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Likewise, the standardized comparison of budgetary and performance figures employed by think tanks such as the OECD leaves open much interpretative and therefore contested ground. One ground for dispute concerns the construction of the categories. In the OECD's report, the Belgian unemployment rate was put just above 8 per cent of the total labor force; in contrast, the Belgian unemployment agency's (www.rva.be) own reports state that it pays unemployment benefits to more than a million people monthly, i.e. 23.5 per cent of the labor force (Arents et al. 2000). The disparity can only be explained by examining closely the definitions of "unemployment" used in studies such as these.

To post-positivists this is just one example among many. They claim it is an illusion to think that separation between values and facts is possible. Moreover, it is impossible to create a division of labor between politics and science where politicians authoritatively establish policy values and scientists can neutrally assess whether the policy outcomes meet the prior established norms (Majone 1989). Policy analysts should actively engage in and facilitate the debate on values in policy making and function as a go-between for citizens and politicians. By attempting to provide "the one best solution" in *ex ante* policy analysis and the "ultimate judgement" in *ex post* evaluation, the ambition of most (rationalist) policy scientists has long been to settle rather than stimulate debates (Fischer 1998).

The advocates of the argumentative approach see yet another mission for policy analysis, including evaluation. Knowledge of a social object or phenomenon emerges from a discussion between competing frameworks (Yanow 2000). This discussion—or discursive interaction—concerning policy outcomes can uncover the presuppositions of each framework that give meaning to its results from empirical research. Policy analysts can intervene in these discussions to help actors with different belief systems understand where their disagreements have epistemological and ethical roots rather than simply boiling down to different interests and priorities (Van Eeten 1999; Yanow 2000). If evaluations can best be understood as forms of knowledge based on consensually accepted beliefs instead of on hard-boiled proof and demonstration (Danziger 1995; Fischer 1998), it becomes quite important to ascertain whose beliefs and whose consensus dominates the retrospective sense-making process. Here, the argumentative approach turns quite explicitly to the politics of policy evaluation, when it argues that the deck with which the policy game is played at the evaluation can be stacked as a result of institutionalized "mobilization of bias." In that sense evaluation simply mirrors the front end of the policy process (agenda setting and problem definition): some groups' interests and voices are organized "in" the design and management of evaluation proceedings, whereas other stakeholders are organized "out." Some proponents of argumentative policy evaluation therefore argue that the policy analyst should not just help expose the meaning systems by which these facts are being interpreted; she should also ensure that under-represented groups can make their experiences and assessments of a policy heard (Fischer and Forester 1993; Dryzek 2000).

DeLeon (1998) qualifies the argumentative approach's enthusiasm about "consensus through deliberation." He cautions that the democratic ambitions of

the post-positivists bear the risk of the tyranny of the majority as much as the shortcomings of positivism. The infinite relativism of the social constructivists makes it difficult to decide just whose voice is most relevant or whose argument is the strongest in a particular policy debate. The evaluation by social constructivists may well recognize the political dimension of analytic assessments of policy outcomes, but it does not by definition lead us to more carefully crafted political judgements.

4. DOING EVALUATION IN THE POLITICAL WORLD

How then, should we cope with the normative, methodological, and political challenges of policy evaluation? In our view, the key challenge for professional policy evaluators should *not* be how to save objectivity, validity, and reliability from the twin threats of epistemological relativism and political contestation. This project can only lead to a kind of analytical self-deception: evaluators' perfunctory neglecting or "willing away" pivotal philosophical queries and political biases and forces (Portis and Levy 1988). It may be more productive to ask two alternative questions. How can policy analysts maximize academic rigor without becoming politically irrelevant? And how can policy evaluations be policy relevant without being used politically? The first question requires evaluators to navigate between the Scylla of seemingly robust but irrelevant positivism and the Charybdis of politically astute but philosophically problematic relativism. The second question deals with the applied dimension. It alerts evaluators to the politics of evaluation that are such a prominent feature of contemporary policy struggles and of political attempts to "learn" from evaluations.

The approach to evaluation advocated here should be viewed within the context of a broader repositioning of policy science that we feel is going on, and which entails an increased acceptance of the once rather sectarian claim of the argumentative approach that all knowledge about social affairs—including public policy making—is based on limited information and social constructions. If one does so, the hitherto predominantly positivist and social engineering-oriented aims and scope of policy evaluation need to be revised or at least broadened. Befitting such a "revisionist" approach to policy analysis is the essentially incrementalist view that public policy makers' best bet is to devote the bulk of their efforts to enabling society to avoid,

move away from, and effectively respond to what, through pluralistic debate, it has come to recognize as important present and future ills (Lindblom 1990). Policy analysis is supposed to be an integral part of this project, but not in the straightforward manner of classic “science for policy.” Instead, the key to its unique contribution lies in its reflective potential. We agree with Majone (1989, 182) that:

It is not the task of analysts to resolve fundamental disagreements about evaluative criteria and standards of accountability; only the political process can do that. However, analysts can contribute to societal learning by refining the standards of appraisal and by encouraging a more sophisticated understanding of public policies than is possible from a single perspective.

This also goes for evaluating public policies and programs. Again we cite Majone (1989, 183): “The need today is less to develop ‘objective’ measures of outcomes—the traditional aim of evaluation research—than to facilitate a wide-ranging dialogue among advocates of different criteria.”

In a recent cross-national and cross-sectoral comparative evaluation study, an approach to evaluation was developed that embodies the main thrust of the “revisionist” approach (Bovens, ’t Hart, and Peters 2001). The main question of that project, which involved a comparative assessment of critical policy episodes and programs in four policy sectors in six European states, was how the responses of different governments to highly similar major, non-incremental policy challenges can be evaluated, and how similarities and differences in their performance can be explained. A crucial distinction was made between the programmatic and the political dimension of success and failure in public governance.

In a *programmatic* mode of assessment, the focus is on the effectiveness, efficiency, and resilience of the specific policies being evaluated. The key concerns of programmatic evaluation pertain to the classical, Lasswellian–Lindblomian view of policy making as social problem solving most firmly embedded in the rationalistic approach to policy evaluation: does government tackle social issues, does it deliver solutions to social problems that work, and does it do so in a sensible, defensible way (Lasswell 1971; Lindblom 1990)? Of course these questions involve normative and therefore inherently political judgements too, yet the focus is essentially instrumental, i.e. on assessing the impact of policies that are designed and presented as purposeful interventions in social affairs.

The simplest form of programmatic evaluation—popular to this day because of its straightforwardness and the intuitive appeal of the idea that governments should be held to account on their capacity to deliver on their own promises (Glazer and Rothenberg 2001)—is to rate policies by the degree to which they achieve the stated goals of policy makers. Decades of evaluation research have taught all but the most hard-headed analysts that despite its elegance, this method has big problems. Goals may be untraceable in policy documents, symbolic rather than substantial, deliberately vaguely worded for political reasons, and contain mutually contradictory components. Goals also often shift during the course of the policy-making process

to such an extent that the original goals bear little relevance for assessing the substance and the rationale of the policy that has actually been adopted and implemented in the subsequent years.

Clearly, something better was needed. In our view, a sensible form of programmatic policy evaluation does not fully omit any references to politically sanctioned goals—as once advocated by the proponents of so-called “goal-free” evaluation—but “embeds” and thus qualifies the effectiveness criterion by complementing and comparing it with other logics of programmatic evaluation. In the study design, case evaluators had to examine not only whether governments had proven capable of delivering on their promises and effectuating purposeful interventions. They were also required to ascertain: (a) the ability of the policy-making entity to adapt its program(s) and policy instruments to changing circumstances over time (i.e. an adaptability/learning capacity criterion); (b) its ability to control the costs of the program(s) involved (i.e. an efficiency criterion). In keeping with Majone’s call, these three general programmatic evaluation logics were then subject to intensive debate between the researchers involved in the study: how should these criteria be understood in concrete cases, what data would be called for to assess a case, and what about the relative weight of these three criteria in the overall programmatic assessment? Sectoral expert subgroups gathered subsequently to specify and operationalize these programmatic criteria in view of the specific nature and circumstances of the four policy areas to be studied. The outcomes of these deliberations about criteria (and methodology) are depicted in Fig. 15.1.

The *political* dimension of policy evaluation refers to how policies and policy makers become represented and evaluated in the political arena (Stone 1997). This is the discursive world of symbols, emotions, political ideology, and power relationships. Here it is not the social consequences of policies that count, but the political construction of these consequences, which might be driven by institutional logics and political considerations of wholly different kinds. In the study described above, the participants struggled a lot with how to operationalize this dimension in a way that allowed for non-idiosyncratic, comparative modes of assessment and analysis. In the process it became clear that herein lies an important weakness of the argumentative approach: it rightly points at the relevance of the socially and politically constructed nature of assessments about policy success and failure, but it does not offer clear, cogent, and widely accepted evaluation principles and tools for capturing this dimension of policy evaluation. In the end, the evaluators in the study opted for a relatively “thin” but readily applicable set of political evaluation measures: the incidence and degree of political upheaval (traceable by content analysis of press coverage and parliamentary investigations, political fatalities, litigation), or lack of it; and changes in generic patterns of political legitimacy (public satisfaction of policy or confidence in authorities and public institutions). An essential benefit of discerning and contrasting programmatic and political evaluation modes is that it highlights the development of disparities between a policy-making entity’s programmatic and

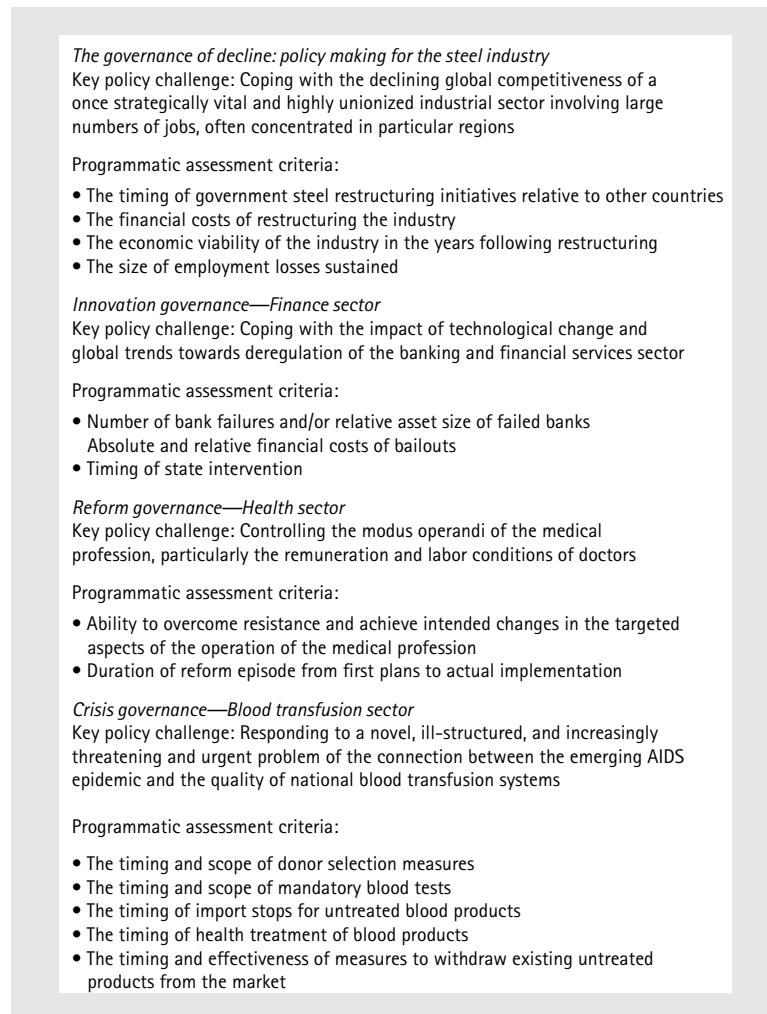


Fig. 15.1. Programmatic policy evaluation: an example (taken from Bovens et al. 2001, 20–2)

political performance. This should not surprise the politically astute evaluator: political processes determine whether programmatic success, or lack of it, is acknowledged by relevant stakeholders and audiences. The dominant assessment of many conspicuous “planning disasters”—the Sydney Opera House for example—has evolved over time, as certain issues, conflicts, and consequences that were important at the time have evaporated or changed shape, and as new actors and power constellations have emerged (compare Hall 1982 to Bovens and Hart 1996). In the Bovens et al. study, some remarkable asymmetries between

programmatic and political evaluations were identified. In the banking sector, for example, (de-)regulatory policies and/or existing instruments for oversight in Spain, the UK, France, and Sweden did not prevent banking fiascos of catastrophic proportions (i.e. major programmatic failures); at the same time, the political evaluation of these policies in terms of the evaluation criteria outlined above was not particularly negative. Likewise, in programmatic terms German responses to the HIV problem in the blood supply were at least as bad as those in France; in France this became the stuff of major political scandal and legal proceedings, whereas in Germany the evaluation was depoliticized and no political consequences resulted. These types of evaluation asymmetries defy the commonsense, "just world" hypothesis that good performance should lead to political success, and vice versa. Detecting asymmetries then challenges the analyst to explain these discrepancies in terms of structural and cultural features of the political system or policy sector and the dynamics of the evaluation process in the cases concerned (see Bovens, 't Hart, and Peters 2001, 593 ff.).

Talking not so much about policy analysts but about policy practitioners, Schön and Rein (1994) have captured the approach to policy evaluation advocated here under the heading of "frame-reflection." This implies willingness on the part of analysts to reflect continuously upon and reassess their own lenses for looking at the world. In addition, they need to make efforts to communicate with analysts using a different set of assumptions. In the absence of such a reflective orientation, policy analysts may find that they, and their conclusions, are deemed irrelevant by key players in the political arena. Or they may find themselves set up unwittingly to be hired guns in the politics of blaming. They ought to be neither.

Reflective policy analysts may strive for a position as a systematic, well-informed, thoughtful, and fair-minded provider of inputs to the political process of argumentation, debate, maneuvering, and blaming that characterizes controversial policy episodes. In our view, their effectiveness could be enhanced significantly if they adopt a role conception that befits such a position: explicit about their own assumptions; meticulous in developing their arguments; sensitive to context; and striving to create institutional procedures for open and pluralistic debate. At the same time, since the political world of policy fiascos in particular is unlikely to be supportive of such frame reflection, policy analysts need a considerable amount of political astuteness in assessing their own position in the field of forces and in making sure that their arguments are heard at what they think is the right time, by the right people, and in the right way. Finding ways to deal creatively with the twin requirements of scholarly detachment and political realism is what the art and craft of policy evaluation are all about.

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CHAPTER 16

POLICY DYNAMICS

EUGENE BARDACH

UNDERSTANDING dynamics is about understanding change, and a concern with policy dynamics has to be, in some measure, about policy change—how to get from here to there in the political process. This concern should be focused on both policy-making and policy-implementing processes. Consider the following questions that call for answers framed at least partially in dynamic terms:

- The federal welfare reform Act¹ of 1996 was something of a backlash against an unpopular program that was seen as encouraging dependency. But was it also:
 - An equilibrating move in a political system that tends to seek the ideological center?
 - An evolutionary move towards economic efficiency that either does or does not have a built-in tropism towards efficiency?
 - A product of successful long-term “learning” processes in the policy-making system?
- Why can’t the United States seem to get a rational health care system that provides reasonable quality care at reasonable cost to all Americans? Perhaps one reason is that the dynamics of policy development in this area, begun in the 1930s, have locked us in to a system that depends heavily, but also only partially on employer-based financing.
- Regulatory agencies are often said to become captured by the industries they regulate. How does the process of becoming captured unfold?
- How did the United States Congress come to be such a polarized body? It was not always this way, and the process took place over many years. How did the

¹ Formally known as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA).

process work? Is the process specific to this institution and its historical context(s), or is the process, at least in part, more generic?

- An entrepreneurial group of legislative staff and legislators with close ties to the powerful Speaker of the California Assembly sought the Speaker's assistance for a major reform in mental health policy only in the closing days of the legislative struggle. Why did they wait? Might they have been better off not waiting so long?

While this chapter does not attempt to answer these questions in particular, it does seek to describe and evaluate a number of conceptual frameworks for answering questions like these.

1. OVERVIEW

This is not a review essay on the status of a mature field. It does not try to summarize comprehensively the works of others. The study of policy dynamics is not a field at all; and, to the best of my knowledge, no one has previously brought together all the phenomena I canvass here. I have scanned for work in which dynamics and policy both happen to be present, even if the authors did not self-consciously intend to make the connection. I have also not aimed to eliminate subjectivity on my part. Scanning is bound to be subjective, perhaps idiosyncratic, as is interpretation of the results.

My main objective is to stimulate research interest in a neglected phenomenon and, by way of doing so, to present concepts and substantive hypotheses that I have found stimulating or that others might find so.

The most important others are the likely readers of this *Handbook*. I assume the average reader to have a generalist's interest in the policy process. Hence, I have favored breadth over depth. Secondly, I have focused more on the institutional dynamics of the policy-making process than on the evolution of substantive policies themselves, though obviously the two subject matters overlap. This focus has naturally led me to look primarily to the work done by political scientists, though I also mention stimulating contributions by economists and other social scientists.² Thirdly, I have tried to point to policy-relevant applications of leading ideas in the study of dynamic social systems, even though such applications are often isolated, pioneering, and not necessarily widely cited by students of the policy process. Fourthly, I occasionally refer to studies or bodies of work that, although not closely related to the policy process, suggest the power of certain approaches to the study of dynamic systems.

² I am, of course, indebted to the work of Baumgartner and Jones, who have presented a survey on these topics as well (Baumgartner and Jones 2002).