11.800, Knowledge in the Public Arena: The Uses and Abuses of Research
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Session 11

Evaluation's Impact

1. Guest Speaker: Carol Weiss
    a. Where is the intersection between research and policy
    b. Why does it work so haphazardly?
        i. I have done six empirical studies of different fields looking at what research is available; what is picked up, what is not picked up, and what kinds of research are more likely to be picked up.
        ii. The core of my work has been about the relationship between research and policy
2. First major study: 1970s was a survey of mental health policy makers (Federal and State levels), administrators of mental health facilities, researchers who had done research on mental health funded by NIMH (National Institute for Mental Health in Department of Health Education and Welfare (now health and social services).
    a. Took 50 studies funded by NIMH, boiled down to 2 page abstracts: question, methods, findings, implications
    b. Tried to match the studies to the job of the people at the federal agencies, state agencies, and in the facilities
        i. Children's health, alcoholism, etc.
    c. We were trying to see what kinds of research people were more or less likely to use. We didn't ask about use, we asked "if this issue came up, would you be likely to rely on these findings?" to get at the potential for use.
    d. Asked them to rate the studies on a range of characteristics, including the methods, whether the findings fit the political tenor of the times; were they congruent with current agency policy; did they give clear direction of what to do next?
    e. Analyzed the ratings on research characteristics and the findings on potential use.
    f. That is the paper on Truth Tests and Utility Tests
    g. Findings
        i. If it challenged agency policy, it was more likely to be useful (challenging the way of thinking, not actually doing something).
        ii. Challenging the status quo was more powerful in terms of use.
        iii. If the research showed what everybody already believed, it was not news
        iv. If it really opened up new territory; if it punched holes in accepted tenets in the field, then people wanted some time and consultation to rethink and not to do something different immediately
3. Currently working with a group of agricultural economists. There is a consulting group on international agriculture research (CGIAR): fisheries, cattle raising, rice group. They are studying how their research influences policy in various countries.
4. What is the connection between this type of work and innovation and diffusion research

a. I am more interested in the effects on a governmental/organizational structure. You can influence one person at a time, but if you have a structure where people have to interact and agree on rules, and budget, and policy, you have to move a whole organization.

b. What do you see as the difference between enlightenment and paradigm shift?

   i. Paradigm shift is the end result, maybe, of a long period of enlightenment.

      1. Enlightenment doesn't always lead to some conceptual change, though on occasion that happens and people switch their whole conceptual apparatus

      2. Usually it is a new way of thinking about or talking about new events or a situation, sometimes it is primarily about vocabulary.

5. There is a group of scholars in Britain who has come out with a book recently about what it takes to change what people do? What are the strategies that people use? Business schools are very interested in business culture.

a. How do you apply learning from medical community to planning/political situations?

b. I expected that research quality might matter a little bit, but not a whole lot. People can believe against all the tenets of science. That whether the research was congruent with their beliefs would be strongly correlated positively. The fact that the challenge to the status quo was so important was really surprising.

6. DARE study; intrigued by how easily people can ignore good research.

a. Examples to the contrary of "challenge to the status quo being good"

b. DARE: program offered in 5th or 6th grade of elementary school by uniformed officers of the police department.

   i. The curriculum was developed by educators.

      1. 1 hour per week. Each week's curriculum is very carefully laid out.

      2. Officer comes into classroom to explain to children why they should avoid illicit drugs and how to say no and how to resist peer pressure.

   ii. Very popular program in the United States. It was being implemented in between 60-80% of all school districts.

      1. The President has a DARE day.

      2. Congress passes a resolution every year in favor of DARE. (Camps, badges, bumper stickers).

   iii. Evaluation evidence started coming in that children exposed to DARE were no less likely to use drugs as teenagers than those who were not exposed.

      1. All the school districts continued to offer it in their classrooms.

c. Research Questions

   i. What keeps people from listening to the research?

   ii. What is the competition to research in decision-making?

d. Methodology

   i. Chose four states in which there had been a statewide random assignment evaluation of the DARE program (all evaluations showed the same thing).

   ii. Took four districts in each of four states.

  iii. Interviewed people in the school district who make decisions about what drug abuse prevention program to run (state law that requires some prevention program to be run).
    1. DARE was the most popular.
 e. Findings: Fairy-Godmother paper.
  i. There were 5 previous papers on the study published.
  ii. There were some districts that were hanging onto DARE for two reasons:
    1. 1) they didn't care whether the kids stayed off drugs or not because they knew it was very hard to change how teenagers act five years after a program that was only once a week for an hour;
    2. 2) what they valued was that the students had gotten to know a member of the police department as a person, as a human being, and if they got into trouble they knew someone in the police department.
    3. In addition, the police got to know children who weren't in trouble.
  iii. Schools thought this relationship was very valuable.
    1. On many issues, the police department and the school department could collaborate.
    2. They started talking to each other.
  iv. Schools/school districts often had good experience of their own.
    1. In their school or their district, they had lots of anecdotal evidence that it was working for their district, local experience.
    2. On the other hand, we found that a lot of districts (this was about 12 years after the program went national) were cutting back or ending DARE even though the first evaluation evidence had come in 8 years earlier.
    3. It took a long time, but a lot of the districts we interviewed had cut back or terminated the DARE program.
     a. Part of the reason was that drug abuse among teenagers was no longer a crisis as it had been in the early 1980s.
     b. It was true that the notion of enlightenment had finally made it into a paradigm shift.
     c. More districts leaving DARE than coming in.
  v. Should research be mandated by a federal agency?
    1. What do you think about a federal agency saying you have to take a strategy from this list because these are the things that have been scientifically proven by research?

7. U.S. Congress: How the legislative setting works (or doesn't) as a use context.
 a. The people who were really up on research were people in manpower, job training, that area was very lively; education to some extent; and then all across the spectrum: foreign policy, housing, etc.
  i. Congress is the essence of politics. All the unresolved issues of the country come to a head here.
  ii. Quite a number of people were keeping abreast of the research.

       iii. One was very open about how she selected the research she paid attention to: author, publisher, if too liberal, she wouldn't pay attention, but if it were the Urban Institute, etc. she would listen to it.
b. What do researchers need to know about formal vs. informal channels?
       i. Informal channels were very important. In a smaller country, even the UK, researchers often have access to officials. In the US it is very rare, and if you do have access, it is very limited.
       ii. What happens is that word gets around if your finding is on a topic that is central to some subgroup of people in the elite of the power structure (opinion leaders).
c. Politicians are more willing to listen to the information presented by lobbyists than researchers because they know their biases, but they will not misinform because then they will lose credibility. Also, lobbyists will be very specific about how legislation needs to be changed based on the information.
       i. Politicians most commonly use research to support an existing position, but when they did want something new, they turned to research for supporting documentation
       ii. Enlightenment was much less common in the legislature than the bureaucracy. There is not much reading (about 10.5 minutes / day), and it is usually selected by their staffers in the press. It is a very face-to-face oral tradition.