

Dr David Orr, Social Work: D.Orr@sussex.ac.uk

Introduction

Evidence has become a major part of governments' approaches to policy making, practice intervention and evaluation of 'what works' and best value. Claims to be 'evidence based' are taken to be the rationale and the measure of accountability, for expenditure on public services, for their effectiveness and cost-effectiveness. The paradigms and models currently used to define evidence-based practice have often travelled from the medical into the social field, giving rise to lively debate as to the nature of evidence, philosophical considerations about the nature of meaning and knowledge, issues of technical implementation, and questions about the relation between research, policy and practice.

This module takes a critical stance in analysing the relationship between research, knowledge production and dissemination, and decision-making in practice and policy. Rather than prescribing and teaching particular methodologies to feed into evidence-based policy and practice, it explores the philosophy, epistemology and politics underpinning contemporary hierarchies of evidence. There will be particular emphasis placed on the theories underpinning research synthesis, that is to say, attempts to develop more sophisticated methods of drawing conclusions for policy and practice from often scattered and unwieldy bodies of research. Drawing on the extensive theoretical literature, the module aims to provide you with a critical understanding, helping you to relate the debates to your own research interests and explore the implications for your wider disciplinary field.

This module aims to:

- (1) introduce the key issues and themes relating to evidence informed policy and practice;
- (2) critically evaluate the research literature about the relationship between research, policy, practice and decision-making;
- (3) consider the research environment of policy makers, front-line practitioners and professional decision-makers;
- (4) explore the mechanisms for supporting evidence informed policy and practice (systematic reviews, research synthesis, meta-analyses) ;
- (5) evaluate the effects of evidence informed policy and practice on public services, non-governmental organisations and those who use them.

Learning outcomes

1. demonstrate critical awareness of the key themes, issues and competing theories discussed in the evidence informed literature;
2. describe and discuss the types of evidence that could appropriately contribute to research, policy making and/or professional decision making;
3. critically evaluate the processes involved in whether and how evidence informed research is transmitted to policy and/or practice;
4. show understanding of the general methodological principles of the main approaches to evidence informed policy and practice, and appraise their use.

Assessment

The course is assessed by a written essay of 2000 words.

“A critical reflection on the application of evidence-informed policy and practice in a chosen area of interest”

Assessment is by a written essay of 2000 words. Students will select an area of activity, planning or research, and discuss it in relation to the themes of the module. The choice of area will be made in accordance with their own individual research interests and in discussion with the course tutor. There will be plenty of opportunities for discussion over the course of the module about how students might relate teaching content to their own research interests for the purposes of the assignment.

Indicative Reading

The course aims to stimulate discussion among participants on different approaches to evidence, drawing on our different disciplinary backgrounds to challenge and gain different perspectives on the ideas presented. The indicative reading is drawn from a range of disciplines and fields, and students are encouraged to follow their own interests in making selections of what to read, while being open to perspectives from other areas which they might not normally explore in the course of their work.

The selection of readings below therefore represents only a very limited selection.

- Attree, P. & Milton, B. (2006) 'Critically appraising qualitative research for systematic reviews: defusing the methodological cluster bombs', *Evidence & Policy*, 2(1), pp. 109-126.
- Behague, D., Tawiah, C., Rosato, M., Some, T. & Morrison, J. (2009) 'Evidence-based policy-making: the implications of globally-applicable research for context-specific problem-solving in developing countries', *Social Science and Medicine*, 69, pp. 1539-1546.
- Biesta, G. (2007) 'Why "What works" won't work: evidence-based practice and the democratic deficit in educational research', *Educational Theory*, 57(1), pp. 1-22.
- Brown, C. (2014) 'The policy agora: how power inequalities affect the interaction between researchers and policy makers', *Evidence and Policy*, 10(3), pp.421-438.
- Chalmers, I. (2005) 'If evidence-informed policy works in practice, does it matter if it doesn't work in theory?' *Evidence and Policy*, 1(2), pp. 227-242.
- Clegg, S. (2005) 'Evidence-based practice in educational research: a critical realist critique of systematic review', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 26 (3), pp. 415-428.
- Daigneault, P., Jacob, S. and Ouimet, M. (2014) 'Using systematic review methods within a Ph.D. dissertation in political science: challenges and lessons learned from practice', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 17 (3), pp. 267-283.
- Denzin, N.K. (2009) 'The elephant in the living room: or extending the conversation about the politics of evidence', *Qualitative Research*, 9(2), pp. 139-160.
- Dixon-Woods, M., Bonas, S., Booth, A., Jones, D.R., Miller, T., Sutton, A.J., Shaw, R.L., Smith, J.A. & Young, B. (2006) 'How can systematic reviews incorporate qualitative research? A critical perspective', *Qualitative Research* 6(1), pp.27-44
- Doyle, L.H. (2003) 'Synthesis through meta-ethnography: paradoxes, enhancements, and possibilities', *Qualitative Research* 3(3), pp. 321-344

- Ecks, S. (2008) 'Three Propositions for an Evidence-based Medical Anthropology', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 14 (Suppl. 1), pp. S77-S92.
- Elgert, L. (2009) 'Politicizing sustainable development: the co-production of globalized evidence-based policy', *Critical Policy Studies*, 3(3-4), pp. 375-390.
- Engelke, M. (2009) *The Objects of Evidence: Anthropological Approaches to the Production of Knowledge*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Fox, N.J. (2003) 'Practice-based Evidence: Towards Collaborative and Transgressive Research', *Sociology*, 37(1), pp. 81-102.
- Goldenberg, M.J. (2006) 'Evidence and evidence-based medicine: Lessons from the philosophy of science', *Social Science and Medicine*, 62, pp. 2621-2632.
- Gray, M, Plath, D and Webb, SA (2009) *Evidence-based Social Work: a critical stance*. London: Routledge.
- Gray, M. & McDonald, C. (2006) 'Pursuing Good Practice? The Limits of Evidence-based Practice', *Journal of Social Work*, 6(1), pp. 7-20.
- Hammersley, M. (2005) 'Is the evidence-based practice movement doing more good than harm? Reflections on Iain Chalmers' case for research-based policy making and practice', *Evidence and Policy*, 1(1), pp. 85-100.
- Hammersley, M. (2013) *The Myth of Research-based Policy & Practice*. London: Sage.
- Knaapen, L. (2013) 'Being 'evidence-based' in the absence of evidence: the management of non-evidence in guideline development', *Social Studies of Science*, 43(5), pp. 681-706.
- MacLure, M (2004) "Clarity bordering on stupidity": where's the quality in systematic review?' *Journal of Education Policy*, 20 (4), pp. 393-416.
- Moat, K.A., Lavis, J.N. & Abelson, J. (2013) 'How Contexts and Issues influence the use of policy-relevant research syntheses: a Critical Interpretive Synthesis,' *Millbank Quarterly*, 91(3), pp. 604-648.
- Morse, J.M. (2006) The politics of evidence, *Qualitative Health Research* 16(3), pp. 395-404
- Oancea, A. and Pring, R. (2008) 'The importance of being thorough: on systematic accumulations of 'what works' in education research,' *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 42(S1): 15-39.
- Oliver, S., Innvar, S., Lorenc, T., Woodman, J. & Thomas, J. (2014) A systematic review of barriers to and facilitators of the use of evidence by policy makers, *BMC Health Services Research* 14(2). <http://www.biomedcentral.com/1472-6963/14/2>
- Parkhurst, J. (2016) *The Politics of Evidence: From evidence-based policy to the good governance of evidence*. London: Routledge.
- Parsons, W. (2002) 'From Muddling Through to Muddling Up – Evidence Based Policy Making and the Modernisation of British Government', *Public Policy and Administration*, 17, pp. 43-60.
- Pawson, R. (2006) *Evidence-based Policy: A Realist Perspective*, London, Sage.
- Pawson, R. (2006) 'Digging for Nuggets: How 'Bad' Research Can Yield 'Good' Evidence', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 9(2): 127-142
- Pawson, R., Greenhalgh, T., Harvey, G. & Walshe K (2005) 'Realist review – a new method of systematic review designed for complex policy interventions', *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*, 10, S1, 21.
- Pawson, R., Wong, G. & Owen, L. (2011) 'Known knowns, known unknowns, unknown unknowns: the predicament of evidence-based policy', *American Journal of Evaluation*, 32(4), pp. 518-546.
- Rabeharisoa, V., Moreira, T. & Akrich, M. (2014) 'Evidence-based activism: patients', users' and activists' groups in knowledge society', *Biosocieties* 9(2), pp. 111-128.

- Riese, H., Carlsen, B. and Glenton, C. (2014) 'Qualitative research synthesis: how the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts', *Anthropology in Action*, 21 (2), pp. 23-30.
- Sandelowski, M., Voils, C., Barroso, J. and Lee, E. (2008) "Distorted into Clarity": a methodological case study illustrating the paradox of systematic review', *Research in Nursing and Health*, 31 (5), pp. 454-465.
- Sharland, E. & Taylor, I. (2006) 'Social work and social care research: a suitable case for systematic review?', *Evidence & Policy*, 2(4), pp.503-523.
- Snilstveit, B. (2012) 'Systematic reviews: from 'bare bones' reviews to policy relevance', *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, 4 (3), pp. 388-408.
- Stevens, A. (2011) 'Telling policy stories: an ethnographic study of the use of evidence in policy-making in the UK', *Journal of Social Policy*, 40(2), pp. 237-255.
- Storeng, K.T. & Behague, D. (2014) "Playing the numbers game": evidence-based advocacy and the technocratic narrowing of the Safe Motherhood Initiative', *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 28(2), pp. 260-279.
- Timmermans, S. And Berg, M. (2003) *The Gold Standard: The Challenge of Evidence-based Medicine and Standardization in Health Care*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Traynor, M. (2009) 'Indeterminacy and technicality revisited: how medicine and nursing have responded to the evidence-based movement', *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 31(4), pp. 494-507.
- Treadwell, K. & Bartley, B. (2011) 'Whose evidence base? The dynamic effects of ownership, receptivity and values on collaborative evidence-informed policy making', *Evidence and Policy*, 7(4), pp. 511-530.
- Widmer, T. (2009) 'The contribution of evidence-based policy to the output-oriented legitimacy of the state', *Evidence and Policy*, 5(4), pp. 351-372.
- Wilkinson, K. (2011) 'Organised chaos: an interpretive approach to evidence-based policy making in Defra', *Political Studies*, 59, pp. 959-977.
- Wright, J., Parry, J. & Mathers, J. (2007) 'What to do about political context?' Evidence synthesis, the New Deal for Communities and the possibilities for evidence-based policy,' *Evidence and Policy*, 3(2), pp. 253-269.