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Abstract
This paper is concerned with applying theories of the policy process to evaluating national drug strategies. It explores the utility of theories, frameworks and models of policy processes for understanding the nature of the evaluation/policy nexus, and for maximising the likelihood that drug strategy evaluations will actually contribute to the development of sound social policy on drugs. It addresses scholars’ assertion that ‘There is nothing as practical as a good theory’. We argue that people evaluating policies and their implementation—especially large, complex social interventions such as national drug strategies—will benefit from applying a policy lens to their work. Doing so can provide an entry point to the evaluation, help set boundaries, and contribute to evaluation design.

We evaluated the 2004-2009 phase of Australia’s National Drug Strategy, and use that evaluation to explore policy theory as an aid to understanding drug policy processes. The policy theories that are available include the systems model, the stages heuristic, the rational/comprehensive model, the bounded rationality model, institutional rational choice frameworks, the incrementalism model, the punctuated equilibrium theory, the multiple streams model and the advocacy coalitions model. Each contributes to understanding Australia’s National Drug Strategy and has potential for contributing to its evaluation.

We conclude that policy theory provides, to evaluators of national drug strategies, insights into the policies that they are evaluating that would otherwise remain hidden. Furthermore, it potentially contributes to focusing the evaluation, interpreting the findings and enhancing evaluation utilisation.
Purpose

In the context of evaluating national drug strategies, this paper aims to explore how evaluators use theories, frameworks and models of policy processes aids understanding of the nature of the evaluation/policy nexus. It also explores how such an approach can increase the likelihood that the evaluation processes and products will actually contribute to the development of sound national drug policies. It addresses scholars’ assertion that ‘There is nothing as practical as a good theory’ (e.g. Pawson 2003).

The use of theory in research and evaluation

Evaluators are increasingly recognising the special issues involved in evaluating complex, multi-faceted social interventions (a book addressing this topic specifically is under preparation: Schwartz, Forss & Marra forthcoming). Glouberman and Zimmerman’s (2002) conceptual work in this area has had significant impacts, and their differentiation between simple, complicated and complex problems and interventions has been taken further by those seeking to modify standard program logic approaches to more adequately address the issues involved in evaluating large scale social interventions (e.g. Rogers 2008). Australia’s National Drug Strategy (discussed below) has many of the characteristics of a complex intervention, including self-organisation, emergent properties and uncertainty owing to the operation of feedback loops: changes that occur in one part of the complex system can create unpredictable changes in other parts. This complexity is one of the reasons for giving attention to the usefulness and role of theory in evaluating such interventions. The complexity means that approaches to evaluation that have been developed for relatively small, simple programs may not be effective in these situations.

In discussing policy analysis, Parsons (1995, p. vxi) differentiates ‘analysis in and for the policy process’ from ‘analysis of the policy process: how problems are defined, agendas set, policy formulated, decisions made and policy evaluated and implemented’. The second approach, analysis of the policy process, is our focus. It can be implemented without reference to policy theory or, alternatively, theory can be applied explicitly as a tool for deepening understanding. We argue that applying policy theory to drug policy evaluation provides an entry point for the evaluator’s work. It has the potential for enhancing understanding of what happened in a complex intervention, what was planned but did not eventuate, the unintended consequences of the intervention, goal creep, the level of implementation fidelity, and so on. We appreciate, however, that policy evaluation is an intensely practical activity, with many practitioners having little appreciation of the social science theory that potentially illuminates both evaluation and the contexts within which it is undertaken. Rarely does an evaluation proposal or final report reveal the theoretical underpinnings of the endeavour. Green, writing from a health promotion perspective, argued that

...relatively few research and evaluation reports document fully the theoretical analysis underpinning the development of programmes and exactly how that analysis was translated into action. Even fewer provide a rationale for the selection of theoretical models. Greater transparency about these issues in publications would be of immediate relevance to practitioners, and also contribute to a more general understanding of the process of theory selection and utilization (Green 2000, p. 126).

1 This is an updated, expanded and refocussed version of a paper presented to the Australasian Evaluation Society International Conference, Canberra, 2-5 September 2009, prior to the release of the report of the evaluation of Australia’s National Drug Strategy 2004-2009.
It is also useful to note the two types of theory that can be drawn upon to aid understanding of social interventions, including large, complex ones such as national drug strategies. The first is what Green (2000) and Pawson (2006) advocate: identifying the basic or applied social science theory that illuminates the active ingredients, the ‘theory-of-action’ (Funnell 1997) of the intervention, in this case the drug strategy and/or its components. For example, the prevention component could be based on theory of the social determinants of health and well-being (e.g. Spooner & Hetherington 2005) or on criminal justice system deterrence theory (e.g. Lenton 2005). In contrast, we are drawing attention to theories of the policy process, i.e. theories that help illuminate how issues get on the policy agenda, and how policy is made.

An overview of policy models

In the discipline of policy studies we find a number of theories, frameworks and models that have potential to enhance understanding of how policy is made. These are some of the most prominent of them (key sources include Birkland 2005; Buse, Mays & Walt 2005, Howlett, Ramesh & Perl 2009; Kingdon 2003; Sabatier 2007):

- The original 1960s systems model: ‘A model of policy-making in which [the] public policy process is seen as the product of a system that processes inputs, such as issues, pressures, information, thereby producing outputs, such as laws, regulations, or other statements of policy’ (Birkland 2005, p. 201).
- The stages heuristic presents policy activity as a cycle beginning with issue identification and then stepping through policy analysis, policy instruments, consultation, coordination, decision, implementation and evaluation.
- The rational/comprehensive model assumes that policy decisions are made rationally with the aim of maximising social gain and on the basis that all required information is available and considered.
- The bounded rationality model posits that people engaged in policy activity act as rationally as possible within the bounds of their capacities and resources. These bounds include lack of time, too much or too little information, the limits of people’s information processing capacity, and political imperatives.
- The institutional rational choice framework focuses on ‘how institutional rules alter the behaviour of intendedly rational individuals motivated by material self choice’ (Sabatier 2007, p. 8)
- The incrementalism model argues that people engaged in policy activity build on their existing information, particularly their knowledge of what worked (or failed) in the past, rather than seek out and attend carefully to new information.
- The punctuated equilibrium model points out that policy is usually stable or changes slowly, incrementally, but is sometimes ‘punctuated’ by significant and powerful changes such as major shifts in public opinion, or changes of government.
- The multiple streams model suggests that problems get on the agenda and solutions are found when three ‘streams’ combine, namely the politics stream, the policy stream and the problem stream. Their combining creates ‘windows of opportunity’.
- The advocacy coalitions model and related policy networks model draw attention to the policy communities that operate within particular policy domains, and the power of advocacy groups, the members of which share common values and beliefs.
A different framing is to focus on where policy activity and decision-making take place. One approach is to differentiate between the vertical and horizontal dimensions (Colebatch 2002). In this framing, the vertical perspective draws attention to policy decisions being made at the top by authorised decision makers such as heads of government agencies. The horizontal perspective, in contrast, draws attention to policy activity as structured interaction between various groups and individuals, including officials, subject matter experts, advocates, etc.

As with models generally, they are not intended to be prescriptive or predictive. Instead, we see them as tools for understanding how policy is made in a particular context and, importantly, as frameworks for describing a particular set of policy activities and potentially for developing strategies for bridging the evaluation/policy divide.

The most prominent and criticised model of the policy process, the stages heuristic (Althaus, Bridgman & Davis 2007; Howlett, Ramesh & Perl 2009;), draws attention to an explicit set of processes usually characterised as policy analysis. It entails the collection of information about the nature of the problem and potential solutions, and weighing competing potential solutions against one another with the goal of producing succinct information that will assist decision-makers to make a properly-informed judgement (Althaus, Bridgman & Davis 2007; Bardach 2005). This is what Parsons (1995, p. xvi) characterises as ‘analysis in and for the policy process’. It is unusual, however, for analysts operating at this stage of drug policy activity to be explicit about the theoretical frameworks that shape problem definition and illuminate the process in identifying and selecting among options for resolving problems. Nonetheless, it is our contention that applying theory in this stage of drug policy development can be beneficial. We base this conclusion in part on our experience of teaching public policy to researchers from the social and physical sciences. Once they grasp the core concepts of policy theory, and gain an overview of the diverse theories that are available to enhance exploration and understanding of how policy is made, they frequently have an ‘ah-ha!’ experience when they realise the utility of the theoretical frameworks for understanding the policy environments within which they are operating.

**How is it useful?**

Green (2000, p. 127) emphasise that ‘It is perhaps important to re-iterate the point that evaluation should be enhanced not restricted by theoretical analyses’. The traditional systems model of the policy process was a worthwhile advance when it was first published by David Easton in the 1960s, reflecting the development of systems thinking at that time. It is still helpful in drawing attention to the environment within which policy activity occurs, and to the feedback loops that exist between the outputs of one set of drug policy activities and the inputs into another. It is problematic, however, in that it treats the political system as a ‘black box’ where a range of inputs are converted by means unknown into a range of outputs. More recent scholarship by evaluators in developing contribution analysis and program logic has sought to overcome this problematic aspect of the systems model of the policy process. Thinking about the basic systems model highlights the fact that some policy models will be helpful in some situations but not helpful, indeed even counter-productive, when applied to other situations.
Policy theory can be useful for evaluating large, complex social interventions including national drug strategies in a number of ways:

- The stages heuristic, with its emphasis on analysis (that is, analysis for and in policy) as one step in the policy cycle, draws attention to the utility of evaluating the relative strengths of competing policy options. In drug policy and program evaluation, it guides evaluators to assess the depth, breadth and quality of the policy analysis that underlies the evaluand, including the extent to which the resulting intervention is evidence-based or evidence-informed.

- Similarly, the rational/comprehensive policy model draws evaluators’ attention towards exploring the degree to which the policy being evaluated is based on an analysis which is rational (an intellectual activity relatively uncontaminated by such things as moral values and advocacy group pressures) and which is also comprehensive in the sense that all the relevant information is taken into account and systematically weighed.

- The bounded rationality model, and the related set of institutional rational choice frameworks, lead the evaluator to look below the surface to understand why particular policy choices were adopted and others rejected as ways of dealing with a particular problem. Sometimes the bounds reflect political realities (the art of the possible). On other occasions, they reflect inadequacies in information and knowledge management, or simply the pressures of time. These bounds were highlighted in a recent report from the Australian National Audit Office on the so-called ‘OzCar affair’ in which a senior Australian Commonwealth public servant argued that problems with policy development and implementation in his agency (Treasury) reflected insufficient time, insufficient information and lack of capacity to engage in systematic policy analysis (Australian National Audit Office 2009).

- The incrementalism model assists evaluators to understand the nature and origins of some policy changes. It leads the policy evaluator to look carefully at the situation before a new policy is developed and implemented. If significant change appeared to be needed but did not occur, the evaluator could apply this model to assess the extent to which decision-makers operated in an incremental mode. They might look for conservative, incremental mindsets in individual policy actors, or seek to determine if the policy environment was not conducive to paradigms shifts.

- In contrast, if significant policy change occurred, and significantly different program contents or processes ensued, the punctuated equilibrium model could be useful, leading evaluators to look for the powerful forces that created a paradigm shift. Similarly, the multiple streams model draws attention to the characteristics of the politics stream (including public opinion), the policy stream (including solutions to the problem), and the problem stream (including the nature of the problem, the likelihood of finding solutions, and how the problem appeared on the policy agenda) the combining of which may have created a window of opportunity for shifts in drug policy.

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2 Evaluand: the entity being evaluated, in this case the National Drug Strategy (Scriven 1991).
Finally, the drug policy evaluator may not find these models useful in understanding the nature of the policy environment and policy change, instead finding value in the advocacy coalitions model. In this circumstance, what may appear to be an irrational set of policy decisions might be readily explainable through an analysis of the organised interest groups applying pressure in a particular policy domain, and the work of policy brokers in trying to find solutions that would be acceptable to a range of advocates holding apparently conflicting positions.

**Australia’s National Drug Strategy**

We are an Australia-based team, led by Dr Mary-Ellen (Mel) Miller of Siggins Miller, that was commissioned to evaluate the 2004–2009 phase of Australia’s National Drug Strategy (NDS). The Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy, the peak decision-making body for the Australian National Drug Strategy, received the report on the evaluation in mid-2009 and recently authorised its public release (Siggins Miller 2009).

The National Drug Strategy has been operating for over two decades and has changed only incrementally over that period. Its core mission, minimising the harms caused by drugs (both legal and illegal) in Australian society, has remained consistent over that period. Also stable has been the partnership approach in which the health, criminal justice and education sectors work together, as do the government, non-government and private sectors. The core of the harm minimisation strategy is characterised as follows:

The principle of harm minimisation has formed the basis of successive phases of Australia’s National Drug Strategy since its inception in 1985...

Australia’s harm-minimisation strategy focuses on both licit and illicit drugs and includes preventing anticipated harm and reducing actual harm. Harm minimisation is consistent with a comprehensive approach to drug-related harm, involving a balance between demand reduction, supply reduction and harm reduction strategies. It encompasses:

- supply reduction strategies to disrupt the production and supply of illicit drugs, and the control and regulation of licit substances;
- demand reduction strategies to prevent the uptake of harmful drug use, including abstinence orientated strategies and treatment to reduce drug use; and

The terms of reference for the evaluation, drawn up by a committee of senior officials primarily from the health and law enforcement sectors and endorsed by the Ministerial Council, are summarised as follows:

The evaluation framework had four key components:

1. Evaluate the NDS as a policy framework that informs stakeholders in the development of their respective drug related policies and programs.
2. Evaluate the outcomes of programs under the NDS, including cost shared funding model projects...
3. Evaluate the roles and workings of the advisory structures that inform the development and implementation of the NDS.
4. Monitor the performance of the NDS with regard to actual and potential drug issues and drug trends in Australia during the period 2006-2009.
These terms of reference were to be applied to assessing each of the four components:

1. The effectiveness of the NDS.
2. The efficiency of the NDS.
3. Identification of future needs for the NDS.
4. Opportunities for future process or other improvements.

It was expected that the project would make recommendations to inform development of the next iteration of the NDS (Siggins Miller 2009, vol.1, p. 3).

The evaluation methodology had, at its core, an overarching systems approach that involved the use of program logic (program theory modelling) and contribution analysis:

The systems approach considered the NDS as a whole, and the social, policy, economic and community context in which it operates. Program logic models spelled out the logic of NDS activities, and formed the basis of matrices setting out the outcomes expected from these activities...

These methods offered a systematic process for first articulating and then studying the diverse range of factors affecting the success of the NDS, and for identifying appropriate research methods, data sources and indicators to evaluate the NDS and its component parts.

This program logic approach was supplemented by a contribution analysis to assess the extent of NDS contribution to changes in drug-related harm in Australia. This analysis recognises that the performance of any government program of effort is complexly determined, and that even large complex government programs only ever make a contribution to outcomes.

Information was gathered from multiple data sources and triangulated to identify key findings and issues and to inform the development of recommendations. For each key component, a set of research activities was performed, consisting primarily of documentation and literature reviews, consultations with stakeholders and case studies (Siggins Miller 2009, vol. 1, p. 4).

The recommendations of the evaluation included maintaining the strengths of the NDS, particularly its ‘three pillars approach’, i.e. seeking to attain and maintain an appropriate balance between supply reduction, demand reduction and harm reduction; addressing all psychoactive substances within the one National Drug Strategy; and enhancing partnerships. It also drew attention to weaknesses and areas for improvement over the ensuing five-year phase of the NDS. Details are available in the evaluation report (Siggins Miller 2009).

**Understanding the NDS as a policy framework**

The terms of reference of the NDS evaluation constituted tight boundaries within which it could be developed and implemented. They did not allow for an explicit exploration and documentation of the utility of policy models for informing that particular evaluation. Nonetheless, it is productive to consider how the various policy models described above contribute to evaluators’ understanding of the NDS as a policy framework.

- **Systematic policy analysis**, being one step in the stages heuristic (Althaus, Bridgman & Davis 2007), has been a feature of the NDS for many years. Typically it entails researchers, public service policy personnel and practitioners collaboratively engaging in environmental scanning, assessing problems from a number of perspectives, identifying policy options and evaluating their relative strengths and weaknesses. This rational process has been frequently used, illustrated by the development of new sub-strategies under the NDS such as the National Cannabis Strategy 2006-2009 (Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy 2006) and the National Amphetamine-Type Stimulant Strategy 2008-2011 (Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy 2008).

These were assessed in the evaluation.
• The substance abuse field is characterised by multiple types of evidence. Understanding of the content and processes of the NDS could be enhanced by assessing the degree to which the policy is based on a rational/comprehensive approach. Such an analysis would identify the extent to which sound research-based evidence was used as inputs to policy making, along with the quality of the assessment of its applicability in a given situation. It would look for what appear to be irrational policy decisions or implementation modalities (i.e. those that fail to reflect current research evidence covering such things as the efficacy and effectiveness of interventions), seek to understand why this has occurred, and the consequences, as illuminated in the policy models discussed here. This reflects, in part, the observation sometimes made in the substance abuse policy field that ‘what is popular does not work, and what works is not popular’. (School drug education is an example, in that it has widespread support but is usually—though not always—ineffective, and sometimes counter-productive.)

The NDS evaluation examined the use of evidence in developing sub-strategies under the overarching NDS.

• Understanding the bounds of rationality and institutional rational choice would provide a range of useful insights from policy theory for an evaluator assessing the NDS as a policy framework. It would look for pressures to maintain the harm minimisation approach, challenges facing policy players accessing and using research evidence, the intensely political aspect of drugs policy, the international context, the challenges of change management, and so on.

Although not prominent in the evaluation report, this orientation was used in discussing the core principles underlying the NDS and the desirability and feasibility of change.

• The incrementalism model would draw the evaluator’s attention to the relative stability of the policy settings of the NDS over two decades, despite significant changes in political and social contexts and in patterns of drug use and drug-related harms. It would lead to an examination of the significant pressures that have been applied to introduce sweeping changes that would abolish the harm minimisation approach (e.g. Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2007) and develop an understanding of why these pressures have not led to significant changes in the nature of the NDS.

Again, although not prominent in the evaluation report, this framing was used in discussing the core principles underlying the NDS and the desirability and feasibility of change.

• The multiple streams model is particularly useful for an evaluator seeking to understand how the NDS framework was established in the 1984-1985 period, how awareness of the problems, combined with political pressure for change and an understanding of the solutions available, converged to create a window of opportunity for introducing a radically new drug strategy. In more recent times, the policy evaluator could apply this model to understanding how, in 2008-2009, the emphasis in Australian drug policy shifted nationally from illicit drugs to alcohol, particularly binge drinking among young people.

This model was not used explicitly in the evaluation, owing to the limitations imposed by the terms of reference.

• Finally, the advocacy coalitions framework, in combination with the policy networks model, would be found useful in understanding the roles of pressure groups (both within the political and administrative arms of government and external to them) in shaping drugs policy. The policy evaluator would seek to identify the policy brokers both within and
outside government who negotiate with the advocacy groups, including policy people in central government agencies and in peak not-for-profits. This model was also not used explicitly in the evaluation, owing to the limitations imposed by the terms of reference.

The conclusion of this analysis of how policy models can be applied by the policy evaluator to understanding Australia’s National Drug Strategy as a complex social intervention, and hence enhance the quality of its evaluation, is that a range of policy models helps explain how national drug policies have been made, the multiple drivers of their implemented and the emergence of unintended adverse consequences. The policy models can also illuminate the reasons that evaluation research sometimes fails to influence policy activity. This reflects the fact that the NDS is multifaceted and that, as a consequence, different components can be usefully understood through different policy lenses. For some purposes a single model would have high explanatory power, whereas in other cases combining two or more would be more helpful. (We are familiar with examples where bounded rationality interacts with—and sometimes conflicts with—the multiple streams that shape policy processes and outcomes.)

Conclusion

A variety of policy models, frameworks and theories exist which can be useful to the drug policy evaluator for understanding the determinants of policy, how it is made, the drivers of implementation, and its performance. The discussion above also illustrates that some models are more useful than others for a specific evaluative purpose. Viewing the evaluand through a policy model lens can contribute to evaluation design. For example, a logic model mapping exercise that incorporates policy theory would produce something different from that derived from a more traditional approach.

We are not arguing, though, that the reports of policy evaluations written for clients by evaluators should necessarily articulate what policy models the evaluators have found the most useful for understanding a particular situation. As with other aspects of social science knowledge, this potentially forms part of the tool kit that the drug policy evaluator uses analytically but does not need to report upon. In other cases, however, it may provide such a powerful explanatory tool that an explicit exposition will be helpful.

Key issues for drug policy evaluators that arise from this discussion include the following:

The kinds of policy theory discussed here provide drug policy evaluators with frameworks that enhance their understanding of the drug policy environment within which they are working. Potential therefore exists for drug policy evaluation practitioners to increase the usefulness of their work through greater systematic use of policy theory to aid understanding of the evaluand.

Using policy theory can help the drug policy evaluator decide the focus of the evaluation, that is, to set boundaries that direct attention and resources to the areas of data collection, data analysis and reflection that will be most productive.

Drug policy evaluators can use policy theory to help interpret the findings and provide a framework for reflecting upon the implications of the data collected.
Drug policy evaluators can make use of policy theory to maximise the likelihood of evaluation utilisation and to illuminate the reasons that evaluation research frequently fails to influence policy decisions:

- If the drug policy environment is one conducive to a relatively comprehensive/rational approach, then standard evaluation strategies that entail developing evaluation questions and indicators, and using the ensuing evidence to answer the questions, will be effective.

- In contrast, an evaluation strategy that assumes a high degree of rationality in drug policy activity where this is not prominent is unlikely to be productive. Instead, evaluators need to attend to bounded rationality, understanding the bounds within which drug policy activity takes place. The way institutional rational choice operates sometimes clarifies the origins of inaction and apparently irrational policy decisions. Taking account of these issues is essential if we want the evaluation findings and recommendations to be adopted. Evaluators need to draft their reports, including findings and recommendations, and negotiate them, in a manner that reflects the realities of the drug policy environment into which they will be injected:
  - In some cases only minor, incremental changes to drug policy and its implementation are possible. Recommendations for sweeping changes in such circumstances will be of no utility.
  - Where advocacy coalitions are influential, even determining the nature of drug policy and its implementation, the evaluation can usefully include change management processes that encompassing working with the advocates so that they feel they have made significant inputs into the evaluation process and contents, understand the evidence base underlying the evaluation’s findings and recommendations, and have a degree of willingness to contribute, as appropriate, to the implementation of the findings of the evaluation.
  - Evaluation utilisation can also be enhanced when the evaluators gain a deep understanding of the multiple streams influencing the drug policy domain within which they are evaluating, and develop strategies for harnessing the power of converging multiple streams. Indeed, evaluations of large, complex social interventions can be designed in such a manner as to bring together the political, policy and problem streams to facilitate the utilisation of evaluation research. (This is referred to as process use of evaluation (Cousins 2007).)

We conclude that evaluators’ use of theories, frameworks and models of the policy process in designing and implementing evaluations, drafting evaluation reports and interfacing with evaluation stakeholders, can be helpful. We advocate for opening space for this type of analysis through the terms of reference of evaluations of large, complex social interventions such as national drug strategies.

Applying policy theory in this way can assist evaluators to produce findings and recommendations that stakeholders in the evaluation will find helpful. Furthermore, it has potential for enhancing the likelihood that the evaluation processes and products will be used, thus contributing to the development of sound social policy on drug availability, drug use, drug users and minimising drug-related harm.
References


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