

***THE ROAD TO SOMEWHERE:
EVIDENCE, PUBLIC POLICY AND THE PUBLIC***

***WHAT WORKS: EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY
AND PRACTICE IN PUBLIC SERVICES***
*Edited by H. Davies, S. Nutley and P. Smith,
Policy Press, Milton Keynes*

***IF ONLY WE KNEW: INCREASING THE
PUBLIC VALUE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH***
By John Willensky, Routledge, London

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What Works and *If Only We Knew* address a central issue of policy analysis, social policy, and applied sociology – the status and utilisation of research evidence. The books have different aims and audiences: Davies et al. talk to the researcher and policy maker; Willensky echoes long-standing pleas that social science engage in a broader public debate.

What Works brings together a range of material in the field of evidence-based policy and practice in three complementary sections. The first offers introductory chapters on evidence-based policy, and the place of evidence within the policy process. The second provides an analysis of discrete service areas, with individual chapters addressing health, education, criminal justice, social care, welfare policy, housing, transport and urban policy. Each chapter balances insights on service-specific issues, with reflections on broader themes: the place of evidence, types of evidence, and future opportunities. Section three has contributions on setting research agendas, research design and dissemination. Sections are relevant and well written, with sound editing ensuring they contribute towards a coherent whole.

Given the push for evidence-based activity, both domestically and internationally, the book makes a valuable contribution to ongoing debates. A key strength is the book's juxtaposition of the generic and the specific, although inevitably New Zealand readers will find the book has less direct relevance than for counterparts in the United Kingdom. All service-based chapters contribute to central debates around hierarchies of knowledge, research approaches, the underdevelopment of capacity, and the place

of evidence within the “policy soup”. The text is a reminder that policy and practice require us to interrogate the relationships between theory, action and evidence.

In exploring evaluation design, experimentation and qualitative research are presented as possible contributors, rather than demonised or dichotomised. Kaplan’s aphorism, “When all you have is a hammer, the whole world looks like a nail”, is instructive here. Research questions should not *a priori* preclude particular methods, so long as ethical considerations are upheld.

In appealing to policy analysts and research commissioners, the book is inevitably state-centred and administratively focused. Given that the majority of the policies and the bulk of practice involve vulnerable groups, the book says less than it might about how collection or utilisation of evidence impacts upon (or even involves) users. Also, discussion of needs analysis and formative evaluation would have made a useful contribution to the broader question of “what works”.

Overall, readers will find this text extremely valuable, particularly in lieu of any similar domestic resource. It serves as useful material for teachers of evaluation or policy analysis, and for those educating future evidence-based practitioners. Managers within statutory and non-statutory agencies will also find much of value.

While *What Works* confines its discussion of utilisation to the policy-making process, *If Only We Knew* attempts to broaden the scope of research utilisation. Echoing past civic-responsibility-type debates around the role of sociology, Willensky aims at a “public-knowledge project” that unites research, policy and practice. He argues that:

The time is right for social scientists to explore ways of improving the contribution that their research makes to public knowledge. (p.4)

He makes some (valid) comments about the research community’s propensity to address a select audience, and for individual reports to become disembodied when presenting findings. The outcome is a failure to engage the wider public in debates that are essential to democracy. His solution is two-fold – that research findings address a wider public, and projects be situated within the broader context of competing literature and evidence.

From his concern to share resources of knowledge rather than concentrate them in the hands of a few, Willensky views the Internet as a potential public space to facilitate greater participation. Situating his discussion within the historical milieu of libraries,

footnotes, bibliographies and databases, he argues that the Internet's hyperlink is a way of linking the public to the broader implications and dimensions of research studies and debates. Rather than too little research, Willensky argues that frequently the problem is a failure to best utilise existing sources of information. He is at pains, however, to distinguish his project from one aiming at unitary knowledge, or pursuit of some Hegelian synthesis. Travelling on the information superhighway will not miraculously dissolve the problems we face. Rather:

I want to develop our ability to juxtapose opposing analyses, to represent the differences in framework and assumption that give our thinking its richness and innovation. (p. 76)

Research thus allows us to investigate particular suspicions, challenge certainties, and explore tacit assumptions. His project is ambitious, but one that resonates with contemporary debates about empowering all sectors within the information economy. Regardless of whether we are wholly convinced by Willensky's prognosis and prescriptions, there is still much of value in his argument. Implicit in his discussion is the request that social scientists talk to policy makers, each other, and the public. Underpinning his argument is an assumption that the public could and should become a more critical consumer of information.

At root, Willensky is an epistemological and technological optimist. That aside, his treatise for the fruits of knowledge to be shared more equitably has a distinct appeal. Centring our attention on the role of users, stressing deliberation and informational pluralism, acts as a potential to the "bureaucratic" or "technocratic" rationality that may drive the utilisation of research evidence. Research is linked to the broader objective of equipping people to participate in civil and democratic society. Moreover, utilisation becomes part of the journey rather than simply the destination to be reached.

To develop the travelling metaphor a little further, we can draw on Giddens's useful prognosis of modernity as:

A runaway engine of enormous power which, collectively as human beings, we can drive to some extent but which also threatens to rush out of our control and could rend itself asunder.... We can ride the juggernaut, with its enormous destructive capacity, and we can steer it, but there are no guarantees of a benign outcome. The world is full of grave dangers, but the powers that are available to inhabitants of high modern societies ensure that there is also opportunity and hope. (Giddens 1990:139).

Both books are a reminder that social science has traveled a great distance since the over-inflated expectations, and subsequent epistemological crisis, of the 1960s and 1970s. Although it is too soon to talk about the rehabilitation of social science within the social and political body, the fostering of a debate around research utilisation may be one part of (at least) a broader revitalisation of social science.

REFERENCES

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- Willensky, John (2001) *If Only We Knew: Increasing the Public Value of Social Science Research*, Routledge, London.