

Book Reviews

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Neutral Information, Evidence, Politics, and Public Administration

Ron Haskins and Greg Margolis, Show Me the Evidence: Obama's Fight for Rigor and Results in Social Policy (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2014). 380 pp. \$32, ISBN: 9780815725718.

Jim Nussle and Peter Orszag, eds., Moneyball for Government (Washington, DC: Disruption Books, 2014). 248 pp. \$10, ISBN: 9781633310018.

For more than a century the field of public administration has been searching for ways to disentangle the relationship between politics and administration. Woodrow Wilson's original proposal to view the two worlds as inherently different has been simultaneously utilized and rejected over the years as both scholars and practitioners have searched for ways to define political neutrality.

While the politics–administration dichotomy continues to show up in public administration class syllabi, this conflict is rarely discussed explicitly in the world of practice and has not appeared clearly in the multiple management reform efforts that have emerged over the past half-century. It is unusual to find the Wilsonian dichotomy between politics and administration used in practice, yet the search for some form of bureaucratic neutrality has continued over the years and has effectively obsessed both scholars and practitioners.

The two recent books that are reviewed in this essay indicate that the search for neutrality is alive and well in contemporary America. Both volumes provide a picture of a set of activities that seem to transcend partisan politics and have emerged from both the White House and the congressional end of Pennsylvania Avenue. It is clear that this search—based on what has been defined as “evidence”—is undertaken by individuals who believe that it is possible to find clear, neutral, and lasting answers to questions that must be asked by decision makers today. While those who see themselves as a part of the evidence-based movement are found both in the United States and globally, there has been little attempt to link these activities to similar past efforts. Yet some of the lessons of the past involving evaluation and related activities are relevant to understanding these contemporary efforts.

This essay attempts to do two things. First, it seeks to place the current evidence-based activity in a historical context of earlier efforts dealing with use of information and a search for neutrality. Second, it provides a picture of current U.S. efforts that have emerged during the Obama administration as analyzed in these two volumes.

A Belief in Information

Starting in the 1960s, the search for political neutrality in public administration hovered around the potential of the use of information in the decision process. Adoption of the Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System (PPBS) in the 1960s began a process that reflected a belief in the potential of analytic skills and the ability to devise a rational framework that would produce neutral data. A series of management reform efforts followed PPBS that continued to be based on a belief that neutral data sources could emerge that would allow decision makers to avoid the constraints that emerged from the political process. The performance measurement processes found in the Government Performance and Results Act and the Program Assessment and Rating Tool nurtured a performance movement that proceeded with a number of assumptions. These assumptions were found in most of the performance efforts; they argued that information is available, that information is neutral,

that it is possible to define cause–effect relationships, and that almost all activities can be measured and quantified. These assumptions about information often have led to failed reform efforts since information sources rarely meet those expectations.

While management reformers were likely to emphasize the efforts that spun off of the PPBS experience, another set of activities was undertaken during the post-1960s period that focused on a somewhat different use of information in the decision-making process in public organizations. Lyndon B. Johnson not only was responsible for spreading PPBS across the federal government but his policy agenda (particularly the programs associated with the War on Poverty) spawned the development of a policy evaluation field linked to education and welfare programs as well as employment and training efforts.

In a recent speech, Alice Rivlin (2014) reminisced about those early days in the evaluation field in Washington. She noted: “HEW in the late 60s was a wonderful place to be. The Congress had recently passed a raft of new programs... Both advocates and evaluators were naïve by today’s standards. We all thought simple interventions could change lives and evaluation would show clear results quickly. It gradually dawned on all of us that progress was going to be more complicated” (Rivlin 2014).

Many of those engaged in the early evaluation field were convinced that they could draw on their academic training for a set of skills that were appropriate for this demand. Social scientists (including economists, psychologists, and sociologists) began to appear on the evaluation and policy analysis staffs of multiple federal agencies. As time went on, the evaluation literature increasingly reflected a recognition of the complexity of the task. Several well-known writers emerged during the late 1970s and into the 1980s who provided a picture of that complexity. None of these individuals had ties to the public administration field, but all of them raised a set of issues that reflected concerns of some public administration scholars.

Lindblom and Cohen’s (1989) work, *Useable Knowledge: Social Science and Social Problem Solving*, contrasted the approach to information that emerges from academic social science (what they called Professional Social Inquiry) with ordinary knowledge, the information that emerges from common-sense speculation and analysis. They noted that too many policy analysts and researchers greatly underestimated the use and effectiveness of ordinary knowledge.

Carol Weiss (1983) provided a somewhat different but related perspective on information. She characterized the information tasks as what she called

the three “I”s—information, ideology, and interests. She noted that “Observers who expect the subcategory of information that is social science research to have immediate and independent power in the process, and who bitterly complain about the intrusion of ‘politics’ . . . into the use of research, implicitly hold a distorted view of how decisions are made” (Weiss 1983, 221–22).

The last writer in this group was Giandomenico Majone (1989). His book *Evidence, Argument, and Persuasion in the Policy Process* substituted the idea of argument and evidence for the approach used by applied social scientists (Majone 1989). Majone viewed the analyst as one who plays the role of participant and mediator rather than objective scientist. Evidence for him was much closer to the process used in legal reasoning. It was information that is used to make a case. Majone noted: “Argumentation is the key process through which citizens and policymakers arrive at moral judgments and policy choices . . . In this way, discussion can produce results that are beyond the capabilities of authoritarian or technocratic methods of policymaking” (Majone 1989, 161).

The combined message from these individuals led some evaluators to recognize what Majone called the “uncritical acceptance of the ‘scientific method’ or what is thought to be the scientific method” (Majone 1989, 177). This message emphasized four attributes that were described recently by a group called the Friends of Evidence. Those attributes included (1) the idea that evidence comes from many sources, methods, and measures; (2) the idea that rigor is important but there is a risk of overdoing it; (3) the importance of learning from implementation on the ground in real communities and involving real people; and (4) the need to develop a culture of continuous feedback and learning from doing (Schorr, Farrow, and Sparrow 2014, 21). This group of observers seeks to address the chasm between unmet social needs and what social institutions are able to accomplish.

These are observations that one would think would be relevant to public administration practitioners and scholars. Yet it seems that much of the public administration community has focused on an approach to the concept of evidence that basically brings us back to the original stages of the policy evaluation field. The two volumes that are reviewed here seem to approach evidence as a simple, true-or-false process that links back to traditional beliefs that stem from academic preparation. They do not confront differences between methodologies appropriate for a public organization setting and those of a sector where efficiency values determine measures of effectiveness.

Both the Haskins-Margolis book and the Nussle-Orszag volume provide the reader with a sense of current views about evidence-based approaches, but neither of them appears to be aware of the insights that had been developed in the field of policy evaluation more than 50 years back. Both volumes appear to assume that the lessons gleaned from the natural science field (i.e., faith in random control experiments) are easy to use in the policy environment. Thus, we seem to be engaged in activities that are really a case of reinventing the wheel.

The Haskins-Margolis Book: *Show Me the Evidence*

Ron Haskins, the senior author of this volume, is someone well known in Washington circles. Currently at the Brookings Institution, he spent more than a decade on the staff of the House Ways and Means Human Resources Committee, first as welfare counsel to the Republican staff and then as the subcommittee’s staff director. His areas of expertise include welfare reform, child care, child support, marriage, child protection, and budget and deficit issues. In 1997, Haskins was selected by the *National Journal* as one of the hundred most influential people in the federal government.

The book that he produced with the aid of Greg Margolis shows his personal understanding of the process of policy making. The book is a densely written presentation with detailed descriptions of crafting policy developments. An introduction and conclusion frame the stories of six different policy initiatives during the Obama administration. These are the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Initiative; the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative; the Investing in Innovation Initiative; the Social Innovation Fund Initiative; the Workforce Innovation Fund Initiative; and the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Initiative.

Each of these programs tells a somewhat different story and indicates both the difficulty of defining “innovation” and the many ways of conceptualizing what were termed as evidence-based initiatives. But there are glaring omissions in this volume. There is no attempt to acknowledge that many public policies contain multiple goals; thus it is difficult to clearly define a single goal for a program. There is no mention of the impact of the U.S. federal system on the policy field; yet when pushed these advocates will acknowledge that our system is designed to minimize the national government role and to provide discretion for states and sometimes localities to define goals and means of implementation.

This book is written from the perspective of a Washington insider, and its dense detail and micro

orientation emphasizes the role of the White House, Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and the executive branch agencies. Although it often tells the legislative story in an interesting fashion, one does not get a sense of the multiple players, the environment in which they operate, and the reasons for the strategies and approaches that are behind congressional action.

The volume consistently uses the term “evidence-based” in its description of the approach that it describes, yet it is difficult to find a clear definition of the term anywhere in the book. Similarly, there is no clarity in terms of possible differences between research and evidence. None of the writers that I mentioned earlier (Lindblom-Cohen, Weiss, and Majone) appear in the sources for the book. The stories that are told about the six policy areas consistently ignore past analyses and research. Several of the policy issues that are in the volume had antecedents stemming from the 1960s War on Poverty. Despite the interest in the Obama years in those past efforts, the ahistorical approach to the analysis of the policy areas discussed seems very partial and often misleading. The goals of the social programs that are described—their effort to address unmet needs—are often lost in the story told in the book. Their analysis focuses on whether an intervention can work—not on ways that it might be made to work more effectively.

I completed this book with an unclear view about the cast of characters who the authors see as crucial to these activities. Is it academics? Is it evaluators inside the bureaucracy? Is it think tanks? Or is it consulting firms (like Mathematica) who receive funds from the federal government to develop analyses?

The Nussle & Orszag Book, *Moneyball for Government*

The authors of this book are drawn from a bipartisan group of past and current federal government leaders who are attempting to make a case for changes in government regarding data, evidence, and evaluation. Edited by Jim Nussle (a former Republican member of Congress and former director of OMB) and Peter Orszag (a former director of the Congressional Budget Office and director of OMB in the Obama administration), the book contains a range of observations from eight individuals drawn from past White House staff, members of Congress, and policy advisors to both branches.

Each of these individuals appears to be convinced that they know how to change the way that government works. The volume is peppered with sports analogies, drawing on the title “*Moneyball for Government*”—a title that grew out of the approach pioneered by Billy Beane, former general manager of the Oakland

Athletics baseball organization, who transformed baseball by using data to build championship teams with a limited budget. The story appeared in a book and a movie.

The volume employs a public relations tone that tries to convince the reader that a wide range of examples of innovative government agencies and nonprofits achieve what they call “better results” by leveraging data, evidence, and evaluation. The contributors to this volume pay special attention to efforts that will have an impact on the budget deficit. Reducing the federal debt is the basic goal of this group of commentators. There does not seem to be an acknowledgment of the difficulty achieving social goals and, at the same time, reducing that debt. They are clear that “better results” are achieved by highlighting efficiency and bipartisanship strategies. While they acknowledge that their proposals will confront obstacles, they attach themselves to the general strategies concerning “evidence-based” policies that are contained in the Haskins volume. They, too, do not spend much time describing the dimensions of information that are both appropriate and problematic in this search.

Where Do We Go Next?

Publication of these two books (and other works as well) has stimulated increased interest in the concept of evidence-based decision making. A group of social policy experts has attempted to focus on an important aspect of this effort: expanding our understanding of what constitutes useful and usable evidence, not simply arguing that all information is appropriate (Schorr, Farrow, and Sparrow 2014, 1). This group, the Friends of Evidence, has argued that “It will take a wider range of evidence-generating methods that are widely understood, endorsed, and applied to provide the timely, actionable, real-world knowledge and the climate of learning to achieve substantially better outcomes, more-effective use of resources, and greater accountability” (Schorr, Farrow, and Sparrow 2014, 1).

This approach should resonate with public administration scholars who have consistently argued that attempts to separate politics and administration are futile. Rather, as many have argued over the years, the two worlds are inescapably intertwined. While the concept of evidence-based decisions may have great appeal, information is rarely neutral and, instead, cannot be disentangled from a series of value, structural, and political attributes.

References

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