

3. Doing ethical policy analysis

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Introduction

In contemporary society, economic and social processes are shaped by vast numbers of complex and subtle interactions between private, decentralised activities and the activities of governments. Like the demand for many professional services, the demand for policy analysis arises from knowledge gaps. Government decision makers, such as cabinet ministers or councillors, continuously confront public problems for which solutions must be found. Typically, those decision makers adopt new public policies or adjust current policy settings to address the problems at hand. Outside of government, decision makers in many non-governmental organisations also seek policy analysis. Such decision makers rely on policy analysis to help them interpret how changes in government policies could affect their operating contexts, revenue streams, and the cost of doing business.

The knowledge gaps that drive demand for policy analysis also create problems of trust. Over the centuries, government decision makers have developed various ways of structuring bureaucracies and using systems of checks and balances to reduce concerns about the trustworthiness of advisers (Kelman 1988; Le Grand 2003). Yet even when such systems are in place to promote honest and high-quality work, verifying the merits of advice given by policy analysts can be costly. The good motives and actions of individual advisers, therefore, remain a key to good governmental decision-making processes. Decision makers must be assured that the policy analysts who advise them are acting with integrity. We can never be entirely sure that individual policy analysts will prove trustworthy. But steps can be taken to reduce the chances that they will behave badly. Those steps include carefully screening applicants for advice-giving roles, creating organisational cultures that promote truthfulness, and instructing policy analysts on good practice. This chapter contributes to good practice by offering suggestions for how to do ethical policy analysis.

For the purpose of the current discussion, the focus is placed on the work of policy analysts serving as advisers to elected and appointed decision makers in government. This simplification allows us to discuss the practice of policy analysis in the context where most of it is performed, without the need to continually

discuss exceptions. Even so, much of what is said here will be relevant to policy analysts serving any clients, be they public or private decision makers. It is also useful to remember that ethical questions are almost always context-specific. Therefore, the broad treatment of ethical issues offered here is intended as an invitation to consideration of dilemmas in many instances.

The next section offers background to our explorations of policy analysis and ethical practice. It is followed by a general discussion of policy analysis and ethical practice. Consideration is then given to how aspects of ethical practice can inform each of the essential elements of policy analysis. The overall argument is that policy analysts should avoid shaping their work in ways that simply reinforce prevailing views in local policy conversations. Although such an approach is pragmatic in some ways, it can reduce the usefulness of policy analysis. At their best, policy analysts maintain critical distance from political debates – not to the extent that they become disengaged, but so they can view problems in fresh ways and offer evidence and insights capable of creating bold changes in policy thinking. Performing like this, policy analysts can exhibit trustworthiness while also infusing policy conversations with ideas and analyses that can promote significant, positive change in policy-making communities.

Policy analysis and ethical practice

The public expect government decision makers to address problems caused by private, decentralised aspects of social and economic interactions, others caused by governmental processes, and yet others caused by unintended, negative interactions between public and private activities. Those decision makers face knowledge gaps concerning the nature of the problems and how they might be resolved. Decision makers also must be careful that any responses to given problems represent workable solutions. As Charles Wolf cautioned, ‘the cure may be as bad as the illness’ (Wolf 1979, p. 133). Policy analysts are employed to close knowledge gaps that inhibit effective policy making. As the discipline of policy analysis has evolved, a consensus has emerged on how policy analysts conduct their work. Here, I follow Eugene Bardach’s (2008) portrayal of that view, encapsulated in eight general steps. My wording differs slightly from Bardach’s, but the nature and order of the eight steps does not. Policy analysts add value to decision-making processes when they:

- define the problem at hand
- assemble some evidence about the problem, its causes, and its effects
- construct a set of alternative ways to address the problem
- select the criteria for judging the relative merits of each alternative

- project the likely outcomes of each alternative, given the chosen criteria
- note the trade-offs associated with pursuing each alternative
- decide what alternative seems most appropriate, given the selected criteria, projected outcomes, and expected trade-offs
- present the findings of the analysis and the conclusions drawn from it.

My portrayal of policy analysts emphasises their role in closing knowledge gaps for government decision makers, but this work is rarely straightforward. Policy analysts have significant discretion when considering how to define a problem and the nature of the analytical work that flows from there. They also face many choices when they develop their policy reports and present their advice to their clients. Further, policy analysts face choices over the extent to which they consult with stakeholders during the policy development process. Even when requirements are made for consultation, everyone knows that stakeholder engagements can be perfunctory. Sometimes, consultation can be used primarily for pushing specific solutions rather than for genuinely listening to stakeholders and understanding their concerns.

Among other things, policy analysts acting ethically must strive to promote outcomes that are good for society. They must also be transparent about the choices embodied in their work. Contemporary notions of ethical practice are informed by a variety of philosophical and religious ideas that have been discussed and developed through the ages. Here, I draw from that tradition to develop five ethical principles that can guide the practices of individual policy analysts. However, before turning to those principles, it is useful to review three highly influential ethical perspectives: universalism, utilitarianism, and altruism.

Universalism tells us there are certain appropriate behaviours and that those behaviours should be followed without any reference to the mediating effects of context. The Ten Commandments fit the universalism model.¹ The Golden Rule offers another example of universalism and has been proposed by many religions and cultures. It is summed up in the words of Jesus: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.² Immanuel Kant presented a variation of the Golden Rule, 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law'.³ Universalism promotes persistence and consistency, but it is difficult to apply because exceptional circumstances abound. The focus is on strict adherence to a code of practice; the

1 See the Old Testament books of the Bible: Exodus 20: 1–17 and Deuteronomy 5: 5–21.

2 See the New Testament books of the Bible: Matthew 7: 12 and Luke 6: 31.

3 See Kant (1797) reproduced in Pasternack (2002).

assumption being that this will generate desirable outcomes. In public policy, having uniform standards that all applicants to university must meet to gain entry would represent a case of universalism.

Utilitarianism focuses on outcomes; the maximisation of pleasure and the minimisation of pain. Here, consequences of actions are considered to be more important than whether those actions fit a universal code of practice. The perspective is most closely associated with the thinking of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.⁴ Within the utilitarian perspective, individuals are expected to promote the attainment of the greatest good for the greatest number of people. There are many instances where deviations from a universal law would be justified within this perspective. For example, there may be times when failing to attend to the neediest people in a group allows effort to be devoted to securing the best outcome for the group as a whole. Utilitarianism is easily understood and is frequently used. However, outcomes are often difficult to predict, and people might have different views about the likely consequences of an action. In public policy, tying enrolment numbers for specific university degrees to labour market demand for graduates with those degrees would represent a case of utilitarianism.

Altruism requires that love of others serves as our ethical standard. People are not treated as the means to an end. People are what matter most. Altruism guides us to always take account of the position of the least-advantaged person and make that position as dignified and comfortable as possible. This perspective has been espoused by many people who have dedicated their lives to working among the poor, or who have used their political careers to promote the social circumstances of the least fortunate. Although informed by imperatives that characterise universalism, altruism takes account of context. Difficulties surround the application of this perspective, because people can disagree on what is best for others. In public policy, allowing exceptions to admissions standards to university so that individuals who do not meet those standards may enrol if they demonstrate maturity and profess a thirst for knowledge would represent a case of altruism.

The three ethical perspectives mentioned here offer distinctive views on what individuals should care most about. Should we follow a strict code of practice, focusing on good process? Should we care most about maximising the outcomes of society? Or should we attend most to the fair treatment of the least-advantaged person? A crucial part of the ethic of being a good policy analyst involves helping others to better understand the choices they face and the likely consequence of any given course of action. At the level of the individual professional, we also

⁴ See John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism* (1863) and *On Liberty* (1859), including Mill's Essay on Bentham and selections from the writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Austin, in Mill (1859).

need to be aware of the choices we face in our daily practices. When would it be appropriate for us to follow universal principles? When would it be more appropriate for us to focus on outcomes? When should we pay special attention to the situation of those who could be most harmed by the advice we give? Identifying the ethical dilemmas we face in our work and discussing them with others around us can serve to improve the overall quality of the analysis we do and the advice we give. We can be better people as a consequence of this kind of reflexivity and offer better support to government decision makers. Inevitably, though, there will be times when our efforts will fall short of what is expected of us. At such times, my suggestion is that we follow the advice of the great Stoic philosopher Epictetus, 'Human betterment is a gradual, two-steps-forward, one-step-back effort. Forgive others for their misdeeds over and over again ... Forgive yourself over and over and over again. Then try to do better next time'.⁵

Other policy scholars have considered how policy analysts might use ethical perspectives to guide their work. The literature falls into two camps. In one, consideration is given to the practices of policy analysts themselves. In the second camp, consideration is given to how policy analysts can integrate ethical frameworks and analysis into the development of policy advice. A common concern is that policy analysts do not make sufficient use of ethical analysis to guide their comparisons of policy options. The concerns of each camp were neatly represented in articles published back to back in an issue of the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* that appeared several decades ago.

Representing the camp concerned with doing ethical policy analysis, Guy Benveniste (1984) argued that a code of ethics should be developed for policy experts and advisers. Benveniste recognised the power and status that can accrue to policy analysts because of the knowledge they hold. He worried that individual policy analysts could become enamoured with playing the game of political influence. In doing so, they could undermine their legitimacy as sources of independent expert knowledge. Benveniste argued that an effective code of ethics would cover the scope of responsibilities, what should be done about identifying and managing conflicts of interest, how issues of secrecy and the exposure of information should be managed, how policy analysts should manage consultation with stakeholder groups, and how decision-making processes should be conducted during crises (Benveniste 1984, p. 569). Benveniste recognised that establishing a code of ethics would be difficult and that many clients and policy analysts would see little point in its adoption. He noted, for example, that recipients of policy advice are usually powerful political actors, which distinguishes them from the clients of other professionals, such as lawyers and doctors. In the latter cases, the asymmetries of power and

⁵ Epictetus (c. AD 55–135, p. 99).

knowledge between clients and professionals are more pronounced than in the case of policy advising and tend to run in the favour of the person rendering the services.

Representing the camp calling for more application of ethical principles as guides to the analysis of public policies was Douglas J. Amy (1984). Amy suggested the strong emphasis on policy analysis as a technical exercise, combined with issues of administrative structure, reduced the opportunities for consideration of ethical issues. In the decades since Amy wrote this, the contributions made by ethicists to policy debates across a variety of policy domains have grown significantly. For example, in their introduction to public policy, Michael E. Kraft and Scott R. Furlong (2007) note the ways ethical considerations inform aspects of health care policy, environmental policy, and foreign policy, along with public policies relating to other fields of human activity. Note also that many of the chapters in this volume offer examples of how ethical principles can be applied to the analysis of public policies.

The present chapter falls in the camp concerned with doing ethical policy analysis, the camp Benveniste (1984) defined. The goal here is to consider how policy analysts exhibit ethical behaviour in the conduct of their work. Models for this kind of exercise can be found in cognate areas of professional practice. For example, a literature exists exploring how social scientists can be ethical in their practices. As well as covering topics such as informed consent, confidentiality, and the researching of sensitive topics, this literature covers motivations for conducting social science research, the need for competency among researchers, and the appropriate reporting of research findings (Reynolds 1979; Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 1996). Within the field of programme evaluation, efforts have been made to develop standards (Sanders et al. 1994). Among other things, these include standards for designing evaluations, collecting information, engaging in analysis, and reporting results.

Policy scholars David L. Weimer and Aidan R. Vining (2005) have offered a useful guide for how policy analysts might exhibit professional ethics through their work. To do so, Weimer and Vining proposed that policy analysts be viewed as performing one of three roles: the objective technician, the client's advocate, or an issue advocate. Each policy analyst can be seen as holding fundamental values. Those values can be a commitment to analytical integrity, responsiveness to the client, or adherence to one's conception of what is socially good. At any given time, policy analysts might view themselves as performing more than one of these roles and show joint commitment to analytical integrity, their client, and their own values, but ethical dilemmas often arise. Weimer and Vining explore how policy analysts might respond to values conflicts, noting available options. These range from discussion of those conflicts with the client to resigning from a given role and even showing disloyalty to the client.

This chapter explores how ethical challenges arise at each step in the process of doing policy analysis. As such, it offers the prospect of reducing the tendency for policy analysts to profess an ethical orientation and good intentions, while routinely engaging in practices that undercut the contributions they could make to improving policy discussions and promoting high-quality public decision making.

Ethical principles for policy analysts

Most general ethical principles hold relevance for people in both their private lives and vocational settings. Contributions to the contemporary literature on leadership and management emphasise the importance of ethical behaviour for supporting effective team processes, organisational transformation, and the emergence of cultures of excellence.⁶ Here, five ethical principles are introduced: integrity, competence, responsibility, respect, and concern. In selecting this set, I have followed Thomas G. Plante (2004). Although other principles are relevant, these five offer a sound basis from which to explore how a focus on ethics can promote good practice among policy analysts. Having set out these principles for policy analysts, I use them to assess how policy analysts might act ethically at each step in the process of doing analytical work.

Integrity

When people act with integrity, they are directed by an internal moral compass. They strive to do the right thing in any given situation and to achieve consistency in their intentions and actions across contexts. Plante (2004, p. 61) has suggested that 'integrity is the foundation for living an ethical life'. In his view, people display integrity when they follow high standards of honesty and when they show commitment to the values of justice and fairness. People of integrity do not seek selfish, short-term gains through opportunistic actions that harm others. Rather, they take the view that their commitment to honesty and fairness will produce the best outcomes all around. Evidence from cognitive psychology suggests that people have fine-tuned skills for detecting when others are not being honest with them (Kramer 1999; Meyerson et al. 1996). As a result, acting with integrity can lay the foundations for building long-term relationships of trust and mutual support (Covey 2006).

Policy analysts are called to advise decision makers about the nature of the public problems they must confront and the relative merits of alternative

⁶ See, for example, Bennis (2003), Covey (1991, 2006), Fox (2002), Jones (1995), Kotter (1996), Maxwell (1999), Quinn (2000), and Sample (2002).

responses. In all cases, clients must have faith that the policy analysts have performed their work with integrity. Advice based on limited engagement with appropriate evidence, lack of consideration for how various policy approaches will affect different groups of people, and limited attention to good design and implementation could result in poor outcomes both for those affected by the policies and the decision makers who adopted them. That is why policy analysts must act with integrity. Adherence to the values of honesty, justice, and fairness is important. Being around others who exhibit integrity can also help to reduce the risk of behavioural lapses.

Competence

A strong relationship exists between competence and ethical behaviour. When you talk or act as if you can do something, then the qualities of honesty and integrity dictate that you can actually do it. It is dishonest for anyone to say they can do something when they cannot. Most professionals have specialised knowledge and skills, making them highly competent in a narrow set of areas. To undertake work outside your specialisation carries the risk that you could fail at it. In some professions, such as medicine and engineering, incompetence could result in serious injuries and the loss of lives.

In the field of policy analysis, the level of knowledge and skill required to perform competently will depend on the substantive area of focus. However, all policy analysts should aspire to delivering high-quality work, to do so without unnecessary cost, and to continuously improve their analytical skills. Seeking feedback from clients, working with mentors, and identifying high-quality work to emulate are some useful strategies that policy analysts can use to strengthen their competencies. Often, the nature of the analytical task will require that teams of policy analysts work together, so that all team members can contribute in their areas of expertise, without straying into territory where their skills would be inadequate. Policy analysts also have reason to form teams with specialists from other fields who possess substantive knowledge and skills relevant to the analytical task. The teamwork required by many policy tasks illustrates the importance of policy analysts building people skills that complement their technical expertise. The skills of working effectively in teams, communicating with a variety of stakeholders, and managing conflict are highly relevant to the work of policy analysts (Mintrom 2003).

Responsibility

Taking responsibility means acknowledging the part you play in contributing to expected or observed outcomes. It is commonplace for people to willingly accept the credit when good outcomes occur but to deflect blame for poor outcomes.

People who take responsibility do more than accept that they are accountable to others. They tend to be proactive, striving from the start to achieve good outcomes. They also quickly acknowledge instances where their actions or lack of action created problems. They then do what they can to make good on past mistakes. Making good can range from sincerely apologising for what happened to doing all that is necessary to address and fix the problem. Acknowledging problems you have caused and undertaking service recoveries takes courage. It can also mean spending valuable resources to make things right. However, when such actions are taken with good grace, they not only serve to mend endangered relationships but they can even strengthen them (Covey 2006; Quinn and Quinn 2009).

Policy analysts face many situations where responsible action is called for. They face choices about how thoroughly to investigate policy problems and explore creative ways to address them. When policy analysts recognise and respect the trust that decision makers place in them, they can scope their work and conduct it in ways that break with conventional wisdom and offer new insights for policy design and implementation. Of course, there will be times when policy problems are neither significant enough nor novel enough to justify extensive new work being performed. Part of being responsible involves taking the time to listen to clients and evaluate their willingness to pursue significant policy innovation. Responsible policy analysts work to develop good relations with their clients. They look for appropriate ways to close knowledge gaps. They also work quickly to defuse problems or misunderstandings that arise because of their actions.

Respect

When we show respect for others, we acknowledge their humanity, their dignity, and their right to be the people they are. Respect means being considerate and appreciative of others. It means treating others as you would like to be treated (Plante 2004). It is relatively easy for us to respect others when we like them, when we have known them for a long time, and when we share with them common views and interests. The tough part of respect is looking for the humanity, the good, and the reasonableness in people who our gut instincts lead us to despise. Hard as it is, part of being an ethical person involves seeking to understand others, to appreciate how they see things. The quality of forgiveness can be especially valuable as an aid in such efforts, so, too, can patience; particularly when it means slowing down the pace of our actions and listening hard.

Respecting others is an important attribute in policy analysts. First, policy analysts need to respect others who they engage with when they are conducting their analysis and developing ideas for ways to address policy problems. Often, policy debates grow heated because of the different interests at stake (Schön and

Rein 1994). Although it can be challenging, policy analysts can gain valuable insights into effective policy design by listening closely to others, even when they profoundly disagree with what they are hearing. Respecting others and turning conflicts into opportunities for learning can promote creative problem solving (Quinn and Quinn 2009). Second, policy analysts need to respect the lives, the needs, and the aspirations of the people who will be directly affected by policy change. Often, policy analysts work to develop policies that will significantly affect the lives of people with whom they share little in common. At such times, showing deep respect for the views, feelings, and hopes of others can be vital for resolving differences. Making conscious use of gender analysis or analytical strategies that take account of differences across racial groups and people of different ethnicities can serve as a useful starting point for recognising social differences and their policy implications. Marianne Williamson (2004, p. 175), who proposes love as a key to addressing the world's problems, has observed, 'It's amazing how positively people respond when they feel respected for their thoughts and feelings. Learning to feel such respect – and to actually show it – is key to a miracle worker's power'. We might add that, in the cut and thrust of policy disputes, showing respect for others can be both courageous and transformative.

Concern

Living an ethical life requires that we show concern for others, and not just those who are close family members or friends. Concern means caring about, showing an interest in, and being involved in the lives of others. When people devote their lives to working with and advancing the interests of the poor, they demonstrate exceptional levels of concern for others. Without making that level of sacrifice, many people – through their work, their philanthropy, and their acts of altruism – do an enormous amount to help others to live better lives.

Policy analysts often choose their vocation because they are concerned for the lives of others and they want to make a positive difference in the world. As such, many policy analysts share a people-focused orientation that has roots in the same goodwill towards others that can be found among people in the caring professions, such as doctors, nurses, teachers, counsellors, and social workers. However, the day-to-day work of policy analysis can easily become rarefied and removed from the lives of those who will be affected by policy change. This suggests that value lies in policy analysts gaining exposure to the communities that their policies affect. By keeping the lives of others salient to themselves, policy analysts can remain alert to the impacts of their work.

Doing ethical policy analysis

Policy analysts are called to close knowledge gaps faced by decision makers. Given inherent information asymmetries in these relationships, decision makers must place trust in policy analysts to act ethically. Having discussed five ethical principles for policy analysts, we now explore the implications those principles hold for the actions of policy analysts at each step in their work.

Ethical problem definition

Defining policy problems is inherently political work. Rarely do the objective facts of a problem receive uniform interpretations from all relevant stakeholders (Majone 1989; Rochefort and Cobb 1994). At this most preliminary stage of policy inquiry, policy analysts face choices about the conduct of their work. Those choices are significant, because how problems are defined strongly influences which policy responses are likely to gain serious attention and which will be brushed aside. How should ethical policy analysts act at the problem-definition step? First, they should identify relevant stakeholder groups and learn how members of those groups see the problem and how they would like it to be addressed. Second, they should assess their findings and identify the key lines of disagreement. Based on this information, they should collect more basic information about the nature of the problem, the problem's causes, and the feasible solutions that might be available to address the problem. All of this information should be assessed and synthesised into a problem statement. It should be shared and discussed with the client, with the goals of conveying potential risks associated with the development of policy solutions, achieving clarity around how the client views the problem, and getting support for moving ahead to other steps in the analytical process. High levels of integrity and competence are required of policy analysts at this stage to avoid conflicts based on stakeholder perceptions of exclusion or beliefs that a favoured solution has already been selected and that everything else will be spin.⁷

Ethical construction of alternatives

Introducing a range of alternative policy responses to a problem can be done in ways that significantly advance policy discussion and good decision making. The subject of how we identify relevant solutions to problems has been considered at length, both by scholars of decision making and political

⁷ James Verdier (1984, pp. 426–27) noted that ‘analysis that comes early in the process can usually have much more impact than that which comes later ... Economic analysis at this stage can help frame the terms of the debate and structure the options that are presented. At later stages, politics tends to dominate analysis. Economic analysis is then used the way a drunk uses a lamp post, for support rather than illumination’.

scientists (see, for example, Cyert and March 1963; Jones 2001; Kingdon 1995). Typically, solutions and problems come intertwined. That is, when feasible solutions become apparent, perceptions of problems change, and arguments are made that government action is necessary. For example, as treatments have been discovered for life-threatening diseases, arguments for government funding of those treatments have grown compelling. Likewise, evidence of the life-preserving effects of airbags in cars produced compelling grounds for airbags to become required features of all new cars. We see in these examples that the suitability of the fit between solutions and problems tends to change over time, predicated on the flow of evidence and of technical innovations. A challenge for policy makers involves avoiding the adoption of policy responses that lock in present technologies and potentially inhibit the discovery of improved solutions. Another challenge is the way that interest groups tend to promote their favourite solutions to problems, even when evidence would suggest that those solutions might not produce the best outcome for the greatest number of people.

What is an ethical approach to constructing the set of alternative policy solutions? First, we should acknowledge that there are limits to how many alternatives can be considered in any decision-making process (Schwartz 2004). Three or four would seem a reasonable number. To promote useful discussion, alternative approaches included within the set should each be quite distinctive, so decision makers can get a good sense of the range of possibilities open to them.

Second, we should include alternatives that appear most relevant, given the problem and discussions surrounding it. If an alternative is well known to be favoured by key stakeholders then it is appropriate to include it – or a close approximation to it – in the set. Decision makers will need to know how it stacks up against other alternatives.

Third, the set of alternatives should be constructed taking account of the broader financial context. For example, when government spending is highly constrained, there is little point in proposing costly policies without accompanying the proposal with suggestions for cost-savings in other areas.

Fourth, the construction of alternatives offers an opportunity for policy analysts to broaden policy discussions. Learning about approaches tried in other jurisdictions or in other related areas of policy can help analysts to devise innovative policy solutions (Mintrom 1997; Mintrom and Norman 2009). This shows evidence of both competence and concern.

Finally, we should treat our analysis as a vehicle for facilitating discussion of additional alternatives. If, on reviewing our advice, decision makers request more alternatives to be considered that build on those already presented, that should be treated as good feedback.

Ethical selection of criteria

Policy analysts are required to weigh up the relative merits of alternative policy responses to any given problem. To do this in a systematic fashion, they must establish a set of criteria for judging each alternative, and then make sure they assess the expected performance of each alternative on each criterion of interest. It is common for policy analysts to analyse policy alternatives using three criteria: efficiency, equity, and administrative simplicity. Taken together, these criteria lead us to consider the relative costs of each alternative, the fairness by which different groups of people are affected by each alternative, and the relative degree of burden that each alternative would place on those required to implement it and those required to comply with it. There is good reason to believe the use of these three criteria is both sound and ethical. However, focusing on only these criteria can limit policy analysis in unhelpful ways.

It is often important to assess policy alternatives in terms of their implications for personal freedom, human dignity, social harmony, and environmental sustainability. When should other criteria be introduced? The development of policy analysis as a discipline has seen increasing calls by various groups in society to have their interests and their concerns reflected in the criteria used to judge policy alternatives. While there is no conceptual limit to what criteria might be applied, in practice we need to keep our analysis manageable. Reflecting on the concerns expressed by stakeholder groups who have weighed in at the problem-definition stage is helpful here. It can lead to the development of a set of evaluative criteria that is appropriately suited to the context. Discussing with others what they care about and how their concerns could be captured in the evaluative criteria is a good way to show both respect and concern during the process of policy development.

Ethical prediction of outcomes

Decision makers need high-quality information on the likely effects of adopting specific policy solutions. The challenge for policy analysts is to generate that information, paying careful attention to the criteria judged most appropriate. Policy analysts can use various methods to gather information, generate information, and analyse the information to predict likely policy effects. Several ethical concerns arise.

First, all analytical work requires that we make simplifying assumptions, that we make estimates when good data are not present, and that we work with models that, at their best, only approximate real-world processes. None of this is a problem, so long as we carefully document our work and have others peer review it. Other people should be able to follow our analytical procedures and come to much the same conclusions. They should also be able to clearly understand the limits of our analysis. Strong technical work should be accorded value by decision makers. However, analysts should never try to hide behind technical matters, or try to win support for a favoured solution using opaque, but smart-sounding, analysis.

Second, because we know there is room for manipulating evidence, we should promote high standards of technical ability and clarity of explanation in our work. This raises the bar for those who would be happier to win policy disputes by playing fast and loose with the evidence.

Through the work of predicting outcomes, policy analysts will usually become clear about the relative merits of each alternative and the trade-offs associated with pursuing one over the others. It is important that these trade-offs be made explicit. Policy analysts should also be prepared to state their views on what policy alternative would be most appropriate in the given context. Doing so can be clarifying to decision makers. Just as importantly, it forces the analyst to work hard at making their arguments for the choice they favour. The most effective way to do this is to make the strongest possible argument for each alternative, rather than paying more attention to a favoured position and doing limited or sloppy analysis of the other alternatives. Exposing their work to peer review is a further check on the validity of the analysts' evidence and arguments.

Ethical reporting practices

Knowledge gaps can be closed only when relevant information is presented in ways that work for the clients. If a busy decision maker requests that all material be initially presented in an oral briefing and a one-page memo, then the onus is on the policy analyst to meet that requirement. Meeting such a requirement can take a lot of careful thought and effort. Policy analysts need to become adept at writing and presenting their work for multiple audiences (Mintrom 2003). It is both ethical and smart to tell the same story in multiple ways, so long as the story remains consistent across the audiences being reached. Having said this, it is clear that any organisational conventions around reporting must be met. Increasingly, policy analysts working in government settings find they must follow report templates that come with their share of positives and negatives. The key is to not let the conventions inhibit the development of effective communication with clients and stakeholders. Working at different ways to present your work

to different audiences is an important means of showing respect to others. But throughout, policy analysts must be sure that they also have a version of their report that they feel most comfortable with, that pulls together in one place all the documentation associated with the analytical process. Increasingly, we can make use of technology to produce reports where different audience members can choose the features of the analysis that they wish to focus on. To do this well is likely to mean working with experts in website design, communications, and marketing. That is what is required when we take responsibility for improving policy discussions and when we desire to help others understand the problems they face and how policy changes can address them.

Conclusion

Knowledge gaps provide the primary rationale for the work of policy analysts. At its best, their work can enlighten decision makers about policy problems and effective ways to address them. Given the nature of these knowledge gaps, decision makers must trust that the information provided to them is based on sound, honest work. The asymmetries in expertise create the potential for problems to arise. For example, policy analysts might deliberately narrow the definition of a problem, limit the selection of alternatives to address the problem, or place undue weight on cost issues when other criteria should be made salient.

This chapter has discussed how policy analysts might develop and deliver their work in accordance with sound ethical principles. By adhering to the proposed approaches, policy analysts can find ways to advance and even transform policy conversations. It is important that policy analysts understand the political contexts within which they operate. But it is disappointing when apparent contextual constraints are used to justify analytical work that does little more than support the political consensus of the day. I have suggested that, when exploring alternative policy responses, policy analysts should aspire to being creative and look for innovative solutions from elsewhere that could usefully inform local policy discussions. This way of doing policy analysis does not depart greatly from standard approaches, but it sets us in a direction that can promote significant, positive change. More than most people in society, policy analysts can catalyze new thinking on policy issues. To do so is ethical. In a world filled with challenges, where routine responses yield limited gains, such work is urgently needed.

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