

The Māori social science academy and evidence-based policy

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Abstract: This paper focuses on recent moves to forge stronger linkages between the Māori social science academy and the policy industry. A critical appraisal of this development is offered, with particular attention given to the desirability of enhancing the academy's role in the policy process, given the policy industry's continued privileging of Eurocentric theory and research methodologies within the developing evidence-based environment. The paper ends with a discussion of the possibilities and problems associated with engagement with the policy industry, particularly as these relate to the various roles members can (or are forced to) take; either as 'insiders' (such as policy workers and contract researchers), or independent, critical 'outsiders'. The author concludes that the best that insiders can hope for are incremental, largely ineffective changes to Māori policy, while independent members of the academy are best placed to speak on behalf of Māori, Māori communities, hapu and iwi.

Keywords: criminal justice; evidence-based policy; kaupapa Māori research; Māori academy; policy industry.

Introduction

Commentators and government policy workers focus on a range of factors when attempting to explain the over-representation of Māori in the criminal justice sector, including low health, education, housing and employment outcomes and poor parenting skills (see Ministry of Youth Affairs, 2000; Ministry of Justice, 2002b). More recently, we have witnessed the resurrection of long discredited biological determinist explanations of Māori offending, with the discovery of a so-called 'warrior gene' that supposedly explains our propensity for violence and anti-social behaviour (Hall; Green; Chambers & Lea, 2006).

However, amongst the melange of explanatory variables and causes, one that invariably escapes critical scrutiny is the activities of the policy industry (Tauri, 2005). For this reason, I have chosen to focus this paper on the role played by the policy industry in responding to, or exacerbating the 'Māori crime problem'. The term policy industry refers to the collection of government agencies with primary responsibility for developing state-centred policies in response to key social issues, e.g., the Department of Corrections and the Ministries of Education, Health and Justice and Social Development, to name but a few. The industry's workforce is primarily made up of public servants, but also comprises a significant number of 'co-dependents' including contracted policy advisors, researchers, evaluators and strategists. Analysis of the activities of the policy industry centres on a critical discussion of the evidence-based policy (EBP) paradigm that has been developing in New Zealand over the past decade. This discussion is pertinent given recent moves to forge stronger linkages between the Māori academy and the policy industry; an issue that was a focus of the Māori Association of Social Scientists conference held in Wellington in June 2008.

In the pages ahead I begin with a brief overview of the EBP environment that is developing in the New Zealand context, followed by discussion of the political economy of EBP, particularly the claim that EBP signals the 'death of ideology' in the policy development process. The final section considers various roles played by members of the Māori academy in the EBP environment, and the implications of forging closer links to the policy industry.

The rise of evidence-based policy

Following developments in the late 1990s in the United Kingdom, there is growing interest in evidence-based policy making in a number of Western jurisdictions, including New Zealand, Australia and Canada (Marston & Watts, 2003). A survey of the range of documents produced by the criminal justice sector, including Statements of Intent, annual reports and high-level portfolio-specific strategies, such as the Ministry of Justice-led Crime Reduction (2002a) and Youth Offending strategies (2002b), shows that New Zealand's policy industry believes itself to be working in an evidence-based environment.

Evidence-based policy has been described as a 'technical approach to policy making' that enables government officials to make well informed decisions about policies, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence from research at the heart of policy development and implementation (Davies, 1999). According to Great Britain's Centre for Management and Policy Studies (cited in Reid, 2003, p.6) evidence-based policy entails a technical process whereby:

The advice and decisions of policy makers are based upon the best available evidence from a wide range of sources; all key stakeholders are involved at an early stage and throughout the policy's development. All relevant evidence, including that from specialists, is available in an accessible and meaningful form to policy makers.

The types of evidence considered crucial to informing an EBP environment generally include data generated through quantitative observations of social reality derived from scientific methods, such as randomised clinical trials, statistical meta-analysis and systematic, large-scale reviews and (to a lesser extent) practitioner knowledge and experience (Parsons, 2002).

Commentators such as Trinder (2000) and Parsons (2002), link the emergence of evidence-based policy to the instrumentalist mode of managerial reforms that impacted public administration practice in numerous western democracies from the early 1980s onwards. Trinder (2000, p.19) argues that the managerialist emphasis on value for money and the "focus on effectiveness and efficiency is a central driving force behind evidence-based practice and policy". Within the managerialist environment that developed out of the instrumentalist reforms, central government agencies and providers contracted to deliver services, must increasingly quantify what they are doing, why they do it, and whether or not 'it' is working.

Another key driver of the rise of EBP was a perceived need by Government policy workers and their academic partners, to move policy-making from its perceived long-standing ideological basis, into the realm of 'hard facts' and empirical certainty (e.g., Reid, 2003). Exponents of EBP argue that opinion-based policy, the dominant approach of the 1970s and 1980s, relied heavily on the selective use of evidence and the "untested views of individuals or groups, often inspired by ideological standpoints, prejudices, or speculative conjecture" (Davies, 2004, p.3). In contrast, EBP is considered by practitioners to be a value-neutral process, due to its adherence to quantitative (meaning scientific) methodologies and analytical frameworks.

The 'death of ideology' motivation is succinctly described by Mulgan (cited in Reid, 2003, p.7) who writes that:

We have seen a reducing role for ideology; the conviction politics of both the 70s and 80s has gone into decline and knowledge about what works has, to some extent, filled that space and therefore there is more of a demand for objective and neutral analysis and feedback in terms of what is happening in relation to policies.

Challenging the grand assumptions of the evidence-based policy movement

Evidence-based policy as a non-ideological and non-political process

While followers of EBP are quick to highlight what they perceive to be the ideological bases of previous policy-making paradigms, they somehow fail to confront the ideological and political nature of the policy environment they are constructing. Critical self-reflection on the part of policy workers would reveal that the EBP environment *is itself* an ideological construct. It is a policy environment that reflects the dominant cultural and political values and beliefs about how society functions and how best to understand, respond and measure that functionality (Perri 6, 2002).

Tensions and debates between advocates and critics of EBP coalesce around a continuum of perspectives related to the role of research and evidence in policy development. At one end of the continuum lies the *rational actor model* of policy construction, where research plays a significant role in a value free and politically neutral policy process. At the other end of the continuum is a *political model* whose advocates underscore the role of evidence in shoring up value—laden policy decisions. Practitioners and commentators at this point on the continuum view research as one of many possible inputs in an ideological and politicised policy process (Cook, 2001). The ‘policy is political’ position is effectively summarised by Packwood (2002, p.268) who stated that “Research has only a limited role in governance because... policies are driven by ideology, economic theory, and political expediency rather than the need to improve clinical effectiveness”.

Some exponents of EBP have, in a round-about way, acknowledged the political context that surrounds the policy industry and its activities. For example, Davies (2004) contends that EBP is firmly grounded within the values, ideologies and political beliefs that frame the industry’s activities. Davies (2004, p.5) emphasises that “Evidence-based policy can itself be seen as a political ideology, representing the case for empirical demonstration alongside more theoretical approaches to political discourse and action”.

Davies’ position appears to be based on a belief that EBP is political in so much as it seeks to bring ‘truth and light’ to the policy development process. What Davies and others fail to consider is the possibility that EBP is part of the dominant political process, rather than a discourse that is in contest with the prevailing system of knowledge and policy construction.

There is nothing innovative about the idea that policy should be based on evidence. However, in the current policy context, what is considered legitimate evidence *is* contentious. At present, governmental processes, including policy development, programme design and investment frameworks are privileged over all others. This privileging is achieved and maintained in a number of ways, such as continuing Government control of the legislative process and sources of funding. Perhaps more importantly, the Government sector manages the production, transmission and utilisation of knowledge upon which the process of policy development is founded.

A 2001 survey of policy-making in the United Kingdom demonstrated that the public sector uses a limited range of evidence, namely policy-focused evaluation, quantitatively derived data and economic/statistical modelling (Bullock; Mountford & Stanley, 2001). A similar pattern is followed in New Zealand, although in a more limited sense, due in large part to the dearth of social issues-related research and evaluation carried out in this country.

The fact that knowledge and evidence within EBP operates hierarchically demonstrates that policy making is far from the neutral, value-free process its exponents claim. Acknowledging the political and ideological context within which policy making operates, establishes EBP as

a powerful, state-centred tool for shaping policy development. It is a process that supports governmental understanding of, and responses to, the social context (Marston & Watts, 2003).

The social world of policy production as a fixed, controllable entity

Advocates of EBP believe the task of the policy industry is to attain the high (social) ground, map it out, occupy it and lay out the hard facts that support the policy-making process (Parsons, 2002). The social world of EBP is an 'empirical' one, solid, measurable, knowable and, ultimately, controllable. I prefer to think of the policy environment in much the same way as Schon (1979), who describes it as swampy lowland where social issues are confusing messes that inhibit the development of technical solutions. Schon's policy world is strikingly different from that described by advocates of EBP. It is a world more attuned to social reality; where the swamp is buffeted by constant change, complexity and uncertainty.

From a Schonian point of view, advocates of the new evidence-based environment are chasing "a notorious (positivist) will o' the wisp long associated with this particular swamp: a will to power" (Parsons, 2002, p.45). According to this perspective, EBP marks a step backwards: a return to the quest for a positivist 'cure all' leading to a promised policy dry ground, where we can know 'what works' and from which government can attempt to exercise control.

It is within the context of Schon's messy swamp and the governmental drive to 'know and control', that we find the key issues confronting the Māori academy as it deliberates on its relationship with the policy industry. One issue that requires our attention relates to the industry's preference for certain forms of evidence and how that evidence is subsequently used. It is apparent that what the policy industry desires of the Māori academy is the production and dispersal of evidence in forms that are readily understandable and usable by its policy workers. In other words, the academy's knowledge construction activities must ultimately be of utility to the policy industry.

Utility and evidence-based policy

In the extant governmental literature, deciding the function of evidence in the policy context is portrayed primarily as a problem of how knowledge can best be managed and utilised to produce effective policy. The purpose of managing the production of knowledge is to ensure its utility for the EBP process. This task requires the development of clear structures and procedure so 'legitimate' evidence can be extracted, stored, retrieved and communicated as and when required by the industry. For this to happen, independent research or academic knowledge must be produced and disseminated to the policy industry in accordance with clear specifications of what counts as systematic A → B knowledge that provides the basis for producing technical solutions to policy issues (Parsons, 2002).

A number of issues arise from the policy industry's adherence to utilitarian evidence and knowledge. The first issue derives from the industry's processes being wedded to the notion of there being an unchanging, 'solid', knowable social world. In reality the industry cannot hide from Schon's swampy lowland. The policy industry's reliance on utilitarian EBP means that in trying to move beyond muddling through, it succeeds only in creating more muddle and uncertainty around the production of public policy. In contrast, Schon's work directs our attention to the central role of uncertainty, flux, unpredictability and change in human interactions and the impossibility of knowing very much about the social context. Schon (1983) argued that change is here to stay; the idea that there is ever a state of stability and unchangeability is a dangerous illusion upon which to base policy development.

The second issue is the policy industry's ability to meaningfully engage with communities. Adherents of EBP often claim that meaningful policy development is difficult due to a shortage of evidence and information to inform policy (Schon, 1979). Critics, such as Schon (1979) and Parsons (2002) counter that the deficit is less to do with available information than

with the way knowledge is created about the social context. The ‘gap’ that exists is the policy industry’s capability for knowing communities from their perspective, and producing policy and interventions that reflect different, ever-changing social contexts. The key question therefore, is not ‘do we have enough information’, but rather ‘do we understand the social world we create policy for’?

Schon’s whole point was that due to the growing complexity of human problems we have to improve our capacities to learn and facilitate adaptation in conditions of rapid and cascading change. Instead, the policy industry pursues the belief that it can increase our capability to know and control simply because we increase our ability to manage information and evidence that is of utility to the instrumental process of policy development.

The failings of EBP as the basis for policy development can be summarised as follows: you can have all the systematically generated, empirically sound evidence you desire, but if your methodology and analytical framework do not adequately reflect the social context, then the resulting policy is unlikely to produce meaningful outcomes *in* the community. Being systematic, empirical and ‘scientific’ is not enough to ensure meaningful responses to complex social issues. Instead, generating relevant, grounded and worldly information is imperative to developing meaningful solutions to social issues.

In contrast to the ‘knowledge to govern’ ethos of modernised government and the EBP environment, the policy industry should seek to facilitate the growth of individuals, organisations and communities that are capable of managing their own continuing transformation (Schon, 1973). Central government should emphasise less its dubious and doubtful claim to know what is best for a particular organisation or community, such as Māori, and focus more on supporting communities to make the best use of local knowledge to construct meaningful solutions to issues they consider crucial to their continued development.

Evidence-based policy and the ‘Māori crime problem’

Along with the social development, health and education portfolios, no other policy sector in New Zealand has so fully embraced the rhetoric and practice of EBP, as criminal justice. Throughout the 1980s and onwards, the focus of criminal justice policy-making moved from explaining and solving crime, to the administration and management of crime and criminals (Shichor, 2000). This move gave rise to a technocratic, managerialist crime control policy; what critical criminologists often refer to as ‘administrative’ criminal justice.

A foundational premise of contemporary crime control policy in New Zealand is that it is both desirable and possible to identify factors that can help distinguish which groups or individuals are most likely to become offenders and victims. This approach to framing crime control policy is based on Durkheimian assumptions about the nature of social reality and its conceptual representation. That is, the policy industry assumes *inter alia* that crime and the crime rate are objective and stable social facts. The policy industry treats street crimes committed by the urban poor and ethnic minorities as more serious and constant threats to social order than the crimes of government officials or corporate entities. This practice enables politicians and officials to avoid questions about how systems of crime control are assembled to manage crimes of the urban and rural poor. It also enables them to overlook overwhelming evidence that incidents of social harm are committed by *all* sections of the population; thus demonstrating that criminal justice policy is no less political and ideological than other policy portfolios (Agozino, 2004; Bessant; Sercombe & Watts, 1998).

Therefore, the predominant explanatory and conceptual framework that drives the policy context here is *risk*; a process of identifying and controlling individuals and populations groups assessed as being ‘at risk’ of offending or producing offenders. In numerous

documents, reports and briefings, risk factors are the foci of explanations of offending and the basis for policy development, particularly in relation to youth (see Ministry of Youth Development, 2002 and Ministry of Justice, 2002b).

In general, these reports derive crime-inducing risk factors from systematic analysis of longitudinal studies and is 'scientifically informed' by academic literature. These studies identify a long list of psycho-bio-medical antecedents of offending, grouped under various headings, such as child (individual) factors, for which the indicators include premature birth, low intelligence, insecure attachment, hyperactivity and impulsivity. Included under family factors, life events and community and cultural factors are a broad assortment of risk indicators such as separation/divorce, deviant peer group, inadequate behavioural management and socio-economic disadvantage.

The reports spare no effort in seeking to reveal the vast number of factors that place some people and groups 'at risk'. Yet the very scale of the multiple factors that the reports posit as risks of future offending is a weakness, rather than strength, of this type of EBP approach. The lists of at-risk factors, conceived in narrow developmental terms, are so wide ranging as to render any attempt at prediction (and evaluation of risk-focused initiatives) extremely difficult, if not impossible. These catch-all risk frameworks identify certain population groups as requiring constant, intrusive state intervention (Blaikie, 1993; Caspi; McGee; Moffitt & Silva, 1995). In the New Zealand context the population groups most often the focus of the risk assessment process and its aftermath, include Māori, Pacific peoples and youth per se.

There are fundamental problems with the criminal justice policy industry's reliance on risk-based theoretical and conceptual constructs for creating policy solutions that fit the 'real world' needs of communities. Fundamentally, despite being supposedly evidence-based, the industry cannot demonstrate that its crime control policies have impacted positively on communities. In truth, the persistent search for the predictive factors that cause crime, or more accurately, facilitate the management of crime, has been largely ineffectual. Katz epitomises this point when he writes that:

Whatever the validity of the hereditary, psychological, and social-ecological conditions of crime, many of those in the identified causal categories do not commit crime. Many people who do commit crime do not fit the causal categories. Many who do fit the background categories and later commit crime, go for long periods without committing or attempting to commit crime to which the theory directs them. (1988, p. 5).

Most striking of all in the New Zealand context is the total absence of any critical scrutiny of the effects of colonisation and the operations of an imposed, Eurocentric criminal justice system on the issues of Māori over-representation (Tauri, 2004). The failure of public policy to engage with the consequences of colonisation and successive governments to meaningfully invest in the social and physical infrastructure of low income communities, are not issues included in the industry's policy process. Instead, the preferred modus operandi of the policy industry is to identify a crime problem, as defined within a narrow, governmental framework (i.e. those actions identified in the Crimes Act), utilise knowledge gathered from empirical, scientific methods unreflective of social contexts, and propose a technical approach to 'manage down' issues that may prove politically damaging or socially disruptive. What *is* clearly revealed is the absence of the knowledge and experiences of Māori and of the socio-economic and political ruptures that have impacted their communities over the past 180 years (Tauri, 2004).

Engagement with the policy industry: problems and possibilities

The long history of state antagonism to the epistemological and philosophical basis of critical academics and their work, has reinforced the binary divide between the respectable, conforming academic subject and the less eligible, disreputable non-conformist. Tombs & Whyte (2003)

There are a number of ways in which the Māori academy can engage with the policy industry to enhance the effectiveness of its activities for Māori. How we engage depends on the type of relationship we currently have with the industry, or wish to develop in the future: whether we are part of the industry; as policy workers or contract researchers, or independent social commentators, academics and practitioners.

Inside, working out

For those working inside the industry, finding ways to enhance Māori input into policy design and implementation above and beyond the current situation is a fraught process. The barriers are significant in size and scope and the opportunities limited. One of the key issues facing Māori working in the system are the poor consultation processes employed for engaging with Māori. Industry workers are often treated as *the* Māori voice in the policy development process, and used as the indigenised face of the bicultural policy environment (Tauri, 1998). Why would agencies engage with communities when they can simply ask their Māori policy workers 'what is the Māori position'? This strategy places significant pressure on Māori working in the industry, constrained as they are by public service conventions that often restricts the provision of advice that reflects the needs of Māori communities. And then there are the poorly crafted 'consultation' exercises agencies undertake with Māori communities to inform policy development; often taking place after policy solutions are developed (Tauri, 2004).

That is not to say that the policy industry is immune to change. Arguably, the Kaupapa Māori Research (KMR) movement has, since the mid-1990s, broadened the range of methodologies and methods used for gathering evidence in some policy environments. This is most obvious in the health and social services portfolios. However, equally true is the fact that the space created for and by KMR, has been minimal. Most often KMR is utilised only at the point where research takes place. KMR exponents are not often present at the point where key policy and research questions are defined or during the analytical process of policy construction. Overall, KMR functions primarily as a culturally appropriate data gathering tool within an overarching Eurocentric, technocratic policy development process: Brown faces and 'brownd' research methods used to extract information that is knowable and meaningful to a largely non-Māori policy audience.

I am not arguing that members of the Māori academy who work in the policy industry should not continue to play a part in enhancing Māori input into policy design. Nor should they halt their efforts to change the way the industry engages with Māori. We do however, need to be realistic and accept that at best, small, incremental changes in New Zealand's Eurocentric, ideologically-driven policy process is as good as it gets; particularly where Māori issues are concerned. Continuously pushing for the inclusion of KMR in research projects and utilising Māori-based analytical frameworks, might facilitate incremental changes in the development of Māori policy. However, a combination of factors need to align for these activities to have any real impact, namely: a) growth in the number of competent Māori in positions of authority within the policy industry; b) a significant increase in the number of non-Māori officials willing to support 'by Māori, for Māori' approaches; and c) continued, co-ordinated resistance from Māori communities and members of the Māori academy to the current EBP paradigm.

Outside, working in

For the policy process to become more attuned with the needs and aspirations of Māori, it is necessary for the industry to be opened up and its activities critically scrutinised by *independent* members of the Māori academy; preferably those who are not aligned to policy development through contractual arrangements and related obligations.

As I see it, the role of the Māori academy's independent caucus is to provide the community-grounded, value-laden, critical scrutiny of the policy industry. The independent caucus provides two important functions in the policy development process: a) to provide direct critique the operations of the policy industry; and b) to challenge the concept of utility as it is defined and operationalised within the current EBP environment.

The key difference between those sitting inside and those outside the industry is that while both groups can be said to work for the good of Māori, only one has the independence necessary for speaking loudly and consistently for the most disenfranchised Māori individuals, whanau and communities. From a Māori empowerment perspective, the utility of the independent caucus comes from the fact that it largely works for Māori, not the Crown and is able to provide Māori-centred critique of the operations of the policy industry.

Conclusion

It is easy to understand the policy industry's desire for the Māori academy's activities to be of utility to its policy workers. The historical paucity of primary research in the New Zealand context means the knowledge generated by the Māori academy provides much needed information about the Māori social context. The need for 'policy friendly' knowledge is compounded by the over-representation of Māori in a range of negative social indicators, including those associated with criminal justice.

However, the Māori academy may find itself paying a high price for co-operating with the policy industry on its terms. Positive outcomes, in terms of effective policy for Māori and meaningful engagement, are likely to be low and, more often than not, will undermine the theoretical integrity of Māori responses to social harm through piecemeal incorporation and 'cultural dumbing-down', perhaps best epitomised by the Department of Corrections 'blended, bicultural' programmes that make up part of its suite of criminogenic initiatives (e.g., Tauri, 2005).

Regardless of the issues discussed above, we should not abandon the policy arena entirely to the whims of the bureaucrats. The work of the academy is important for highlighting otherwise invisible, silenced aspects or responses to indigenous issues and for giving voice to historically silenced groups (Haggerty, 2004). Even proposals that are not adopted entirely may aid in softening the hard edge of regressive or reactionary policies. Yet none of these potentially valuable results hide the fact that the Māori academy will continue to face significant difficulties in translating their knowledge, evidence and solutions into meaningful policy for Māori.

A key issue facing the Māori academy is the fact that EBP is deeply rooted in the managerialist and mechanistic process of policy-making currently in vogue in New Zealand and other comparable jurisdictions. The EBP process, wedded as it is to empiricist, Eurocentric processes of knowledge construction, invariably narrows and constrains the way in which evidence is conceptualised and operationalised in policy development.

Evidence, in critical and post-positivistic approaches favoured by critical members of the Māori academy, is inextricably interconnected with the issues of community participation and empowerment (see Smith, 1999). Engagement with community along these lines requires

advocates of EBP to surrender their mythical firm ground and descend into the complex and messy social context they seek to dominate. In doing so, they will find a context and world view where facts are not so hard, causes not so easily determined and where power is contested, and not necessarily in their favour.

There are two roles members of Māori academy can choose (or in certain cases, be forced) to play in the policy process. One is the 'insider' who is bound by the conventions of the Public Service and contractual obligations and who might stimulate incremental changes to the policy-making process, including the way knowledge is gathered and utilised to make policy. However, it would be naïve to think that insiders will achieve much more than that. The other is the critical outsider, independent academics, researchers, service providers and commentators who largely work to or for Maori communities. In contrast to the insider, those working outside the 'system' play the much needed role of the critical commentator who provides independent scrutiny of the policy process. It is my view that the critical outsiders of the Māori academy are those best placed to constantly remind the policy industry that theirs is not the only way to view and understand the Māori social context. Finally, when contemplating our relationship with the policy industry, members of the Māori academy should consider the following question: if we are all focused on being 'of utility' who will be left to critically scrutinise the impact of the industry on Māori individuals, communities, hapu and iwi?

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