' (2000, p. 3). This requires that policy-makers and researchers remain 'context sensitive' about the sorts of research methodologies and the types of evidence best suited to different circumstances. Meeting these conditions will not guarantee that research and other forms of evidence will triumph over politics and a range of other inputs into policy, but they will at least increase the prospect of a more democratic and less simplistic conceptual and practical relationship between evidence and policy outcomes.

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