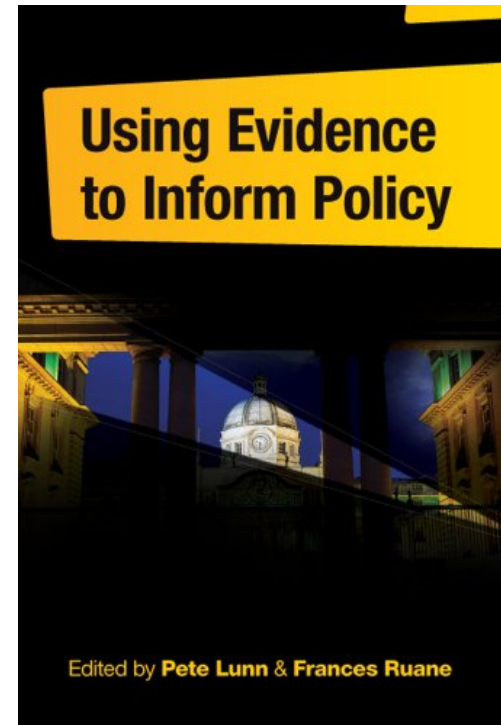# When and How Can Evidence Inform Policy?

"The most savage controversies are about matters as to which there is no good evidence either way."
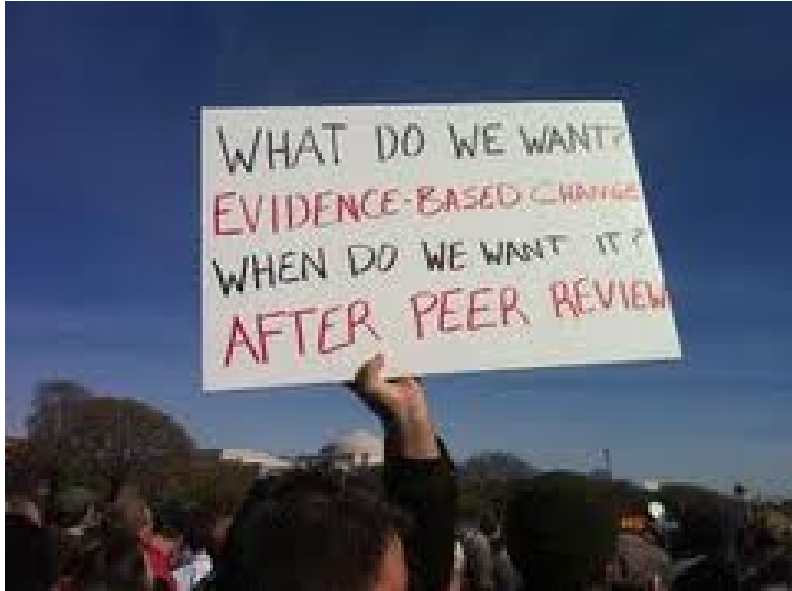
Bertrand Russell

Pete Lunn

Why "policy implications" ?

imply, v.t. to express indirectly; to insinuate
infer, v.t. to derive as a logical consequence; to conclude

Idea of evidence-based policy can be overstated
(See Sanderson, 2009)

Because...

1) Values and priorities matter
2) Attitudes to risk matter
3) Strength of evidence partly subjective
4) Extent of uncertainty also subjective
5) Political or financial realism

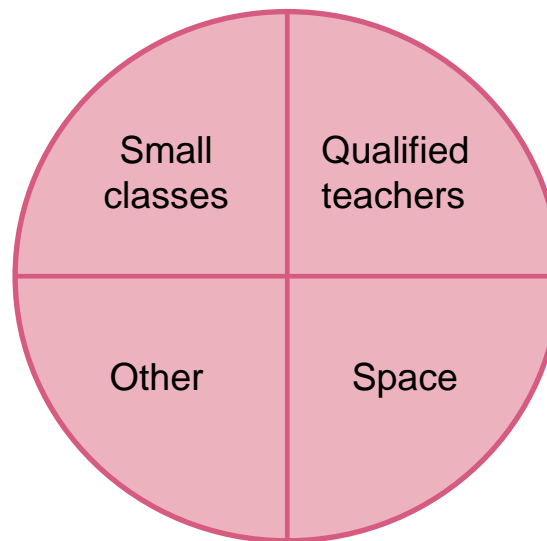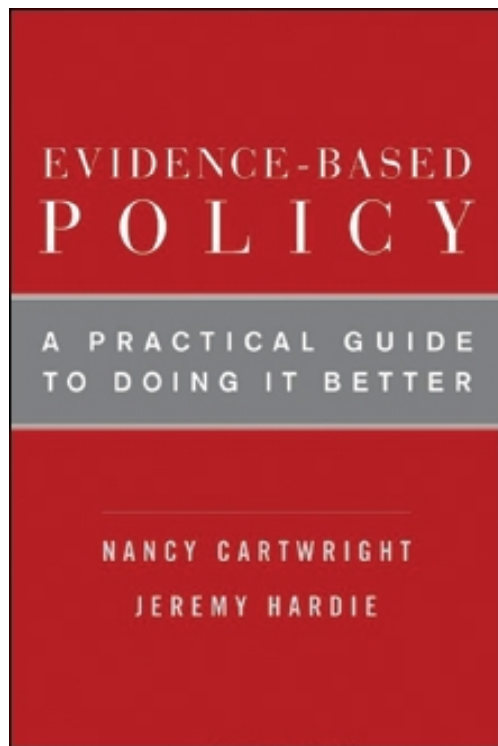Also problem of "policy-based evidence making":

• Use of selective evidence by the powerful (Tombs and Whyte, 2003)

• Evidence interpreted by researchers via an ideological framework (Boden and Epstein, 2006)

Even the randomised controlled trial (RCT) is not conclusive...

Just because it has worked THERE, does not necessarily mean that it will work HERE because:
1) The causal mechanism may not work in the same way
2) Some support factors may be missing:
    You need to identify the "causal cake", e.g.

UK example

William
Solesbury

"I think the concept that policy should be based on evidence is something that I would rail against quite fiercely. It implies first of all that it is the sole thing that you should consider. Secondly, it implies the metaphor 'base' and implies a kind of solidity, which […] is often not there, certainly in the social sciences although I think to a great degree, […] not always in the natural and biological sciences".

(House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, 2006, p. 45)

Alternative conceptions

"Evidence aware" policy?

"Evidence inspired" policy?

"Evidence informed" policy

BUT...

One connotation of "evidence base" needs to be preserved: Every policy area has an evidence base of findings, theories, methods and experts.

Knowledge to Action
Best et al. (2008, 2009, 2010)

Three models of increased effectiveness:

1. Linear models

- Knowledge like a product to be disseminated or diffused
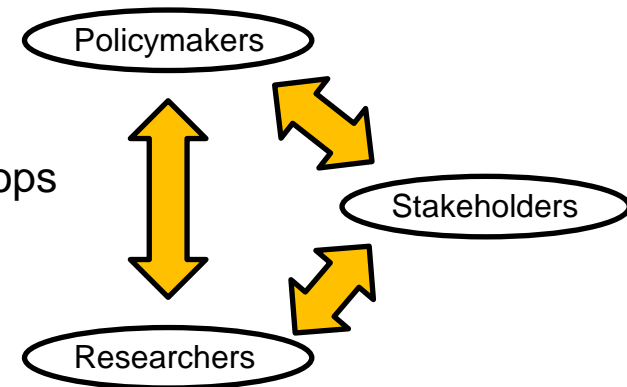- Researchers produce, practitioners use – one-way communication

2. Relationship models

- Knowledge comes from multiple sources: research, theory, policy, practice, not just from the researcher
- Researchers and policymakers collaborate

3. Systems models

- Relationship between researchers, policymakers and other stakeholders constitutes a dynamic system
- System has understood roles and multiple feedback loops
- Aim is to generate "engaged scholarship"
  - But important to maintain independence

Policymakers

Stakeholders

Researchers

Conclusions

- Policy cannot generally be *deduced* from evidence, but it can be *informed* by evidence

- The relationship between researchers and policymakers varies in intensity and effectiveness
  - Suppliers > Collaborators > Scholars engaged in a policy system
  - Important to preserve independence in more systematic engagement

- More systematic engagement is more effective
  - Important to preserve independence
  - Relationship of "creative tension"