

## Chapter 3 Evidence-based policy-making

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### Chapter abstract

The idea that public policies might usefully be improved by evidence (or, more strongly put, that policies ought to be evidence-based) is long-standing. However, official commitments to 'evidence-based policy-making' (EBPM) are more recent, dating back to policy developments in the US and the UK in the 1990s. Since then, a vast research literature on EBPM has emerged. However, due to the rather fragmented nature of this literature and a general lack of cross-fertilization, a number of fundamental questions remain unresolved. Questions about what constitutes "evidence"; what role evidence can and should play in policymaking processes and how the quest for EBPM affects the democratic legitimacy of policy-making?

In the current chapter, we do not attempt to resolve these questions, but we argue that a first step is to further more comparative analysis' on whether, how and why EBPM is playing out differently in contrasting geo-political contexts. The chapter thus briefly outlines how ideas and practices relating to EBPM have evolved in two different groups of welfare states: first, liberal welfare states, including the UK and the US, in which the idea of evidence-based policy has its philosophical foundations; and, second, the Nordic/social democratic welfare states, some of the earliest adopters and translators of the idea.

The chapter concludes by highlighting the need for moving beyond an unattainable search for universally applicable mechanisms to increase evidence use, towards more complex and context specific understandings of how states can improve their approaches to using evidence, with a view to both improving policy outcomes *and* enhancing the democratic legitimacy of policy-making.

### Keywords:

Evidence-based policy-making, Welfare Regimes, Knowledge Utilization, Democratic Legitimacy

### 3.1. Introduction - what is evidence-based policy-making?

The idea that knowledge (rather than opinions, values or power) should be the primary basis of policymaking has been continually resurfacing since the inception of the State itself - from Plato's "philosopher kings" (Plato, 2007) to Henri de Saint-Simon's 19<sup>th</sup> century notion of the "administrative state" (Saint-Simon, 1964). In the twentieth century, this idea played a key part in the technocratic ideals of post-war policymaking in the USA (Fischer, 1990). In recent decades, this idea has again gained traction via the concept of Evidence-based Policy-Making (EBPM). Since the 1990s, we have witnessed:

- The proliferation of an international evidence-use movement (Hansen & Rieper, 2009);
- An increasing promotion of political reforms under the heading of Evidence-Based Policy (EBP); &
- The emergence of a whole new research-field exploring the interplay between evidence and policy, including new academic journals (e.g. *Evidence & Policy* and *Implementation Science*).

These developments are all testament to the fact that EBPM, as an idea, has broad appeal and few opponents (Davey Smith et al. 2001). Although there were examples of governments distancing themselves from claims to be 'evidence-based' in the first two decades of the twenty-first century (see, for example, Wells, 2018), the COVID-19 pandemic has firmly resurrected the notion that policies are best led by science (e.g. Sasse, Haddon & Nice, 2020). As well as sounding reassuring in a crises, part of the appeal of EBPM is perhaps its lack of clarity; the majority of relevant literature, whether it is promoting (e.g. Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010), criticizing (e.g. Greenhalgh & Russell, 2009) or describing (Nutley, Boaz, Davies, & Fraser, 2019) EBPM, does not provide a definition beyond the commonsensical goal of enhancing evidence use in policymaking. There are, of course, exceptions, such as the following, slightly more detailed definition that: "*objective knowledge from scientific research including rigorous evaluation studies should occupy a central place in policy decision making*" (Head, 2015). However, here, three pivotal questions remain unanswered:

- 1) What is "*objective knowledge from scientific research*" (i.e. what counts as 'evidence')?;
- 2) What does it mean to "*occupy a central place in policy decision making*" (i.e. how do we define a policymaking process as evidence-based)? &
- 3) How does EBPM relate to the democratic legitimacy of political decision-making?

These three questions remain at the centre of debates around EBPM. Key proponents have borrowed heavily from the terminology of Evidence-Based Medicine, implying a conception of evidence as a form of knowledge concerning the effectiveness of interventions (ideally derived from Randomized Controlled Trials - RCTs); a definition which retains some dominance (e.g. Haynes et al, 2012). The following extract, from a report by the Behavioural Insights Team within the UK Government, is illustrative of this:

‘Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are the best way of determining whether a policy is working. They are now used extensively in international development, medicine, and business to identify which policy, drug or sales method is most effective. [...] However, RCTs are not routinely used to test the effectiveness of public policy interventions in the UK. We think that they should be.’ (Haynes et al, 2012: p.4)

However, this rather narrow, positivist conceptualization of evidence has sparked a large, critical literature arguing for a much broader range of research-based and non-research based knowledge to be considered as ‘evidence’ (Parkhurst & Abeysinghe, 2016; Stanhope & Dunn, 2011). For example, in 2018, Deaton and Cartwright wrote a seminal article arguing that the value of RCTs was more limited than many acknowledged, concluding that ‘RCTs can play a role in building scientific knowledge and useful predictions but they can only do so as part of a cumulative program, combining with other methods, including conceptual and theoretical development, to discover not ‘what works’, but ‘why things work’” (Deaton & Cartwright, 2018, p2). Their article is not critical of RCTs *per se* but of what the authors call ‘magical thinking’ about the power of RCTs, arguing that, in reality: ‘What methods are best to use and in what combinations depends on the exact question at stake, the kind of background assumptions that can be acceptably employed, and what the costs are of different kinds of mistakes’ (Deaton & Cartwright, 2018, p33). Using similar reasoning, Trish Greenhalgh has cautioned that efforts to adhere to a model of EBPM that employs an overly narrow hierarchy of evidence may risk undermining responses to COVID-19: ‘where the cost of inaction is counted in the grim mortality figures announced daily, implementing new policy interventions in the absence of randomized trial evidence has become both a scientific and moral imperative’ (Greenhalgh, 2020: unpaginated).

Similar differences are prevalent around the second question of what it means for policymaking processes to be evidence-based. Much of the EBPM literature suggests the evidence-agenda was born from an optimistic, idealized notion of policymaking (Cairney, 2019). This was perhaps most famously articulated by Campbell’s (1969) call to treat policy “*reforms as experiments*”, i.e. policymakers should merely choose the ends (i.e. the societal problems they wish to solve), then let researchers design and test the means (i.e. the specific programs and interventions to solve the problems). Although few EBPM proponents have advanced quite such a bold proposal, much of the founding literature shares an understanding of EBPM as a rational and linear process that involves testing different interventions and adopting the most effective. This understanding has been criticized from both an empirical and a normative perspective (Botterill & Hindmoor, 2012; Newman, 2017; Sanderson, 2009). Empirically, idealized notions of EBPM have been repeatedly criticized for setting the bar so high that any analysis of real-life policymaking will inevitably find policies are not evidence-based. Normatively, even if policymaking could feasibly be evidence-based, some note that the approach is not necessarily desirable since policymaking has to balance other legitimate concerns, not all of which can be answered with evidence (e.g. Stewart et al, 2020). In response, there have been shifts towards broader, more realistic framings of the role of

evidence in policymaking, often signaled via a terminological change from evidence-based to evidence-informed (Nutley, Boaz, Davies, & Fraser, 2019).

Linked to this is the third question; how EBPM relates to the legitimacy of democratic engagement in political decision-making (whether via voting in elections, responding to consultation or proactive advocacy and protest). As Geoff Mulgan (former advisor to Tony Blair, UK Prime Minister 1997-2007) argues, in democratically elected countries, ‘the people, and the politicians who represent them, have every right to ignore evidence’ (Mulgan 2005: p.224). A recent special issue of the journal *Evidence & Policy* exploring this issue argues that ‘there remain clear and pressing tensions between commitments to EBP, and the need for citizen engagement with those policies’ (Stewart et al, 2020 p199; see also Saltelli and Giampietro, 2017).

In this chapter, we do not propose any definite answers to these three questions, since our interest is in understanding how the idea of EBM has played out over time, across distinct welfare contexts in this increasingly varied field. Instead, we elucidate some of the differing perspectives on, and experiences of, EBPM in ways that highlight contextual distinctions over time and between different types of welfare states. We argue that the field has generally moved towards a more inclusive understanding of evidence and a less stringent approach to conceptualizing what research use in policy settings can (and ought, ideally, to) look like. However, more positivist and instrumental understandings of EBPM have not disappeared and debates about the democratic legitimacy of EBPM continue to shape the field.

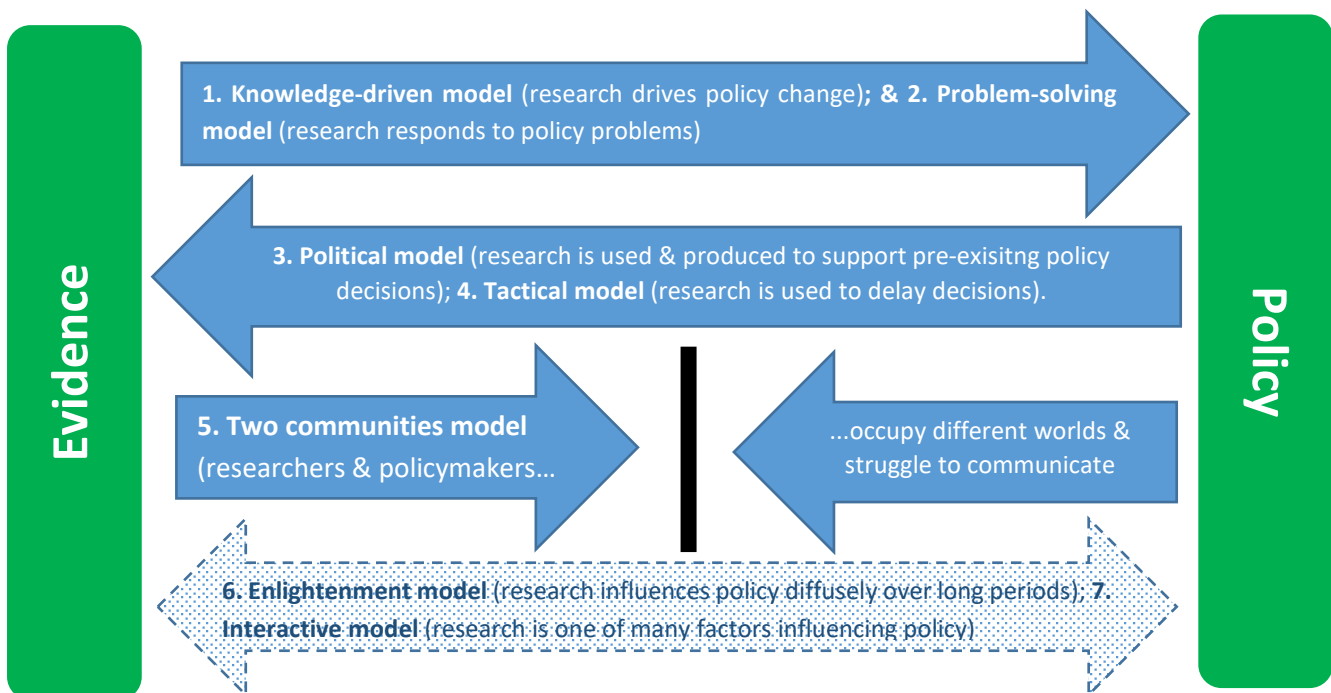
These discussions remain especially relevant in our current situation. The last decade has seen the global rise of populism and so-called ‘post-truth politics’, which some scholars see as a direct response and opposition to a hitherto dominant technocratic rationality of governments (Esmark 2020; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017). As part of this, we have repeatedly witnessed the implementation of policies which appear to go against prevailing evidence (e.g. the austerity policies implemented across Europe, following the financial crash of 2008, involved substantially reducing welfare spending, despite evidence highlighting the likelihood that this would lead to negative population impacts – Quaglio et al, 2013). And while the current COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the need for high-quality evidence in policymaking, it has also highlighted many of the persistent challenges related to EBPM (e.g. the often inconclusive nature of evidence and the tension between the need for swift political action and the time-consuming process of producing high-quality, scientifically robust evidence – Greenhalgh, 2020).

### **3.2 Key ideas within the EBPM literature**

Years before the mantra of EBPM was adopted by policymakers in the UK, Australia, Canada and elsewhere (Cabinet Office 1999; Cabinet Office 2000; Canadian Academy of Health Sciences 2009; Rudd 2008), policymakers in the USA (and, to a degree, the UK) were experimenting with efforts to

improve the utilization of research in policy (Weiss 1977). These earlier policy efforts to achieve research-informed policy stimulated a large literature exploring the relationship between science and policy (e.g. Blume 1977; Bulmer 1982; Caplan 1979; Weiss 1977; 1979; 1982). Many of the ideas put forth by this literature would later be repeated in the new field of EBPM (often without direct references to this older literature, as the early proponents of EBPM seemed more occupied with the field of Evidence-Based Medicine than the substantial research- and evaluation-utilization literature within the social sciences). The ideas in these various models are summarised in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Visual summary of early models of the relationship between evidence & policy**



Models 1 and 2 summarise the simplest way of thinking about the relationship between evidence and policy, depicting a direct, linear connection in which evidence either drives policy change (the ‘knowledge-driven model’), or provides direct solutions to policy problems (Davies, Nutley and Smith 2000; Weiss 1979). In both cases, knowledge is utilised by policymakers in an ‘instrumental’ manner (Knorr 1977; Weiss 1980). Although there have been occasional examples of research feeding into policy in this manner, such simple models have been consistently discredited for failing to capture the intricacies and complexities of the actual relationship between evidence and policy (see Nutley and Davies 2000; Nutley, Walter and Davies 2007). Nevertheless, these models were implied by some of the first proponents of EBPM and continue to serve as an ideal within parts of the literature.

The other five models in Figure 1 are linked by suggesting that policymakers rarely utilize research in the direct, instrumental depiction in models 1 and 2. The political model, for example, highlights the dominance of political values and ideologies within policy. From this perspective, research is

only likely to play a role in policy if it is consistent with dominant political perspectives or agendas. The 'tactical model' suggests a similarly symbolic approach to evidence in which policymakers encourage/fund research activity with the aim of delaying awkward decisions or distracting attention (Davies, Nutley and Smith 2000).

Model 5, developed by Caplan in 1979, represents a more structural (less political) approach to explaining the difficulties in achieving evidence-based policy. Here, a key barrier to using evidence in policy is the cultural gap between researchers (the 'producers') and policymakers (the 'users'). Whilst not always referring to Caplan's (1979) work directly, many contemporary assessments of the limited use of research in policy and practice mirror Caplan's observations and promote solutions involving bringing the 'two communities' closer together.

The final two models imply the influence of research on policy is necessarily looser and more limited than Models 1 or 2. Model 6 captures Weiss's (1977) account of the 'enlightenment' function of research in policy, which involves research achieving diffuse conceptual (rather than direct instrumental) influence. In this model, bodies of research gradually changing the way actors think about particular issues, over long periods. Finally, model 7 tries to reflect Donnison's (1972) account of policymaking processes as highly chaotic and complex, with policymakers seeking (and receiving) information from a variety of sources, including practitioners, journalists and interest groups, as well as academic researchers. In this model, research ideas travel back and forth between a variety of groups, transforming over time, often unpredictably.

Overall, this early research highlights the complex and often difficult nature of the relationship between research and policy. These difficulties informed questions among researcher and policymakers about the viability of using academic research in policy during the 1970s-1980s.

### 3.2.1 Current debates on EPBM – Old wine in new bottles?

The emergence of EBPM as a policy idea during the 1990s prompted a renewed academic interest in the relationship between research and policy (e.g. Black 2001; Burrows and Bradshaw 2001; Nutley, Walter and Davies 2007; Sanderson 2009; Young et al. 2002). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given Miller's (1980) assessment that there is a capacity within academia to be continually 're-inventing the broken wheel', this new body of work did not always appear to build directly on the earlier academic work. Rather, much of this literature implied an idealized version of models 1 and 2, in which research could (and should) produce utilizable grounds for policy decisions (e.g. Macintyre et al. 2001; Young et al. 2002). This led Parsons to argue that the commitment to EBPM marked:

'not so much a step forward as a step backwards: a return to the quest for a positivist yellow brick road leading to a promised policy dry ground - somewhere, over Charles Lindblom -

where we can know 'what works' and from which government can exercise strategic guidance.' (Parsons 2002: p.45)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the complexities highlighted in earlier work, empirical assessments of the extent to which policies reflected available evidence found highly selective use of evidence, despite commitments to EBPM (e.g. Katikireddi et al, 2011; Naughton, 2005). Academic activity once again sought to explain the persistent disjuncture between research and policy, reintroducing more complex accounts of this relationship. This included drawing attention to Weiss' (1977, 1979) arguments about the 'enlightenment' function of research, (e.g. Hird 2005; Petticrew et al. 2004; Young et al. 2002) and developing new, related ideas (e.g. Radaelli's 1995 concept of 'knowledge creep').

For others, however, Caplan's (1979) account of 'two communities' appears to have been more appealing, with various contemporary assessments of the limited use of research in policy focusing on a need to overcome institutional and cultural 'gaps' between researchers and policymakers (e.g. Lomas, 2000; Wimbush et al, 2005). This has informed arguments for work to achieve shared understandings, and increase interaction, between researchers and policymakers (e.g. Lomas, 2000; Lavis, 2006). The idea here appears to be that research would be more frequently employed by policymakers if only they could better access and understand it (and if researchers produced more relevant, responsive research). These approaches also stress the need to improve mechanisms of communication and levels of trust between researchers and policymakers.

Several reviews of knowledge transfer studies attempt to synthesise what we know about research use in policy (Innvær et al. 2002; Mitton et al. 2007; Nutley, Walter and Davies 2007). These reviews highlight challenges around the accessibility and timeliness of research, a lack of policy incentives to use research, and a lack of understanding and trust between researchers and policymakers. Their recommendations tend to focus on mechanisms for *increasing* the chances that particular research projects will be employed by policymakers, which is distinct from trying to *improve* the quality of the research used in policymaking (which might involve mechanisms to *limit* the influence of poorer quality or less relevant research). Interestingly, only two of the reviews suggest the *quality* of the research was important for enhancing policy impact (Innvær et al, 2002; Nutley et al, 2007). The recommendations in many of these reviews are remarkably similar to those reviewed by Weiss in 1990:

'Most advice to policy researchers over the years has been geared towards that ubiquitous benevolent despot, the decision maker. Homilies have poured forth: identify the key decision maker; talk to her/him in person; be sure that research addresses the questions he/she raises; involve her/him in the research process; communicate results early and often; write in simple words and short summaries; be sure the results and the recommendations drawn from them are feasible within the constraints of the institutional system; be aware of the problems that may occur in implementing the recommendations and help the decision maker foresee and

avoid them. And so on. Policy researchers have been repeatedly lectured to make themselves and their findings 'user friendly' to the decision maker.' (Weiss 1990: p.98)

This raises questions about the progress of this area of scholarship in this area. Moreover, Weiss (1990) was already critical, concluding that such advice 'has not worked very well', partly because research alone 'is almost never convincing or comprehensive enough to be the sole source of policy advice' and partly because, 'there are always issues that research doesn't cover.' We add three further critiques of much of the recent scholarship on evidence and policy. First, policymakers and researchers each tend to be depicted as relatively homogenous groups. This seems questionable when there are so many accounts of the fractured and disjointed (even acrimonious) nature of relations *within* both academic research and policy (e.g. Bartley 1992; Gieryn 1983; Kavanagh and Richards 2001). Second, it often appears to be assumed that it is possible for research to respond directly to policymakers' questions and concerns, despite challenges to this idea (e.g. Petticrew et al. 2004; Whitehead et al. 2004). Third, such approaches often fail to acknowledge the ideologies and interests shaping both policy and research (Rein, 1980), which mean policymakers and researchers might disagree on the very issues that warrant research or on which methodologies provide valuable insights (Hammersley 2003).

These limitations help explain why the three fundamental questions presented in the introduction remain unresolved. Academic research is often fractured into distinct "camps" with widely diverging views on what constitutes "good research" (e.g. Collyer and Smith, 2021) which makes it impossible to agree what constitutes evidence in EBPM. If research is unable to directly answer complex policy-questions with much certainty, how far should we go in efforts to ensure policies are evidence-based? And if research agendas are shaped by ideologies and interests, should we afford non-elected researchers more influence on policies than elected politicians or the general public? These questions challenge the dominant assumption within a great deal of the EBPM scholarship; that use of evidence in policy is *a priori* positive and so should be actively pursued. Instead, we argue for the need to better understand the contextual, divergent and contingent nature of evidence-use with a view to improving the role of research in policymaking (rather than simply increasing the research reaching policy discussions). A first step is to consider how the very idea of EBPM differs between countries.

### **3.3 Current/future challenges and promises of EBP in the development of welfare states**

#### **3.3.1 Comparing EBPM across welfare state regime types**

Given the almost commonsensical nature of the idea of EBPM, it is unsurprising that the idea has proliferated across welfare states in the last two decades. However, when looking at the elusiveness of the concept and our unanswered questions, it is perhaps less obvious that the idea



should fare equally well across diverse welfare settings. Here, we compare the international reach and divergence of EBPM as an idea in liberal welfare regimes (focusing on the US and UK) and social democratic welfare regimes (focusing on Norway, Denmark and Sweden) (Esping-Andersen, 1991)). In some ways, the US, UK and the three Scandinavian countries can all be considered frontrunners in the uptake of ideas, methods and organizations associated with EBPM, albeit in different ways. The US was, and remains, the dominant exponent of the ideal of systematically evaluating policy programs through experimental or quasi-experimental methods. The New Labour government in the UK was the earliest example of a government actively promoting and formally labelling its own approach as 'evidence-based policymaking'. While the Scandinavian countries were the first to form their own national or regional variants of emerging international collaborations of evidence-producing organizations.

However, different patterns seem to emerge if we look beyond the initial uptake of the idea of EBPM and instead focus on the subsequent promotion and reception of the ideas. Indeed, there seems to be a marked difference between the liberal welfare states and the social democratic welfare states concerning whether and how politicians promote the idea of EBPM. The UK, especially under New Labour governments (1997-2010) were perhaps the most explicit of any administration in using the EBPM terminology. While the US has arguably been most active in promoting the central tenets of a positivist vision of EBPM (i.e. basing policies on rigorous quantitative evidence) via legislation. Although we can identify an original impetus with the Clinton administrations of the 1990s, this focus has persisted, even continuing under the recent Trump administration via the signing of the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act. Of course the specific approaches of the Blair- and the Clinton-led - administrations have to be understood in the context of the post-ideological political climate of the 1990s, where many centre-left governments tried to reinvent themselves as less socialist/social democratic and more rational and pragmatic. However, the comparison with the Scandinavian countries also suggests that the active promotion of EBPM by politicians is at least partly informed by other factors. In Scandinavian contexts, politicians have generally been much less vocal in their support of EBPM and the promotion of EBPM here has often been driven more by research institutes and other evidence-producing organizations than by policymakers. Even when some Scandinavian governments began to adopt EBPM ideas, this was often driven more by civil servants in the central administration than by elected politicians. This suggests a difference in political culture between the liberal and the social democratic welfare states, with the public support for policies in Scandinavian countries perhaps being less dependent on the idea they are 'evidence-based'. Indeed, in 2016, evaluation researcher, Evert Vedung, argued that 'the evidence-wave will soon recede' in Nordic contexts, since he felt 'the evidence-wave does not fit well with the Nordic administrative culture, which is built on dialogue, argumentation, deliberation and participation.'" (Vedung, 2016 – Authors own translation). The findings of recent studies on the evidence movement in Scandinavia supports Vedung's prediction (Elvbakken & Hansen, 2019; Møller 2017; Møller, Elvbakken & Hansen, 2019), finding that evidence-producing organizations became less influential in Scandinavia over the past decade. Alongside this, the notion of evidence has been broadened to include the knowledge of frontline professionals, such as social workers and school-teachers. Prior to the pandemic, a study of the evidence-agenda in the field of social policy in

Denmark even suggests that so many negative connotations have been attributed to the term “evidence” that the Ministry of Social Affairs no longer uses this term in official communications (Møller, 2017).

There are also important differences when looking at the implementation and reception of the idea of EBPM, both within and among the regime clusters. In the US, we see some of the foundations of EBPM (notably policy initiatives being designed and rolled out to facilitate rigorous quantitative assessment via RCTs and cost-benefit analyses) having been implemented ahead of the conception of EBPM as a term. In both the UK and Scandinavia, this way of making policies evaluable remains much less prevalent even now, despite official commitment to EBPM in the UK. This difference is likely to relate to divergent research traditions as well as different ideas around both what constitutes welfare policies and what ‘good’ policymaking involves. The dominance of quantitative methods and a (neo)positivist approach is much more prevalent in the social sciences of the US than in the UK or Scandinavia, suggesting some of the differences between the US and elsewhere may be explained by cultural-disciplinary differences in research. At the same time, the time-limited, targeted nature of many US welfare policies, and the emphasis on achieving specific behavioural changes, also makes American welfare policies much more amenable to RCTs and cost-benefit analyses. Such experimental methods are more difficult to apply to the universal and rights-based nature of many welfare policies in social democratic welfare states, where the intended outcomes are often broader. The similarities between the Scandinavian countries and the UK here underline previously noted challenges around placing this country firmly within the liberal welfare states regime type (see also Bambra, 2005).

Looking at the reception and, especially, critiques of EBPM, there are notable differences regarding *who* the opponents are and *what* their critique is based on and, here, the differences do appear to align with the welfare regime categorization of the US and UK as liberal, and Denmark, Norway and Sweden as social democratic. In these Liberal welfare states countries, critiques seems to come mainly from within the research-community and the basis of this critique is often centered on the narrow notion of evidence and the simplified understanding of the research-policy relationship (cf. question 1 and 2 of the introduction). In Scandinavian contexts, there has been much outspoken critique of EBPM and this has come not only from researchers but also (indeed, largely) from the welfare professions (teachers, social workers etc.). Here, as the quotation from Evert Vedung (see above) highlights, critiques are not only about the nature of evidence and policymaking, but also the democratic legitimacy of EBPM. In these social democratic welfare regimes, EBPM has not only been criticized for bypassing the chain of accountability in a representative democracy but, more importantly, for neglecting the importance of deliberation and participation from non-experts.

This difference in the nature of the critique of EBPM may also help explain the difference among the countries regarding the current promotion of this idea. The UK and the US remain the most vocal official supporters of EBPM (despite direct challenges to the research claims of experts in both contexts prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and, in the US, prior to the election of President Biden). In the US, the norm of using a narrow set of experimental and quantitative methods to assess policy-interventions seem so ingrained in the political institutions that it is seldom debated,

which perhaps explains why President Trump, who was often portrayed as an opponent to scientific research (Sharfstein, 2017), nonetheless signed the Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act. In Scandinavia on the other hand, the term “evidence-based” is often used less openly by politicians - perhaps unsurprisingly given the critical reception of the idea by many public employees (see above). Instead, the evidence-based knowledge is increasingly inscribed into governance arrangements in ways that promote EBPM ideas as technical tools, less open to public scrutiny (Andersen 2021).

There are, of course, several caveats to the comparison sketched out in this chapter. First, we have only focused on two welfare regime types (and just five countries within these). Second, the scope of this chapter only allows for a very general comparison. To determine if there are systematic differences in the uptake of EBPM across welfare regime-types necessitates both the inclusion of countries from other regime-types as well as more in-depth, comparative analysis of the different cases (analysis which is currently lacking in the scholarship on evidence and policy). Finally, we are cautious as to whether regime-typology is a sensible starting point for comparing EBPM across countries. Since Esping-Andersen’s seminal work, many researcher have criticized the typology for simplistically downplaying differences within regime-types (see, for example Emmenegger, Kvist, Marx, & Petersen, 2015; Powell, Yörük, & Bargu, 2020). A few countries (such as the US and Sweden) are widely accepted as ideal typical examples of specific regime-types but many others (including the UK) are harder to place. Moreover, our analysis implies that the explanatory factors of Esping-Andersen’s typology (universalism and de-commodification) may be less important for EBPM than countries’ political culture and institutions. The differences we sketch out in this chapter are therefore tentative and employed mainly to highlight the potential of comparative research around EBPM. The lack of comparative empirical studies of EBPM marks an important blind spot in current scholarship (Smith et al, 2019) which may be directly impeding scholarship and policy work around EBPM.

### 3.3.2 What are the issues that EBPM could potentially address?

The promise of EBPM, in terms of the issues it might address, depend on the answers to the three questions we outlined at the start of the chapter. If, for example, the answer to question 1 is that the ‘evidence’ in EBPM is narrowly defined to quantitative, experimental data and analysis (as has been the case in the US) then the potential applicability of EBPM is reduced, especially in contexts (such as Scandinavia) where many social policies are rights-based and universal. Employed in this narrow way, EBPM can potentially aid policymakers only in deciding whether to pursue (or terminate) policy interventions that are amenable to quantitative, experimental evaluation. If, on the other hand, we take a far more inclusive approach to defining ‘evidence’ and include, for example, opinion polls, qualitative data capturing lived experiences, professional opinions, etc then the potential applicability of EBPM becomes far greater. However, this expansion then raises questions about the extent to which EBPM differs from general knowledge utilization in policymaking.

The answer to question 1 directly impacts on the answer to question 2, what EBPM looks like, although this is also necessarily shaped by the contextual specificities of policymaking, as we have highlighted via our comparison between EBPM in the US, UK and Scandinavian contexts. Our analysis suggests that EBPM in the US involves embedding a positivist approach within (restricted strands of) policymaking, via mandatory requirements to employ tools such as cost-benefit analysis and mechanisms that help promote the utility, availability and accessibility of quantitative, experimental evidence and data. In the US (and, to some extent, the UK) these developments intersect with commitments to 'open government' and the push for greater transparency around the scientific advice that is informing policy decisions. In this context, EBPM potentially offers a means of opening the 'black box' of policymaking to public and expert scrutiny. In contrast, the resistance to EBPM among some researchers and professionals within Social Democratic countries (which relates, very directly, to the issues of legitimacy raised by question 3 in our introduction) appears to be informing a much subtler approach, in which selected tools of EBPM are built into governance arrangements in ways that deliberately seek to avoid public attention. All of this is likely to limit the issues that EBPM can feasibly address in Scandinavian contexts to policy developments that are not traditionally shaped via strong professional engagement or extensive democratic deliberation.

### **3.4. Conclusion**

There is little doubt, as we illustrate here, that EBPM remains a contested concept but precisely why it is contested, or what is being contested, appears to vary by context. The scholarship surrounding EBPM is somewhat frustrating for at least three reasons: (1) there is a lack of definitional clarity, which results in different people using the same terms to refer to distinct ideas, while the same terms can be interpreted differently in diverse contexts; (2) perhaps because of this, there appears to be only limited and piecemeal learning across different bodies of relevant work, whether over time or between distinct policy issues (e.g. health and education), and the three questions we set out in the introduction all remain open to discussion; and (3) a lack of comparative analysis means there are only limited insights into how and why EBPM is playing out differently in contrasting geo-political contexts. The current COVID-19 pandemic context underlines both the crucial role that scientific evidence can play in guiding policy and the limits to an EBPM ideal that embodies a hierarchy of evidence placing meta-analyses of RCTs at the pinnacle. In our view, this points to a pressing need to move beyond an unattainable search for universally applicable mechanisms to increase evidence use, towards more complex and context specific understandings of how states can improve their approaches to using evidence, with a view to both improving policy outcomes *and* enhancing the democratic legitimacy of policymaking.

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