



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation

Policy Evaluation

Contributors: Chi Yan Lam

Edited by: Bruce B. Frey

Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation

Chapter Title: "Policy Evaluation"

Pub. Date: 2018

Access Date: March 12, 2018

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks,

Print ISBN: 9781506326153

Online ISBN: 9781506326139

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506326139.n523>

Print pages: 1258-1261

©2018 SAGE Publications, Inc.. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

Policy evaluation refers to the systematic investigation and determination of value of a policy—and can take place in various sectors, including education. Policy evaluators apply evaluation methodologies and employ social scientific research methodologies to answer evaluation questions in support of policy making, policy development, and policy decision making. Policy evaluation is rarely undertaken for its own sake but mostly conducted in connection to the policy cycle. Because of the inherent political nature of policies, policy evaluation is increasingly undertaken by policy actors—both governmental and nongovernmental parties—with interests in shaping the political agenda. Hence, awareness into both the technical and political dimensions of policy evaluation is important to its understanding and execution.

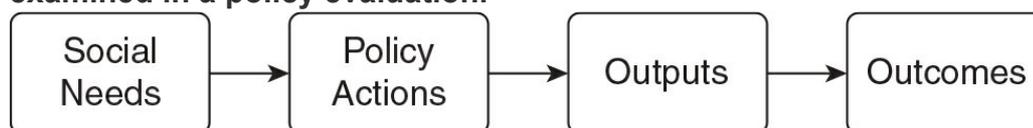
Policy as the Evaluand

The focus on policy as the evaluand—the object to be evaluated—in policy evaluation demarcates the unique domain within which policy evaluation operates. The specific nature of policy—its constitution, function, and purpose—carries implication for its evaluation.

A policy can be broadly understood in terms of the system of ideas and actions that are intended to either promote or constrain certain actions and behaviors for the purpose of achieving certain intended valued outcomes. Policies are almost always introduced in response to a perceived discrepancy between what is desired and what is the current state, otherwise known as a need. The system of ideas and actions, which constitute a policy, ought to offer a logical remedy to the perceived need; policy actions usually take on the form of policy instruments, such as legislation, agreements, and programs and services. Through implementation of the policy, intended valued outcomes are to be achieved. A core goal of policy evaluation is to determine the extent to which intended outcomes have been realized or not. Put simply: Is the policy making a difference in ways policy makers had expected?

Yet, as rational as a policy may sound in principle, the design of policies is never as rational or immutable as one would like. A helpful way to think about policy is through framing it in a problem-solving frame (Figure 1). A policy comprises policy actions (solution) intended to accomplish some valued goals (outcomes) in response to remedy a perceived social need (problem). The interrelationships between that of policy actions as a response to some perceived social need and that of policy actions and instruments and its ability in effecting intended valued outcomes is an important one to observe: They are tentative at best until a policy becomes implemented and its effects become knowable. Policy evaluation, therefore, serves an important function in bringing empirically generated evidence to bear on understanding the substance and consequences of a policy.

Figure 1 A model of the logical relationships underpinning components of a policy. A policy may be analyzed and understood in terms of the relationships which underpin various components of a policy. These relationships, once made explicit, can be examined in a policy evaluation.



Types of Policy Evaluation

In practice, policy evaluation can be conducted in a number of ways differing in the manner in

which they are conducted, the policy actors who engage in them, and their intended effects. Michael Howlett, M. Ramesh, and Anthony Perl observe three broad categories: administrative evaluation, judicial evaluation, and political evaluation.

Administrative Evaluation

Administrative evaluation is concerned with the logical consistency and implementation of the policy concerning how resources are used to organize activities, and the extent to which organized activities are able to accomplish intended outcomes. Administrative evaluations are typically undertaken by governmental actors, usually as a part of policy implementation, to understand how a policy is implemented in context and its effects on populations. Conducting an administrative evaluation of a policy requires the systematic collection of data concerning the policy's implementation: demographics and other characteristics of interest concerning the targeted population, detailed description about organized activities, as well as careful, defensible measurement concerning outcomes of interest. The scope of administrative evaluation is wide and the efforts needed to conduct one can be extensive. For that reason, administrative evaluations are typically focused on more manageable aspects of the policy.

Process evaluation typically focuses the evaluation on the efficient delivery and operation of the activities. The relationship of interest is that of inputs and activities. The objective is usually to identify processes for which more resources are used than is typically needed (efficiency), the extent to which the processes make a meaningful contribution toward the goals of the policy (effectiveness), or whether the activities are conducted in a responsible way or as agreed upon between the funding party and the implementation party (accountability).

Performance evaluation typically focuses the evaluation on the immediate outputs stemming from administering the activities. Examples include enrollment, attendance, retention (the number of students or clients who remain with the intervention until the end), and "success" (the number of students or clients who remain with the intervention until the end and have achieved the predetermined standard).

Efficiency evaluation focuses the evaluation on understanding whether a policy can achieve a comparable level of performance in outputs using less resources. Such a determination requires a careful examination into the inputs–activities–outputs relationship. Duplication or redundancy in services and organizational processes are typical foci in efficiency evaluation. Such evaluation may also make a determination as to whether a comparable level of performance can be achieved by substituting a less costly option over a more costly one.

Effectiveness evaluation focuses the evaluation on determining the ways in which and the extent to which a policy achieves its intended outcomes—that is, changes in state—given the inputs invested. In practical terms, effectiveness evaluation is sometimes referred to as value-for-money evaluation. It is helpful to distinguish policy outcomes by logical expectancy in terms of near-term outcomes and far-term outcomes (impact). This is because policies are often articulated in far-term outcomes, which tend to be broad and ambiguous. Focusing efforts on realizing the near-term outcomes helps to ensure that far-term outcomes are achievable in the long run.

Much of administrative evaluation compares what gets implemented of a policy against what was planned or articulated. This mode of comparison is sometimes referred to as goal-attainment evaluation. Focusing an evaluation on goals can ignore wider dynamics at play.

First, a policy evaluation is wise to account for unintended consequences arising from the implementation of the policy. Doing so would require the evaluation to be open to unintended changes in the context or systems that the policy is intended to shape; adopting correspondingly a methodological approach that would facilitate examination into consequences beyond what had been anticipated, expected, and intended is important. Second, it may be important to approach an evaluation without reference to a policy's action or targets in order to describe and "reflect back" to policy stakeholders what is truly happening "on the ground." On that basis, a determination is made. This approach is known as the goal-free approach to evaluation. The value of this approach is derived from the observation that the premise upon which a policy was formulated or its policy actions may in fact be flawed or incomplete in addressing the underlying social need.

Judicial Evaluation

Judicial evaluation is concerned with the legal issues surrounding the substance and implementation of the policy. Judicial evaluation applies legal principles and standards to determine the soundness of policies. For that reason, judicial evaluation is often undertaken by the judiciary and by professionals with legal training. In education, examples include testing the constitutionality surrounding particular policies and examining policy with respect to providing equitable access to programs and fair treatment of groups in their participation. A policy may also be subjected to an ethical evaluation. An ethical evaluation is concerned with measuring a policy against preexisting value systems and established ethical standards.

Political Evaluation

Political evaluation refers to evaluation undertaken by political actors who desire to shape the political discourse around a policy. This type of evaluation distinguishes itself from the other two by placing less emphasis on the rigor with which evaluative claims are generated and advanced and more on the messages that the evaluation sends. Hence, the goal is rarely aimed at improving policy but to advance a political agenda. In 2009, Howlett, Ramesh, and Perl observed that "unlike administrative and judicial evaluations, political evaluations are usually neither systematic nor technically sophisticated. Indeed, many are inherently partisan, one-sided, and biased" (p. 174). In some cases, a politically motivated evaluation can result in the evaluation being judged as gratuitous (i.e., lacking in any genuine intention or effort in using the evaluation) or as symbolic (i.e., using evaluation as a mechanism to justify preexisting positions). In other cases, a political evaluation can lead to genuine policy improvement by enabling participation from political actors.

Logic of Evaluation

Despite the many types of policy evaluation, at the core of any policy evaluation is the requirement to determine the value—merit, worth, and significance—of the policy. This determination generally involves selecting criteria for determining merit, setting standards of performance, measuring performance, and synthesizing the results into a value statement. What constitutes a policy of value is itself a value-laden determination. Whose values ought to be incorporated and by what means could values be surfaced have been the subject of many debates, particularly in hotly contested political issues, and the topic of many scholarly articles. Any policy evaluation that shies away from making an evaluative claim risks falling short of today's professional standards.

Approaches to Evaluation

Policy evaluations may be further classified by their intended purpose. A summative evaluation renders a summative judgment about the value of a policy. Summative evaluations typically inform decisions surrounding continuation or cessation of funding or to allow for comparison between alternative policy strategies. Formative evaluation renders a judgment about the value of a policy but well in advance of the summative evaluation. A formative evaluation is typically narrower in scope than a summative evaluation, allowing for a more focused examination around processes, structures, and other components of the program. Formative evaluation typically supports improvement processes. Developmental evaluation, a recent methodological advancement in evaluation, supports the development—refinement (doing something better), innovation (doing something differently), and evolution (ongoing change)—in the overall policy and/or its components. The evaluator works collaboratively as an embedded member of the development team to support evaluation inquiry. Together, these three approaches afford the contemporary policy evaluator evaluation approaches that are compatible with all phases of a policy lifecycle—from its inception to its cessation.

Challenges

Policy evaluation can suffer from a multitude of challenges:

- Difficulty in identifying and observing target population, particularly with difficult-to-serve populations
- Reaching agreement among stakeholders concerning values systems and performance standards
- Lack of strong evidence base to support or justify policy content
- Lack of appropriate or sufficiently robust measures
- Difficulty in accessing or generating appropriate data
- Difficulty in establishing a basis for comparison
- Undue pressure to conduct an evaluation at a hastened pace or to produce favorable results.

To guard against these challenges, the field of evaluation has established professional standards. Examples include the *American Evaluation Association Guiding Principles for Evaluators* and Canadian Evaluation Society's *Competencies for Canadian Evaluation Practice*. The field has also made a concerted effort to delineate what constitutes quality evaluation processes and products. The *Program Evaluation Standards*, published by the Joint Committee for Standards for Educational Evaluation, is one example. The Canadian Evaluation Society has established a credentialing program to assist evaluation consumers in identifying and procuring services from competent evaluators. These developments reflect the ongoing professionalization of the field to better meet the needs of evaluation users and enhance the quality and utilization of evaluation.

See also [American Evaluation Association](#); [Developmental Evaluation](#); [Formative Evaluation](#); [Logic Models](#); [Process Evaluation](#); [Program Evaluation](#); [Stakeholders](#); [Summative Evaluation](#)

Chi Yan Lam

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781506326139.n523>

10.4135/9781506326139.n523

Further Readings

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). Using evaluation to inform CDC's policy

process. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Howlett, M., Ramesh, M., & Perl, A. (2009). *Studying public policy: Policy cycles and policy subsystems*. Toronto, Canada: Oxford University Press.

Patton, M. Q. (2011). *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.