Introduction:
Evidence-Based Policy: A Concept in Geographical and Substantive Expansion

Kathrin Frey
Department of Political Science and Centre for Democracy Studies, University of Zurich (Switzerland)

Simone Ledermann
Parliamentary Control of the Administration (Switzerland)

1 EBP—The Rise of a Research Topic

Over the past decade, the notion of 'evidence-based policy' (EBP) has become increasingly popular in many policy areas (Davies et al. 2000) and has spread internationally (Head 2010; Nutley et al. 2010). Politicians and civil servants seem to be attaching more weight to utilizing research evidence for policy purposes than ever before. The term EBP has originally been coined by the Labour Government in power in the United Kingdom (UK) between 1997 and 2010. Tony Blair's Government emphasized the relevance of rigorous scientific analysis to improve policy-making. Political decisions, it was argued, ought to be 'based on a comprehensive and foresighted understanding of evidence' (Cabinet Office 1999). The slogan 'what matters is what works' was intended to signal the end of policy-making based on political ideology or prejudice in favor of policy-making based on sound evidence (Nutley et al. 2007).

EBP can be seen as the most recent efforts undertaken by governments over the past half century to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of public policy-making through the use of systematic evaluative rationality (Howlett 2009). It sustains the shift from input and process steering (defining resource allocations for specific processes or setting administrative guidelines to be fol-

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lowed) to output-oriented concepts of public steering that apply criteria based on ‘results’ (defining the desired policy effects). Although the appeal to EBP has received wide attention, its conceptual foundations are yet rather ambiguous (cf. also section 2 on central research issues).

Not surprisingly, the efforts to strengthen EBP in the UK and elsewhere have been paralleled by a new wave of research interest in the relationship between evidence and politics. Publications dealing with questions about the generation, diffusion, and utilization of evidence (or expertise, scientific knowledge, etc.) for policy purposes have increased considerably (e.g. Boswell 2009; Frey 2010a; James and Jorgensen 2009; Ledermann 2008; Pawson 2006; Sager 2007; Schrefler 2010, Tenbensel 2004). Workshops at international conferences in public administration and political science on this topic have been flourishing. This issue of German Policy Studies is the result of such a gathering, held at the 2008 ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops in Rennes under the title ‘The Politics of Evidence-based Policy-making’. We were among the sixteen participants, and together with the organizers Fritz Sager and Ray Pawson, we shared four intensive days with fruitful discussion, presenting our work to each other.

We are pleased that we have been able to enlist five of the contributions for the present issue, which together represent a good assortment. The authors of this issue cover research topics that are relevant to EBP, ranging from the question of principle about the nature of evidence to down-to-earth issues that arise when trying to apply evidence to policy or practice. All articles have a qualitative empirical research part, which constitutes in some cases the core of the analysis, while it serves merely as an illustration in others. We tried to select empirical examples that span from the UK as the cradle of EBP to continental Europe where the concept has travelled to (Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, and Switzerland). This way, we would like to facilitate a comparative perspective on how the concept of EBP has developed.

2 Central Research Issues

The concept of EBP is based on a twofold optimism: On the one hand it presumes that the quality of policies, their effectiveness and efficiency can be measured in an objective and conclusive way. On the other hand it assumes that policy-making can be rationalized. This optimism has been the starting point of many critics of EBP and gave reason to the allegation of naivety (Sanderson 2002; Parsons 2002, 2004; Widmer 2009; see also *Monaghan* in this issue). Two fundamental questions lie behind this twofold optimism:

- What is evidence and how is it generated?
- When, how and by whom is evidence brought into policy?

We would like to elaborate on these questions in order to point out relevant research issues on EBP and locate the contributions in this issue within current discussions. The two questions are not as separate as they might appear at first sight; the definition of evidence and its production are implicitly or explicitly linked to an intention of use.

What is evidence and how is it generated?

While efforts to improve public policy by using evidence have not been challenged fundamentally, there is growing disagreement and confusion about what constitutes sound, and thus credible, evidence for decision-making (Donaldson et al. 2009). As *Hanne Foss Hansen* and *Olaf Rieper* put it in their article, ‘evidence’ is an ‘elastic concept’. In French, the term ‘evidence’ refers to self-evident, apparent facts and experience, whereas in English, it means proof and implies causality. In its original version, EBP referred to ‘evidence’ as proof and put the question of ‘what works’ at the center. This narrow definition has, however, been an important point of criticism, as *Mark Monaghan* discusses in his contribution. One of the main advocates of a broader concept, which he entitles ‘intelligent government’, is *Ian Sanderson*. In his article, he demands that not only scientific evidence, but also practitioners’ experience and the ‘common sense’ of the people concerned by a social problem be used in policy-making. That these two additional types of ‘evidence’ or ‘knowledge’ are important, is demonstrated by *Heleen Vreugdenhil* and *Philippe Ker Rault* in their study about pilot projects. Diffusion of pilot projects depends on a successful transfer of the different types of knowledge created in a pilot, including social learning.

There is a strong movement within EBP to exploit existing data or research more fully, namely in the form of systematic reviews. These reviews are proposed as a solution to the timing problem: scientific research often takes too long to deliver its results, so that policy decisions have been taken by that time. As an alternative, systematic reviews summarize already available results in order to inform policy. We can witness a rapidly growing amount of literature on how to do so-called systematic reviews of existing findings (Foss Hansen and Rieper 2009; Pawson 2006; Sager 2007). In the 1990s, the Cochrane Collaboration has pioneered this so-called ‘evidence-movement’ with systematic reviews in the field of medicine, and the Campbell Collaboration has brought it to the areas of social welfare, education and criminology. In their article, *Foss Hansen* and *Rieper* trace the institutionalization of the evidence movement in Denmark and show how certain organizations established a hierarchy of evidence, ranking designs and declaring randomized controlled trials as the gold standard in applied research and evaluation. These organizations follow a particular methodology for producing a specific form of evidence such as meta-analyses of robust research studies in order to assess the effectiveness of a public policy. Depending on the policy area, the established evidence hierarchy and research methodology has, however, been questioned. A core issue of this controversy is causal attribution or in other words, what type of study design can identify the consequences of a policy with scientific rigor (Farrington 2003; Pawson 2006; Foss Hansen and Rieper 2009)? This debate has not only stimulated methodological reflections of how to measure policy effectiveness and efficiency, but also provided a fruitful ground for the development and promotion of more sophisticated evaluation and review techniques.

So within EBP, there are narrow interpretations of evidence that are focused on a particular methodology, whereas at the other end of the spectrum, we can find broad definitions of evidence encompassing not only research and evaluation studies but also routine monitoring data, expert knowledge or practice-based evidence and a diverse array of research methods exploring a variety of research questions—not just ‘what works’, but also ‘what is the nature of the problem’, ‘why does it occur’ and ‘how might it be addressed’ (Nutley et al. 2007: 13). In her contribution, *Anneli Rüling* demonstrates with a frame analysis that the kind of research questions posed depends on the political and cultural context. As a consequence, EBP can never be free from ideology or measure public performance in an objective way, because values determine what is seen to be relevant for investigation and measurement. Thus, it is essential to highlight the influence of ideology and values on the creation and interpretation of evidence (see also *Sanderson* in this issue). These values can change over time. *Monaghan* shows in his article that policy-makers’ attention has shifted from one dimension of policy success to another as new evidence has been published focusing on the latter dimension.

Solesbury emphasizes that from a policy-maker’s perspective, some skepticism about the validity of any type of evidence is desirable. He formulates the key questions to be asked when bringing evidence of any kind to bear on policy or practice: How relevant is this to what we are seeking to understand or decide? How representative is this of the population that concerns us? How reliable, how well-founded—theoretically, empirically—is it? (Solesbury 2001: 8). An answer to these questions requires adequate policy-analytical capacity of the policy-makers and the decision arena (Howlett 2009), and this brings us to the second fundamental question we want to highlight in this special issue, namely how evidence percolates into policy-making.

When, how and by whom is evidence brought into policy?

There is a rich research tradition on the relationship between science and politics going back to the early beginning of the movement of policy analysis in the 1960s (Lindblom 1958; Wildavsky 1979). This second fundamental question is present in various strands of research and is embedded in a theoretical discourse about the tension between democracy and technocracy and professionalism rooted in the classic studies such as Habermas (1971). This tension is reflected in the present issue by *Foss Hansen* and *Rieper,* who discuss the risk that the evidence movement in Denmark could lead to purely technocratic, depoliticized and undemocratic decision-making. Alternatively, *Sanderson* devises the concept of ‘intelligent government’ that overcomes the tension between democracy and technocracy and joins their respective strengths: democracy ensures that citizens can express their moral values; technocracy (or what he calls knowledge, intelligence and learning) guarantees that the government delivers on these values in an efficient and effective way.

Two research traditions have recurrently examined the role of evidence in policy-making: on the one hand, policy analysis focuses on the ‘influence of ideas’ and ‘policy learning’; on the other hand, evaluation research utilization examines the ‘use’, ‘utilization’ or ‘influence’ of evaluation studies. Both research traditions are faced with the difficulty that their respective central concepts of ‘use’, ‘influence’ and ‘learning’ remain ambiguous. This ambiguity is reflected in the current issue, as the papers relate to different sources for the definition of the concepts. *Monaghan* examines the ‘utilization’ and *Rüling* the ‘use’ of evidence. Both adopt an argumentative approach as they analyze how evidence has been drawn upon in political debate. To *Sanderson*, the ‘use of evidence’ is just one step towards the more essential notion of ‘learning’, which is understood to include a moral and ethical dimension that is central for intelligent government. In contrast, *Vreugdenhil* and *Ker Rault* choose ‘use’ as a generic term, which includes ‘learning’ as a first step and ‘diffusion’ as a second step. The fact that the same terms are used slightly differently by different authors thus reflects the lack of consensus about key concepts in the field.

The original concept of EBP as set out by the UK government assumed a direct evidence-policy connection, even though both policy analysis and evaluation utilization research had long before shown that this relationship is much more complex. All the articles in this special issue bear testimony to the intricacy of this connection: *Foss Hansen* and *Rieper* hint at the lack of use of the systematic reviews provided by the evidence movement although the reviews rely on the ‘best’ evidence available. *Rüling* discusses the selectivity of evidence use, i.e. that the frame of the actors determines the range of research results that are taken into account. *Vreugdenhil* and *Ker Rault* conclude from their case studies that it takes more than evidence about positive effects for a pilot project to achieve diffusion. They emphasize the importance of actor participation in order to enable social learning. In the same vein, *Sanderson* examines the role of the Government Analytical Services in Scotland and points out that in order to transfer evidence into policy, it is necessary for these services not only to function as ‘knowledge brokers’, but also as ‘evidence advocates’. *Monaghan* critically reviews existing models of the evidence-policy connection, including knowledge brokerage. Concluding that none of the existing models are able to explain why certain pieces of evidence are preferred over others, he sketches out his own ‘process model’. The need to conduct and communicate research in ways that ‘users’ find helpful has generally been receiving growing attention in the literature, and knowledge translation and exchange strategies have been developed and tested more rigorously (Dobbins et al. 2009). The articles in the present issue provide empirical evidence that such strategies are required for successful EBP, but they also highlight the limits of these strategies in the face of a myriad of intervening factors.

Existing findings from various strands of research emphasize the conditionality of ‘evaluation utilization’, ‘learning’ or EBP respectively. However, the findings remain inconclusive about the relative importance of the different conditions. On a very general level, the conditions shaping the evidence and policy-relation can be separated in two groups: The characteristics of the available evidence on the one hand, and the characteristics of the political context on the other hand. The question of how to deal with conflicting evidence (as mentioned by *Monaghan* or *Rüling*) or how to integrate different types of evidence including experiential evidence apart from research-based information (as suggested by *Sanderson* or *Vreugdenhil* and *Ker Rault*) is not clear

(Tenbensel 2004). As to the political dimensions, institutional structure is certainly important as it defines the opportunities of the actors for EBP within the system. *Sanderson*, for instance, mentions the centralist structure within the UK as an obstacle to innovation. Norms and values matter, too. As *Rüling* demonstrates, political culture or tradition (liberal or conservative welfare state in England or Germany, respectively) determines what evidence enters the field of vision of the actors and what goes unnoticed. Within the political culture, we can discern an ‘evidence culture’: *Foss Hansen* and *Rieper* illustrate that the kind of evidence accepted as ‘valid’ differs considerably between policy areas such as social work and education. *Monaghan* shows that in highly politicized areas the selection of evidence not only depends on long-term institutional conditions and political culture, but also on short-term considerations by political actors. Thereby, the article sheds light on the role of media communication in EBP. Overall, the articles in this issue bring home that no simple model will ever be able to conceptualize the evidence-policy connection in its complexity (cf. also section 4 on open questions).

3 About the Contributions

At first glance, EBP is a simple and appealing concept. However, the above discussion shows that reality is more complex. The articles in this issue all start from the original concept of EBP as proposed by the UK Labour Government elected in 1997 and examine a certain aspect. The present issue also starts at the roots of the concept with two articles analyzing recent efforts for EBP in the UK.

Monaghan provides us with an encompassing outline of the origins, development and criticisms of the EBP concept by New Labour. He argues that the evidence movement has become a key component in many policy debates and has percolated even into adversarial policy areas which were typically seen as being evidence-free. To highlight the specific challenges such areas pose for EBP, *Monaghan* draws on a longitudinal case study of UK

Cannabis classification. His analysis shows that evidence is embedded in adversarial policy processes but the selection and prominence of certain pieces of evidence changes over time. The insights from the case study are used to critically discuss existing models of research utilization and to develop a new concept, the so called ‘process model’.

Sanderson draws on philosophical concepts to develop an ideal-type of ‘intelligent government’ that goes beyond EBP and places emphasis on experimentation, learning and deliberation. He uses the ideal-type to assess recent developments in Scotland taking place under the government by the Scottish National Party. The author concludes that the outcomes-based approach to government has been reinforced and that some elements of intelligent government have been incorporated, but that on the whole the learning culture, deliberation and experimentation are still weak. In the light of economic crisis and the loss of confidence in political institutions, *Sanderson* advocates a strengthening of intelligent government.

After this focus on British experiences with EBP, this special issue presents three articles that shed light on the evidence and policy-relation in continental Europe. The article of *Foss Hansen* and *Rieper* concentrates on Denmark, while the last two articles of this special issue provide a comparative perspective on Germany, the Netherland and Switzerland (*Vreugdenhil* and *Ker Rault*) and on Germany and the UK (*Rüling*), respectively.

Foss Hansen and *Rieper* deal with the so-called ‘evidence movement’ in Denmark. Based on a framework by DiMaggio and Powell, they analyze the pressures that have led to the establishment of organizations that produce and diffuse systematic reviews of existing research in the area of medicine (Cochrane Collaboration), social work (Campbell Collaboration), and education (Clearinghouse). The idea of synthesizing knowledge has generally been well received in Denmark as a solution to the problem of information overload, which has facilitated to ‘import’ the organizations to Denmark. The organizations differ in their definition of relevant evidence and appropriate review approaches. The article also discusses on-going disputes about the implications of the evidence movement for policy and practice.

Vreugdenhil and *Ker Rault* shed light on the role of pilot projects as an instrument to realize EBP. In EBP, pilot projects are considered an important tool to generate knowledge on the effectiveness of policy innovations prior to their wide implementation. The authors develop a comprehensive framework to analyze pilot projects and present empirical insights from three water management pilot projects in the Rhine basin. The analysis shows that the extent and way in which pilot projects inform policy-making depends on the type of pilot project, on actor involvement and on the types of evidence generated by the pilot project. Based on their analysis, the authors formulate some strategies of how to design pilot projects so they successfully contribute to EBP.

Rüling explores the significance of evidence for policy change. To what extent does research evidence contribute to underlying re-framing processes? The article examines this question in the case of the expansion of childcare services for kids under the age of three in Germany and England and applies a discursive approach. The contribution shows that early childcare has been successfully re-framed as an economic issue in both countries, but that the focus has been different. Policy-makers in both countries used evidence for political argumentation, but the bodies of evidence they relied upon were completely different.

4 Avenues for Further Research

This issue seeks to contribute to the understanding of the evidence and policy relation in the age of EBP promotion. The assembled articles show the diversity, in which EBP manifests itself in different policy areas and countries. Furthermore, the contributions relate to various strands of literature and bring together multiple research perspectives that highlight many important aspects of the complex and ‘messy’ relation between evidence and policy. We have sought to capture this diversity with two fundamental questions: first, what counts as evidence and how is it generated? Second, when, how and by whom is evidence brought into policy? This issue complements the findings on these questions as discussed above, and we are convinced that these are the important questions to guide future research. In these concluding remarks of our introduction to this special issue, we would like to specify some aspects of these questions that call for further research and raise the ultimate but so far neglected question about the effect of EBP on policy outcomes and political systems.

First, the contributions show that there is an ongoing and maybe never ending debate about what counts as relevant and sound evidence for policy-making. There is neither a consensus among researchers nor among policy-makers about this issue. From an empirical research perspective on the evidence and policy relation, we do not plead for a single well-accepted definition of evidence, but we rather stipulate the importance of an explicit delineation of the types of evidence that are considered within a study. The field would benefit from research that differentiates between different types of evidence and seeks to assess their relevance for different types of actors within different phases of the policy process (Frey and Widmer 2011; James and Jorgensen 2009). There is a need for research that investigates the perspective of the potential users of evidence and their information processing behaviour, and of how policy makers deal with divergent implications of different types of evidence (Tenbensel 2004; Boaz and Pawson 2005).

Second, this issue highlights that the key concepts of this field—namely ‘evidence use’, ‘influence of evidence’ and ‘learning’—remain ambiguous and constitute a conceptual and methodological challenge. While efforts to specify and clarify these concepts have increased recently (Boswell 2009; Krikhart 2000; Mark and Henry 2004; Radaelli 2009), methodological issues receive little attention. This issue is no exception in this respect, given that none of the articles provided a thorough discussion of methodological challenges or limitations. We know little about how they exactly dealt with cognitive aspects that are not directly observable. What are appropriate measurement strategies? How do they perform on the ground in concrete research projects? What are the issues raised by specific techniques like frame analysis or expert interviews?

Third, the contributions of this special issue shed light on the relationship between evidence and policy in six different jurisdictions. However, the focus of analysis differs with respect to the main questions addressed as well as with respect to the policy areas investigated. This way, it is difficult to interpret the findings in a comparative perspective because the influence of the policy area and of the national context cannot be disentangled. The two contributions that provide either a comparison of policy areas (*Foss Hansen* and *Rieper*) or countries (*Rüling*) emphasize that these two context conditions shape the evidence policy relations in important ways. There have been some innovative efforts to learn and draw broader, cross-national lessons (see for example Nutley et al. 2010), but there is a need for more systematic cross-national as well as cross-sectional research on the relationship between evidence and policy. Such research can contribute to clarify the conditions shaping the role of evidence in policy processes.

Finally, this special issue does not deal with the important question whether evidence-based policy actually makes a difference. Empirical findings about the impact of EBP are still very scarce. While we can observe some efforts to investigate the effects of EBP on the policy process (Frey 2010b; Nutley et al. 2010; Tenbensel 2004), there is a large research gap as to the consequences of EBP on the policy outcome and the political system. Does EBP reduce policy failure and lead to more effective and efficient policies, thereby enhancing public welfare? Does EBP contribute to the output-oriented legitimacy of modern democracies (Widmer 2009) and ensure accountability? Of course, an investigation of these questions is challenging and raises problems of causal attribution. But taking the slogan of EBP seriously, the ultimate question for EBP itself must be ‘does it work?’.

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