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Learning through comparison when studying evidence and policy

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Introduction

This special themed section of *Evidence & Policy* focuses on studies that develop insights about evidence use in policy settings through comparison. Between them, the four included papers compare: evidence use within different institutions in the same national context; institutions designed to support evidence use operating in different nation-states; approaches to evaluation across national contexts; and, from a practice perspective, the insights gained when individuals move from academic research into political, policymaking roles. The aim is to demonstrate the conceptual and empirical contribution that comparative perspectives can offer scholarship on the evidence-policy interplay.

The question of *how* to achieve more evidence-informed policymaking has been a core driver of scholarship on evidence use for many years, with a burgeoning literature seeking to explain policymaking processes to researchers and to identify methods and mechanisms for increasing evidence use within policy processes (Oliver et al, 2014). Many available studies emanate from research programmes which explicitly sought to support the use of evidence, or to understand the use of evidence, for specific topics or policy challenges. While this literature has furthered our understanding of the complexity of the research-policymaking nexus, it has unintentionally contributed to a lack of comparative analysis (Smith et al, 2019; Andersen and Smith, 2022). This means we have only limited insights into how and why efforts to improve the use of evidence in policy play out differently in contrasting (e.g. geo-political, disciplinary or institutional) contexts. We believe that the dearth of comparative analysis on evidence and policy is problematic for three key reasons.

First, it hinders conceptual clarity, since it diminishes our chances of exploring how similar ideas and concepts are interpreted differently, or with contrasting consequences, in diverse settings. A recent bibliometric analysis exploring how 'cultures of evidence' are conceptualised in academic work demonstrates that there are strong disciplinary clusters when it comes to understanding, and studying, the relationship between evidence and policy (Bandola-Gill et al, 2024). While health focused research tends to prioritise understanding, and addressing, gaps between evidence, policy and professional practice, research focusing on environmental and sustainability issues often assumes an alignment between research and policy experts and instead concerns itself with gaps between 'experts' and local communities (Bandola-Gill et al, 2024). Since many of us work *within* these research clusters, we are likely missing opportunities to learn from these very different ways of thinking about the use of evidence and the key challenges facing those seeking to ensure that robust, insightful evidence informs the formulation and implementation of policy. Much like the parable of blind men separately encountering distinct parts of an elephant and reaching contrasting conclusions as to what an elephant is like, we have created a patchwork of research clusters that each explore distinct parts of the complex interplay between evidence, policy, practice and publics, generating contrasting insights. Comparative analysis, we propose, is one means of forging connections across some of these clusters, providing opportunities to supplement and refine popular theories and ideas within clusters by learning from theories and ideas within other clusters. A

comparative lens also provides opportunities to explore whether distinct terms and concepts are being used in different research clusters to convey similar ideas. At the moment, implementation science, the sociology of science, and evidence use scholarship have each developed distinctive concepts and terms, which means we know little about the extent to which insights across these related bodies of literature overlap.

Second, we may be missing opportunities to learn through comparison between research that varies in its substantive focus. Different research fields thus tend to focus on distinct types of evidence (e.g. research on policy evaluations, STEM-research, indigenous knowledge etc.) and distinct settings of policy use (e.g. research examining evidence use within specific policy areas, levels of government or national settings). This informs a tendency for research to develop along separate parallel tracks, with a lack of cross-fertilization between studies within different settings. This further contributes to the disciplinary fragmentation within this area of scholarship and increases the risk that some scholarship 'reinvents the wheel' rather than learning from, and building on, relevant work from related fields.

Third, a lack of comparison perhaps reinforces a tendency to downplay questions of politics, trade-offs and democratic legitimacy (Stewart et al, 2020). As Flinders and colleagues (2016) note, the much-vaunted notion of co-producing research carries risks that vary with political context. A lack of contextual sensitivity perhaps helps explain why much of the research on evidence use fails to adequately engage with politics and power, or address questions of whether and how the integration of evidence into policymaking can and should be balanced with other democratically legitimate goals (e.g. social justice, deliberation and participation).

We argue that a better understanding of the contextual, divergent and contingent nature of evidence-use across contexts is pivotal, if we are to: (1) *improve* the role of research in policymaking (rather than simply work to *increase* the amount of research policymakers are exposed to); (2) learn from, and reflect on, the insights provided by less familiar contexts and disciplines; and (3) maintain sufficient democratic legitimacy to sustain efforts to strengthen evidence use in policy.

The need for comparative research in this area of scholarship, and the over-dependence on single case studies, has been repeatedly highlighted in editorials in this journal (e.g. Nutley et al, 2010; Smith et al, 2019) and we hope this special themed section of *Evidence & Policy*, goes some way to addressing this gap. The themed section includes three empirical research articles, each of which employs a comparative lens, and a practice paper which combines three accounts of researchers turned politicians, who comparatively reflect on how their views of the relationship between evidence and policy has evolved as they have moved into political decision-making roles.

Looking across the four papers, we identify three common themes. First, in two of the empirical studies the comparisons highlight a tendency for certain disciplines to dominate the evidence culture of particular policy issues or institutions, notably STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and economics. Second, the practice paper and two of the empirical studies draw attention to the complex, highly political nature of policymaking spaces, in which evidence intersects with interests and institutions. Third, partly because of the first two themes, and partly because of limited resources, all four papers emphasise for greater realism in designing processes

and systems to support the use of evidence in policy. The following sections introduce these three themes in more detail, situating the papers within this special themed section within the wider literature on evidence and policy.

Dominant disciplines

Questions of what ‘counts’ as relevant evidence has always been central to scholarship on evidence use in policymaking. Several scholars have stressed the need for ensuring the validity of evidence on ‘what works’ by adhering to specific methodological standards – often in the form of evidence hierarchies with the ‘gold standard’ of meta-reviews on top (Oakley, 2002). Others have criticised such standards for narrowing the scope of evidence to the point of making it irrelevant for policymakers (Pawson, 2006) or for furthering certain political interests under the guise of methodological validity (Nolan, 2015). In recent years, there seems to be a growing convergence within the scholarship, with more studies arguing for greater plurality and diversity in the types of evidence used for policymaking (Boaz et al., 2019; Hill O’Connor et al, 2023). Despite this move towards scientific pluralism, the three research papers within this themed issue all, in different ways, point to a continued dominance of certain scientific disciplines, methods and approaches within arenas of evidence use. This speaks both to the different interests at play regarding the types of evidence used in policymaking and a potential tension between simultaneously enhancing the use of evidence and pluralising the types of evidence to be used.

Moawad and Ludwicki-Ziegler’s (2025) analysis shows how the parliamentary technology assessment institutions of France, the UK and Germany all continue to be dominated by traditional STEM research, even as the experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic accentuated awareness around the necessity of knowledge from the social sciences and humanities. They trace the continued influence of STEM-research in the public communication of the parliamentary technology assessment institutions in each country for the period of 2020-2022 as well as in the academic background of parliamentary technology assessment institution employees. They find that social studies seldom figure prominently in the communication of these institutions and when they do, such research is primarily positioned as complementary, rather than integral, and mainly concerns the ethics of utilizing new technologies.

Similarly, Andersen and Pattyn (2025) find that calls for expanding the use and institutionalization of policy evaluations in the central governments of the Netherlands and Denmark have mainly resulted in an increased use and institutionalization of certain forms of economic knowledge. This type of evidence is strongly supported by the ministries of finance in both states and reflects a preoccupation with questions of cost-reductions and accountability, rather than more fundamental learning about, or reflections on, the appropriateness of particular policies, the ways in which policies have been implemented and experienced, and the contextual factors that shape these experiences.

The article by Kelstrup, Jørgensen and Hansen (2025) focuses less upon the type of evidence utilized and more on the way such evidence is managed and implemented within the areas of school education and employment policies in Denmark. However, they identify a tendency in both ministries to primarily view the role of evidence as determining ‘what works’, and a preference for methods that provide effect-measurement information such as Randomized Controlled Trials.

Across the different national settings and types of organizations, there seems to be a tendency to place the greatest trust and value in technical, calculable and seemingly more objective types of evidence. The dominance of certain types of evidence over others can of course be attributed to a plethora of different factors, but across this research, two overarching factors stand out. First, the articles by Andersen and Pattyn (2025) and Kelstrup, Jørgensen and Hansen (2025) both highlight the embeddedness and institutionalization of certain types of evidence within existing power structures. As shown by Andersen and Pattyn (2025), the dominant position of the ministry of finance regarding policymaking in general is – through their central role in the Dutch and Danish evaluation systems – translated directly into a dominant epistemological position regarding how policies should be (and are) evaluated. The disciplinary monoculture grounded in economics within the Ministry of Finance is thus furthering a similar disciplinary monoculture within the broader evaluation system – hereby colonizing the disciplinary traditions of other ministries as well. A similar colonizing effect is evident in Kelstrup, Jørgensen and Hansen's (2025) article. They show how the dominance of a specific hierarchy of evidence within the ministry of Employment was also inscribed within the management of the local job-centers, overriding the knowledge and experiences of the frontline professionals. In contrast, the ministry of education initially opted for a more plural and collaborative approach, where the alternative knowledge base of school teachers would be incorporated into processes of knowledge management and dissemination. The authors attribute this greater plurality in evidence types to the strong degree of unionization and influence of the teachers compared to social workers working in employment services.

Second, the three research papers highlight the 'culture' of different evidence use settings as an important factor in explaining the dominance of certain disciplines (see also Bandola-Gill et al, 2024). Moawad and Ludwicki-Ziegler (2025) find much greater diversity in the educational background of the public officials within the German parliamentary technology assessment institution compared to its British and French counterparts, which they argue resulted in greater engagement with social studies in Germany. They attribute this finding to the tradition for greater multi-disciplinarity within the German system of higher education. Similarly, Kelstrup, Jørgensen and Hansen (2025) find that the history and traditions of certain policy fields influence the types of evidence promoted in particular ministries. More specifically, they argue that the strong professional ethos of teachers made it harder for a narrow conception of evidence to assert its dominance in the policy area of education.

Finally, each of the articles points toward certain tensions arising from the dominance of specific types of evidence over others. Andersen and Pattyn (2025) highlight tensions related to the insights evidence can provide in policymaking. They show how the dominance of economics as a discipline combine with questions related to cost-reduction to make the policy evaluations of the Dutch and Danish evaluation systems ideally suited to serve functions of control and external accountability. However, the limited plurality of evidence within these evaluations may come at the cost of using evidence to serve broader goals of learning from policy experiences to improve opportunities for future policy success.

Kelstrup, Jørgensen and Hansen (2025) similarly identify a focus on short term performance goals at the cost of considering longer-term improvements. Furthermore, they highlight a tension

between compliance and legitimacy. Their analysis shows how the ministry of employment – through a top-down approach to knowledge transfer - succeeded in making the local job-centres comply with the guidelines of the rather narrowly defined evidence-based programmes and instruments. However, this top-down approach has also faced significant critique for not providing the type of evidence relevant to the specific challenges and knowledge-needs of the job centres. The job centres have thus shown great compliance in implementing the evidence-based programs promoted by the ministry of employment, but they have done so in order to avoid sanctions rather than because they deemed such evidence legitimate and relevant.

Complexity and democracy

The comparative analysis within the papers in this special themed section also repeatedly draw attention to the ways complexity and democracy shape the evidence-policy interplay. At a time in which democracy is widely understood to be under threat at least partly as a result of misinformation (Ecker et al, 2024), and as we face growing concerns about the politicization of research (Kozlov, 2025; Jayasuriya and McCarthy, 2021), it seems essential to acknowledge the political nature of evidence and policy. Here, we highlight three distinct insights, grounding each within the analysis provided within this special themed section.

First, and most fundamentally, evidence-based policies are unlikely to be implemented, let alone succeed, if there are strong objections and resistance among key stakeholders, especially those charged with implementing policies, or from communities, especially where public compliance is required. The analysis by Kelstrup, Jørgensen and Hansen (2025) is a classic example; despite efforts to take a collaborative approach to developing evidence-based policy, too many teachers were ultimately left unpersuaded, local opposition ensued and the policy reform was not implemented in many schools. It is a stark reminder that, in democratically elected countries, ‘the people, and the politicians who represent them, have every right to ignore evidence’ (Mulgan 2005: p.224). It is important to clarify that we are not framing democratic politics as a ‘barrier’ to evidence-based decision-making or, in Pawson’s terms, ‘the four-hundred pound brute’ that quashes the ‘six-stone weakling’ that is evidence (Pawson, 2006: p.viii). Rather, we are arguing that, for evidence to make a meaningful difference in policy, democratic legitimacy must be considered. Policies are only likely to achieve their intended goals if stakeholders and members of the public are persuaded to support, implement and/or comply with a policy. Efforts to connect evidence and policy must therefore also consider how to bring publics into this conversation (Stewart et al, 2020), complicating an academic preoccupation with perceived gaps between researchers and policymakers.

The second insight flows directly from the first. If we accept that it is necessary to consider the broader democratic legitimacy of evidence-based policies, and policy proposals, then it follows that evidence which seeks to understand and engage with members of the public should play a central role. Yet, as Moawad and Ludwicki-Ziegler’s (2025) article shows, the dominance of STEM research in some of the institutions established to facilitate evidence use in policy tend to downplay social studies, reducing the prospects for understanding societal perspectives on which policy outcomes will serve the ‘best interests’ of citizens. In short, efforts to achieve evidence-based policy which are dominated by a narrow range of disciplines (as set out in the previous section) are unlikely to

facilitate the kind of dialogue between evidence, policy and publics that democratic policy systems demand. As Pickersgill and Smith (2021) argued in relation to the dominance of STEM disciplines in policy forums working to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, ‘societies are formed through the interactions between histories, laws, traditions, and social relationships’, and it is the less dominant social sciences and humanities that tend to offer the expertise and insights required to understand these crucial dimensions of policy.

The third insight is more pragmatic and relates to the complexity of policymaking processes and institutions. As the practice paper by Synhaeve, Heap and McMahon (2025) illustrates, policymaking has multiple entry points, and operates at a range of levels, each of which brings its own processes, pressures and culture. Much of the literature on evidence and policy focuses on the use of evidence in executive bodies but two of the papers in this themed issue (Synhaeve, Heap and McMahon, 2025; Moawad and Ludwicki-Ziegler, 2025) are part of a welcome turn towards investigating the use of evidence in political institutions (see also Ettelt, 2018; Geddes, 2024; Oronje and Zulu, 2018). As Synhaeve reflects, her move from research into politics underlined the fast-paced political debates and demonstrated politicians’ need for accessible evidence that helps them rapidly assess the range of policy options on the table (Synhaeve, Heap and McMahon, 2025). This is potentially challenging for academics, who are often more comfortable providing detailed assessments of specific options that they have studied or who, at the very least, need time to develop an evidence-informed assessment of multiple options. It underlines the value for researchers trying to influence policy of trying to follow shifting political agendas to spot emerging policy windows as early as possible.

Resources and realism

The everyday complex reality in which politicians and other policymakers work, and the speed at which some decisions occur, suggests a need to be modest about the feasibility of achieving evidence-informed policy. The articles in this special issue identify a number of critical, contextual factors that explain why evidence-informed policy does not always ‘work’, no matter how compelling the evidence may be (Weiss et al. 2008: 33).

First, institutions with adequate resources (such as budget, or time allocation) are better equipped to integrate evidence into policy making (Jennings and Hall, 2012; Cherney et al. 2015). Earlier research has shown that this is one of the main barriers for the production and use of evidence (Oliver et al. 2014). A certain threshold of human and financial resources is not only essential for carrying out the tasks associated with conducting and commissioning relevant policy research (Howlett 2009) but also simply to process and use the available information. Such structural characteristics will largely determine where the attention of individual actors can be directed, as the information processing literature has also demonstrated (Baumgartner et al. 2009). Within this issue, we can see how this manifests in local policymaking contexts, which are typically more resource-constrained than central government, via the personal reflections of McMahon and Heap on their time as local councillors in England and Scotland, respectively (Synhaeve et al. 2025). As described, the ‘piecemeal’ nature of local government funding means that policymakers, particularly elected members, do not have the capacity to thoroughly investigate the evidence behind every intervention. Instead, *pragmatism* often plays a role, with policymakers combining available resources and information as feasible. Other scholars

have already referred to this form of ‘epistemological bricolage’ (Freeman, 2007) as characteristic of the work of many policymakers. Essentially, policymaking often consists of ‘piecing together,’ assembling, and trying to make sense of different bits of information and experience that are available (Freeman, 2007: 476). Not only will the individual characteristics of policymakers, or their cognitive heuristics, determine what types of information play a role in this bricolage, but as Synhaeve, Heap and McMahon (2025) reflect, institutional characteristics also determine the content of this bricolage. Evidence that is ‘top of mind’ or easily accessible (Carlston and Smith 1996: 198 in Miler 2009: 866) will be used more. As Heap describes, even when relevant evidence is available, it does not always make it to the council chamber or committee rooms because of the way council business works (Synhaeve et al. 2025).

The comparative contributions further emphasize the importance of time as a barrier or promoter for evidence-informed policy. Earlier studies already highlighted that policymakers need time to use research findings in making decisions (Dobbins et al., 2001; Capano and Malandrino, 2022; Oliver et al. 2014). In Synhaeve et al. (2025), Heap explicitly cites councilors’ overloaded agendas working against the possibility of delving into the details of underpinning evidence. Moreover, the policy cycle does not always run parallel to electoral cycles and legislative periods. McMahon’s contribution sheds further light on this: council members sometimes enter office in the middle of long-term public spending programs (Synhaeve et al. 2025). Often, key decisions have already been made and there is no longer a ‘window of opportunity’ to discuss the benefits of, or underpinning evidence about, a specific policy initiative. Previous research has also emphasized the importance of evidence entering the policy process sufficiently early to be considered (Lammers et al. 2024).

That said, improving the prospects of achieving evidence-informed policymaking is not merely a matter of available resources. The comparative study of public school and active labor market policies in Denmark by Kelstrup et al. (2025) shows that, whether evidence is effectively integrated in public policy, and whether it ‘works’ in achieving certain government or ministerial objectives, also depends on how well it aligns with the expectations and dynamics of policy subsystems. Where public service professionals, who are required to navigate new policies and processes on a day-to-day basis do not ‘buy in’ to a policy reform, tensions and conflict are likely to ensue in ways that evidence alone is unlikely to help resolve. In other words, ensuring policies are designed in a way that is evidence-informed does not guarantee successful implementation. Ultimately, as discussed in the previous section, if a new reform is not considered democratically legitimate, or if target groups are not convinced about its benefits, evidence-informed policies will not make a meaningful difference. The contingent nature of policymaking therefore requires a realistic understanding of what can (and what cannot) be achieved through work to ensure policy formulation and design is evidence-informed, a point which returns us to the necessity of ensuring processes to link evidence and policy also take account of politics and publics.

Closing comments

We hope that the articles within this special themed section of *Evidence & Policy* contribute to a burgeoning body of scholarship that demonstrates the value of taking a comparative lens to studying evidence use in policy, paving the way for further comparative research. The comparative research that does exist within scholarship on evidence and policy often centres on comparisons

across different policy settings. This is indeed the case for all three research papers in this special themed section (Andersen and Pattyn, 2025; Kelstrup, Jørgensen and Hansen, 2025; Moawad and Ludwicki-Ziegler, 2025) as well as for several other recent publications (Christensen and Hesstvedt, 2024; Geddes, 2024; McDowall, 2024; Saguin et al, 2024). We hope these papers help showcase the value of such comparisons, demonstrating how the specificities of certain contexts and issues are clarified through comparison with other cases. In addition, we want to close this introductory editorial by highlighting the potential value of other forms of comparison, notably comparing how the relationships between evidence and policy are conceptualised within distinct disciplinary clusters (Bandola-Gill et al, 2024), and comparing how our own understanding can shift as we move between different types of roles (e.g. moving from research into policy or vice-versa, as Synhaeve et al, 2025 have done). Current funding opportunities that emphasise the value of interdisciplinary working and which aim to build bridges between research and policy (e.g. by creating opportunities for people working in universities to spend time in policy, and for people working policy to spend time in research settings) seem well-placed to facilitate these alternative forms of comparison.

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