The Nature of Policy Research

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C O N T E N T S

INTRODUCTION

Is there any difference between policy research and program evaluation? What is policy research? What are the major frameworks in the policy research field? How can a policy research live in a multi-framework world? This paper tries to answer these questions. The first part of the paper will look at the difference between policy research and program evaluation. It is an important question because it can help to determine their functions in a policy inquiry process. Then, I shall lay out some major characteristics of policy research, which will serve as criteria for the assessment of various existing frameworks of policy research. Three major policy research frameworks, quasi-experimentation, cost-benefit analysis, and naturalistic study, will be examined. Finally, I shall discuss various ways to deal with the multi-framework world in policy research field.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN POLICY RESEARCH AND PROGRAM EVALUATION

Defining Policy and Program

Before we can answer the question whether there is a difference between policy research and program evaluation, we need to clarify what is a policy and what is a program. It is difficult to separate these two concepts because people often use them interchangeably. However, I shall argue that they are related but distinguishable.

There are private and public policies, however, this paper will focus on public policy. Public policy is used to remedy particular social problem or pursue social objectives. There are many different definitions of public policy. Thomas Dye (1987) defines it as being "*whatever governments choose to do or not to do*." MacRac and Wilde (1979) define a policy as an act or a "*chosen course of action significantly affecting large numbers of people*." James Anderson (1979) defines a policy as "*a purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern*." The emphasis here is placed upon the action taken by politicians and governmental administrators.

Another way to define public policy is to focus on the decision aspect of a policy. Kahn (1973) defines policy as "*a strategy, directive and posture, the of reality assessment and choice, of empiricism preference*." Rein (1970) explains policy as the substance of planing choices. We can go on and list more definitions.

British writers, Hogwood and Gunn, summarizes various uses of the word 'policy'. Policy can be used as (1) a label for a field of activity; (2) an expression of general purpose of desired state of affairs; (3) a specific proposal; (4) decisions affairs; (5) a formal authorization; (6) a program; (7) an output; (8) an outcome; (9) a theory or model; and (10) a process (1984, p. 13-19).

All these indicate that the concept of policy is a complex one. It involves value orientations, decision-making process, rules and regulations and implementation process. Hogwood and Gunn finally give a long definition of public policy, which is worth quoting here because it summarizes some of the major arguments in this paper.

> "Any public policy is subjectively defined by an observer as being such and is usually perceived as comprising a series of patterns of related decisions to which many circumstances and personal, group, and organizational influences have contributed. The policy-making process involves many sub-processes and may extend over a considerable period of time. The aims or purposes underlying a policy are usually identifiable at a relatively early state in the process but these may change over time and, in some cases, may be defined only retrospectively. The outcomes of policies require to be studied and, where appropriate, compared and contrasted with the policy-makers' intentions….. The study of public requires an understanding of behavior, especially behavior involving within and among organizational memberships ……. "(19 p. 23-24).

Then, what is a program? Rutman defines it as "*an intervention or set of activities mounted to achieve external objectives- that is, to meet some recognized social need; to solve an identified problem*' (1984, p. 11). A program is a specific sequence of activities to achieve the objectives of a policy. A program involves a particular package of legislation, organizatoin and resources. Usually, a policy consists of several programs. For example, AFDC (Aid To Family with Dependent Children), Head Start, WIN (Work Incentive Program) are programs of welfare policy. This may often be so, but there are other cases, where programs develop objectives of their own, especially large-scale programs such as the Superfund program in environment area.

Policy Research and Program Evaluation

The differentiation of what are a policy and a program is important in the sense that we can outline the possible contributions of policy research and program evaluation in policy-making process. Then, how can we differentiate policy research and program evaluation? Majchrzak defines policy research as "*the process of conducting research on, or analysis of, a fundamental social problem in order to provide policymakers with pragmatic, action-oriented recommendations for alleviating the problem.*" (1984, p. 12). Rutman argues that program evaluation "*entails the use of scientific methods to measure the implementation and outcomes of programs for decision-making purpose.*" (1984, p. 10).

It is difficult to tell their differences by looking at these definitions. We may think there is not much difference between policy research and program evaluation because both of them use similar empirical techniques. Also, efforts have been trying to extend the notion of program

evaluation, by using the stakeholders-based evaluation (Bryk, 1983), performing implementation study for a program (McLaughlin 1985), by seeking connection between program evaluation and forecasting (Chelimsky 1987), and developing a naturalistic program evaluation (Guba & Lincoln 1987), which make the distinction between policy research and program evaluation hard to differentiate. However, the two should not be confused. Program evaluation attempts to judge the utility of existing programs, while policy research examines a particular social problem and proposes alternative ways to solve the problem.

The difference between policy research and program evaluation can be illustrated by looking at their functions in a policy inquiry porcess. A useful policy inquiry framework is provided by William Dunn (1981). The framework is selected because it provides a basis for distinguishing various types of policy-relevant information. His framework involves five policy-informational components (rectangles), they are transformed into one another by using six-policy-analytic methods (ovals), as illustrated in figure1.

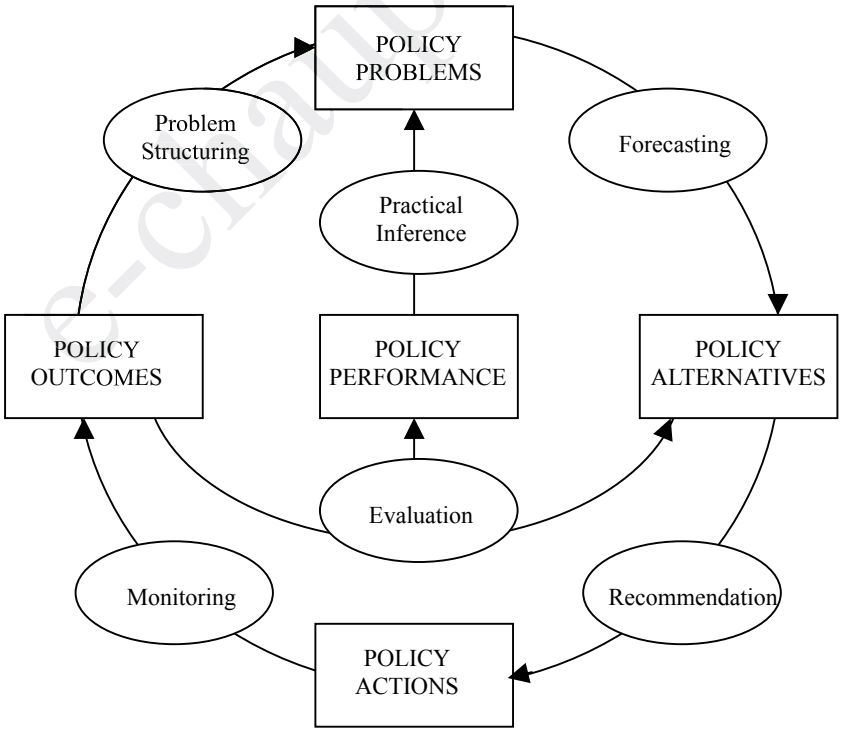

Figure 1: The Process of Policy Analysis (Dunn, p. 48)

Under this framework, traditional program evaluation, which mainly concerns with the evaluation of the performance and outcome of existing programs, is only one of the elements under the evaluation method. However, policy research is supposed to use multiple methods to produce policy-relevant information, which include problem structuring, forecasting, monitoring, evaluation, and recommendation.

Also, we can distinguish policy research and program evaluation by focusing on the time factor. Program evaluation is mainly a retrospective type of research, which is confined to the production of information after policy actions have been taken. Evaluation "*typically acts after the fact (that is, after the initiation of the program or policy)*…." (Chelimsky 1987, p. 362). Policy research can be retrospective as well as prospective. Prospective research involves the production of information before policy actions are initiated and implemented.

Finally, there are two more aspects that separate policy research form program evaluation. First, program evaluation is usually taking programs as givens and discussing their effects, while policy research not only focuses on discussing what are the alternative ways to achieve a policy objective, but it also investigates the goal and value implication of a policy. Second, program evaluation evaluates decision in a given place and time in order to get a precise result, while policy research evaluates decisions across places and times.

Arguing that there are differences between policy research and program evaluation is not to scale down the significant contributions of program evaluation in policy inquiry process. Rather, this can help us broaden our visions and motivate us to use multiple methods to produce policy-relevant information.

CHARACTERISTICS OF POLICY RESEARCH

In this section, I shall lay out some major characteristics of policy research. These characteristics will serve as criteria for the assessment of various existing frameworks of policy research. For policy research to yield usable information, the research process necessitates an understanding of the context in which the study will be performed and the results will be used.

First, policy research information is only one of many inputs to a policy decision. In a pluralistic political society, there are a host of plausible factors besides policy research information that are likely to influence policy decisions; usually, political, economic and ethical considerations play a significant role in political decision making.

Second, public policy aims at solving social problems. However, most social problems are so-called 'ill-structured' or 'wicked' problems, such as the problems of poverty, racial discrimination and even drugs. Some characteristics of wicked problems are (1) there is no definitive formulation, (2 there is n immediate and no ultimate test of a solution, (3) wicked problems do not have enumerable set of potential solutions, (4) wicked problems can be explained in numerous ways, the choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem resolution (Rittel and Webberk, p. 161-166). Because of these characteristics of wicked problems, there is never enough time to do research that might be needed. And more importantly, value assumptions play a significant role in framing a policy problem. Public policy making typically involves high levels of value conflicts among competing stakeholders. Rossi and Wright (1985), after examining gun control legislation, argue that " *Very often…… 'facts' are off on the periphery of a debate whose main themes center on value issues. The opponents and advocates of gun control are often debating world views, ideologies and ways of life.*" (p.330).

Third, policy research is contextual-oriented. Laswell (1971) proposes policy sciences as "contextual, multi-method, and problem-oriented." Contexuality means that policy research should be sensitive to the reality of the policy world. Coleman (1972), in his famous article on policy research, argues that there are major differences between policy research and discipline research. Discipline research is designed to aid a particular discipline, and its results are generally used to contribute to theory building. However, in policy research, "the audience is a set of political actors, ranging from a single client to a whole populace, and the research is designed as guide to action" (p.2). In other words, policy research is action-oriented.

Fourth, policy research is not seeking scientific truth. In a concrete policy context, there can be more than one sound argument for a specific issue. Even, the same policy-relevant fact can lead to radically different claims. For example, a research report provides information about the welfare dependency problem. The same information can, however, lead to (1) a designative claim that the existing welfare system is flawed because it creates a dependency problem; (2) an evaluative claim that the report is racist because most welfare recipients are blacks; (3) an advocative claim that a

child-support assurance system ought to be adopted as soon as possible.

Looking at policy research in this way leads one to believe that values and facts are mixed together in any research process. A model that focuses on the credibility of policy argument is much useful in policy context (Dunn 1981; Guba & Lincoln 1987; Bozeman & Landsbergent, 1989; Maynald-Moody 1989; Majone 1989; Paris and Reyonds 1983). Obtaining useful information is not the only task of policy research, the most important task is to generate policy arguments (recommendations) that are used in the course of public debate. According to Paris and Reynolds, empirical research is to help ideologies to be congruent with the world, rather than to seek scientific truth. Empirical policy research enhances the empirical adequacy of ideologies (1983, p. 201-254).

And, finally, there is a time constraint factor in policy related research. Policy research is fixed in time and decisions must be taken at a given time point, based on whatever information is available at that time. Policy research rarely had the time and resources to control the conditions for experimental research. Policy research operates in real time with dynamic changing environment.

Based on these contextual elements of policy research, we can derive the following characteristics of policy research:

(1) the research is sensitive to the policy process and social environment.
(2) the audience for research results is a group of political actors and interested parties, usually with conflicting interests
(3) the research must explicitly incorporate values of al interested parties into its inquiring process
(4) the research is to generate credible policy arguments, it is action-oriented and is capable of identifying change in a positive direction.
(5) the research is constrained by the timing of decisions.

MAJOR FRAMEWORKS OF POLICY RESEARCH

Quasi-experiment

Since randomized controlled experiments could only be done in a very limited circumstances, quasi-experimental research designs seek to conduct research in real world settings. Most program evaluations that have been carried out in this country have been quasi-experiments, which are mainly performed by social scientists with psychology, sociology, and educational research background. The main purpose of quasi-experimental method is to establish causal relationships between treatments and outcomes. It is less useful for purposes of prediction and discovering unimagined causal relationships.

Quasi-experiment is not only a scientific research method, but it also presupposes certain ontological and epistemological positions. According to Cook (1983), quasi-experimentation presumes that we live in a world of real objects and relationships that are lawfully interrelated by a force called causation. Quasi-experiments could help us to discover these lawful relationships. Under his conception of the world, a future society will be a scientific society that uses scientific methods for changing itself. Donald Campbell (1972) calls it "a experimenting society".

How realistic is this scientific society imagery? Policy decisions are often made in a situation with multiple and competing interests. In a democratic and pluralist society, it is inappropriate and unacceptable to let scientific laws dominate the policy-decision process. Policy research that only uses quasi-experimental will generate results that are insensitive to the policy process.

Quasi-experimentation is an appropriate research method when we have consensus over values and goals of policies. However policy goals and values are usually vague and undefined, they may even change over time. Quasi-experiment is basically a scientific method which precludes values from its consideration. The truth of scientific knowledge is independent of the values or biases of researchers. Social scientists commonly accept that nonpartisan research and evaluation are guided by concerns for the public interest. However, it is not possible to know answers to question about the public interest and general welfare (Lindblom, 1986). Traditionally, programs evaluators using quasi-experimental methods have arbitrarily taken policy-makers' goals as the only legitimate goals. Policy research that only

uses quasi-experimental methods tends to reinforce the status quo by working within limited set of alternatives and the policy agenda s determined by the powerful groups.

Although a quasi-experiment is not as expensive or time consuming as randomized experiment, a well-conducted quasi-experiment still requires lots of time and resources, especially when we use it for a policy rather than a program. Many sophisticated quasi-experimental designs require long time series data both before and after a policy intervention is implemented. First, the necessary data often do no exist; sand second, the method is difficult to meet the time constraint of policy decisions.

Basically, quasi-experiments are operated in a truth seeking model. It precludes the possibility that there is more than one sound argument for a particular situation. It presupposes the existence of objective knowledge of social phenomena. If a causal relationship is found between two variables, there is no way you can ignore it. However, citizens and policy makers may in fact need a variety of studies (policy arguments) to challenge their ways of thinking, or enlightenment rather than social engineering.

Finally, quasi-experiment can obtain knowledge that can be manipulated and changed. The research results are action-oriented and are capable of identifying change in a positive direction. However, we have to be careful about the moral implications of this kind of knowledge. It treats people as objects to be manipulated rather than as moral agents who have a right to determine their own future and the conditions under which they will live.

Cost-benefit Analysis

Most economists advocate the use of cost-benefit analysis to provide "*useful information about the desirable and undesirable effects of public sector programs or projects.*" (Anderson & Settle 1977, p.1). Cost-benefit analysis can be used for retrospective and introspective purposes. Some scholars, including Anderson & Settle, emphasize the data gathered through the use of cost-benefit techniques represents only one of many kinds of information to be considered by policy makers. However, some scholars argue that cost-benefit analysis constitutes as evaluative tool, to be used in determining the desirability of public policies and programs. Thompson argues that "*benefit cost analysis is broadly considered s a useful tools for evaluating multi-attribute public programs.*" (1980, p. 16). From this perspective, cost-benefit analysis not only represents one of many useful

techniques to generate policy relevant information, but also reflects an important mode or logic of decision making.

At the broadest level, cost-benefit analysis may be regarded simply as systematic thinking about decision-making. However, when economic use cost-benefit analysis, they presuppose certain assumptions, which are as follows:

(1) the effects of a policy are evaluated by reference to the 'willingness to pay' of he individuals affected. To use willingness to pay as the source of all valuation is to retain market concept of value.
(2) only effects that have market values are considered.
(3) the decision rule of the analysis—enact policies that yield positive net benefits.

Cost-benefit analysis argues that the decision (value) criterion of any public policy should be based on economic efficiency. Cost-benefit analyses are easily justified in private business sectors, it is generally accepted that their decisions, as long as they have no harmful effects to other persons, can only be based on profit-maximization and economic efficiency criteria. In order to apply the similar analysis in public settings, a social cost-benefit requires "*the identification of all the effects of a policy on the individual welfare of all members of a community*." (Sugden & Williams 1978, p. 89)

First, most of the time, cost-benefit analysis falls short in recognizing the contextual nature of a policy. In cost-benefit analysis, every variable is reduced to costs and benefits, and they are expressed in a common denominator (dollar value). Also, some economic techniques have been developed to assign dollars value to non-market goods such as pollution, life and time. Cost-benefit analysis has been used to structure social and political relationships, rather than to reflect them.

Second, the information generated by cost-benefit analysis may be relevant to policy decisions. Policy stakeholders are less likely to agree that economic efficiency should be the only criterion in determining policies. Policy research that only uses cost-benefit techniques will most likely fail to provide credible policy arguments if the shared value is not on economic efficiency.

Third, social cost-benefit analysis gives us a false impression that it will take into consideration every possible cost and benefit of a policy. Determining a policy's costs and benefits is not an objective task; it inevitably involves value judgments. Environmental and business groups are likely to have different weights on the costs and benefits of beauty and nature. On which groups should a cost-benefit analyst be based to determine the costs and benefits?

Also, public policies usually involve intangible cots and benefits such as citizen's satisfaction, psychological suffering, and ecological value. It is difficult for a cost-benefit analyst to make accurate assessments of these costs and benefits. Even if it is possible, it would require the analyst to make inevitably subjective decision. Different analysts looking at the same policy can and do reach conflicting evaluations of the policy. Actually, cost-benefit analysis has been accused of being an ideological weapon for political use (Zinke 1987, Byrne 1987).

And, finally, cost-benefit analysis is undoubtedly capable of identifying policy change in a positive direction. But, the acceptability and feasibility of the direction are highly questionable.

Naturalistic Inquiry

Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose a new paradigm for the social sciences that locates naturalistic and qualitative inquiry at its center. They argue that we are in the post-positivist era which focuses on scientific reflexivity, in which its axioms "are the inverse of those of positivism" (p.32). The new paradigm recognizes the existence of multiple realities and the significance of mutual causality in human behavior. Objectivity is rejected in naturalistic study because value is inherent in any social inquiry.

Lincoln and Guba lay out fourteen characteristics of naturalistic inquiry which include (1) doing research in natural settings; (2) using humans as the primary data-gathering instruments; (3) using intuitive knowledge because "it mirrors fairly and accurately the value patterns of the investigator," (4) using qualitative over quantitative methods; (5) using purposive sampling; (6) performing inductive data analysis; (7) developing substantive theory from the data: (8) constructing research designs to fix the reality; (9) negotiating meaning and interpretation with the subjects to get a better understanding of the reality; (10) using case study reporting mode over the scientific or technical report; (11) interpreting the data in terms of the

particulars of the case rather then lawful generalizations; (12) applying findings only to the research setting; (13) setting inquiry boundaries on the basis of the research focus; and (14) developing new criterion for judging the trustworthiness of data (1985 p. 39-43).

According to Lincoln and Guba, traditional internal and external validity concepts are not appropriate in naturalistic inquiry. The new trustworthiness criterions are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (p. 301-328). The major method for naturalistic inquiry is case study.

Lincoln and Guba's proposal is similar to what other scholars consider as interpretive or hermeneutic policy inquiry (Dryzek 1982) and Fisher (1985) to illustrate the usefulness of the interpretive policy inquiry, which are respectively the Canada's Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry and Head Start Program Inquiry. A few years ago, Schon et. al. (1984) reported their evaluation on community-level nutrition intervention as reflection-in-action type of research, which shares some of the characteristics of naturalistic study.

Without many exemplary pieces of research that are based on the naturalistic procedures, it is difficult to determine the feasibility and usefulness of the approach. We can only evaluate the approach by examining its theoretical articulations. The naturalistic inquiry acknowledges that policy research should be context related and reality is multiple and constructed by various stakeholders. Policy research that is based on the naturalistic approach will not presuppose certain objective criteria that can lead us to change in a particular direction. The research is an open process and the direction of change is evolved through the research process. Also, naturalistic policy research is a collaborative process; therefore, it is likely that its recommendations will attain the credibility standard.

The major weakness of the naturalistic inquiry is it may be a too 'demanding' approach for researchers, citizens and decision-makers. It is questionable whether a naturalistic policy research can be preformed in a setting with limited resources. The naturalistic policy inquiry encourages all relevant parties in society to fully participate in the policy inquiry process in order to arrive at a normative consensus. Most likely, the whole process will be very complicated and will involve a tremendous amount of time and resources.

WAYS TO LIVE IN A MULTI-FRAMEWORK WORLD?

In acknowledgment the existence of multi-framework in policy research, how can a policy researcher face this situation and find a way to perform adequate research? In this section, I shall evaluate some of the ways that policy researchers may consider.

(1) A SINGLE FRAMEWORK

A policy research can 'stick' to one of the frameworks discussed in the last section. The use of a single framework suggests that every policy problem will be analyzed by the same method. Policy researches can evaluate which framework is most persuasive to them and determine their conception of appropriate method of policy research. In most cases, the selection of the frameworks will be largely influenced by the academic disciplines with which one affiliates. For example, policy researchers who have strong economic skills training tend to adopt cost-benefit analysis, while policy researchers who have strong program evaluation training tend to adopt quasi-experimental methods.

How can we prevent one framework form dominating the policy analysis field? (Here, I assume the three frameworks have the same validity; of course, it may not be true in reality.) One way to prevent the domination is to maintain a balance among the frameworks being used in policy research. This is similar to what Paris and Reynolds' argument—the goal of policy inquiry is to generate a plurality of rational ideologies on policy issue. In this situation, policy outcomes are left to some invisible hand; let the democratic political systems to make the final decision.

However, the assumption about equal validity among these frameworks is questionable. In reality, they are competing with each other. For example, the naturalistic approach is very critical towards the ontological and epistemological foundations of quasi-experimental methods. On the other hand, both quasi-experimental and cost-benefit analysis are more institutionalized than the naturalistic approach. The competition will not be fair if we just let the political invisible hands to select the 'right' approach, since these frameworks are not in the same starting point.

Also, it is inappropriate or even unethical for a researcher to adopt only one framework if we believe policy inquiry should be multidisciplinary, and if we think social problems are complex and multi-dimensional.

(2) A CONTINGENCY APPROACH

Another way to live in a multi-framework world is to adopt a contingency approach to various frameworks. The basic belief here is that an appropriate framework will vary depending upon the context and the pursing values of policies. Bobrow and Dryzek, in their book Policy Analysis by Design, try to list the conditions needed for different frameworks.

According to Borow and Dryzek, some values lend themselves to a particular frame of reference and to a particular methodology. If the primary value sought is economic efficiency, welfare economics may offer a useful set of principles to guide policy design, and causal analysis may be appropriate for determining effects. But where there are multiple values, complex situations, and controversy, the interpretive (naturalistic) approach would be more appropriate.

Although the judgment on conditions needed for different frameworks is still a complicated issue, it is a better alternative than the single framework approach. However, there remains questions on who is going to decide the primary value of a policy and what are the criteria of resolving value conflicts.

(3) An Integrated Approach

The third way to live in a multi-framework world is to synthesize the various frameworks. Of course, the major difficulty of an integrated approach is how to reconcile the basic value differences among different frameworks.

Fischer tries to address this problem in his book: Politics, Values, and Public Policies. Fischer proposes a methodology that synthesizes elements of phenomenology, systems theory, moral philosophy and political theory. He suggests that policy inquiry is a four-phase process-verification, validation, vindication and rational choice. Each phase is characterized by a set of questions and methodologies. Or example, conventional evaluation research helps us to verify whether the goals of policy have been met, while phenomenological or naturalistic inquiry helps us to validate the criteria by which policy is to be judged.

The integrated approach proposed by Fischer does not really solve the problem of competing values of various frameworks. He only argues that various frames of reference are better "*understood as alternative perspectives on social phenomena rather than competing approaches to truth per se. Instead of competing methodologies, they can be viewed as coexisting perspectives on the same reality, each with its own of data and internal logic.*" (1980, p. 172)

Finally, Fischer's integrated approach may be too 'demanding' for policy researchers, citizens and decision-makers. To incorporate all the elements laid out by Fischer in a policy research would require a tremendous amount of time and resources.

(4) A Balanced Life

In recent years, both policy research and program evaluation fields have undergone some major changes. Traditional research methods that are based on naïve positivism have been seriously questioned, there has been a growing interest in the qualitative research techniques and methods that are based on subjective interpretation. Actually, quasi-experimental and cost-benefit analysis can be seen as historical products of a particular discipline. Policy researcher should not be constrained by these disciplinary boundaries and should use multi-methods to generate policy-relevant information.

The various frameworks can be used as a guide to generate relevant inquiry questions on a particular issue. Different information is needed in different stages of policy inquiry. Efforts has been made to lay out the information needed n different stages (Dunn 1981, Fisher 1980)

Policy researchers should be aware of the value implications of different methodologies. Values should not be considered as merely subjective feelings and mysteries; rather they should be considered as an inherent characteristic of human understanding and decision-making processes. Although economic and statistical concepts are important analytical tools, policy researchers should pay more attention to the underlying assumptions, philosophies of knowledge, and ideas on social functions of policy inquiry. If there is no way we can reconcile value conflicts, then policy researchers should explicitly state their value presuppositions in their analyses and facilitate a wide-ranging dialogue among advocates of different evaluative criteria.

Also, we have to accept the limits of human cognitive capacity and to be aware that human knowledge and understanding are fallible. Methodologies will be more useful if they can reveal the limits of generalizability of knowledge, that is, if they are sensitive to the contextual, institutional and individual characteristics.

The contingency approach can surely provide us some insights for matching methodologies with certain particular issues. If a problem is complex and if time and resources are available, the integrated approach can be used to develop polices that are responsive to multiple concerns.

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