

Using Habermas' theory of communicative action to transform sociological engagement with evidence-based policy

Abstract

Many sociological analyses of evidence-based policy frame it as contributing to the rationalisation of social relations, and being constructed through and implicated in systems of knowledge/power.

These analyses are based on social theory placing insufficient emphasis on the emancipatory potential of evidence, and the possibility of rational adjudication of truth claims. We argue sociological engagement with evidence-based policy could be transformed by being informed by the work of Habermas. Habermas' work could enable a more nuanced view of EBP in terms of whether or not this leads to rationalisation in the form of de-politicisation or marginalisation of citizens' voices. Habermas' work on knowledge-constitutive interests could inform a reconstructed view of evidence, disabused of positivist assumptions and with increased emancipatory potential.

Habermas' notion of the ideal speech situation as a procedural basis for truth could function as a standard for exploring how EBP is affected by power asymmetries, as well as for adjudicating truth claims.

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Introduction

Evidence-based policy (EBP) refers to using research evidence to inform what policy problems to address and how to respond to these. Many sociological analyses are critical of EBP, framing it as contributing to the rationalisation of social relations (Standing, 2017; Timmermans & Berg, 2003) and viewing evidence as socially constructed and/or implicated in systems of knowledge/power (Rhodes & Lancaster, 2019; Wood, Ferlie, & Fitzgerald, 1998). We argue that these analyses, though informative, draw on social theory insufficiently emphasising the emancipatory potential of evidence, and the open and rational adjudication of truth claims. We propose sociological engagement with EBP could be transformed by the work of Jürgen Habermas, in particular his theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1987a). This would enable an understanding of evidence and EBP that examined social processes and power, but acknowledged the positive potential and rational basis of scientific evidence.

Critical sociological analyses of EBP

Some of the sociological analyses of EBP in public health and health services are situated within a Weberian tradition describing an 'iron cage' of a totally administered society arising as an unintended consequence of the application of instrumental rationality to social relations (Weber, 2002). EBP is viewed as central to systems of control of service providers and citizens (Mykhalovskiy & Weir, 2004), narrowing policy-making to technocratic assessments rather than democratic consideration of values and priorities. EBP is presented as obscuring the political way in which 'problems' and plausible 'solutions' are identified (Robertson, 1998). Quantitative research is viewed as particularly problematic, tending to prioritise precision (estimating statistical associations between health outcomes and the interventions or risk factors hypothesised to cause them) over depth (analysing the broader social structures accounting for these) (Schrecker, 2013; Wildgen & Denny, 2020). Insufficiently 'upstream' analyses then inform insufficiently upstream interventions so the deeper causes of inequity are unchallenged (Schrecker, 2013; Wildgen & Denny, 2020).

Such technocratic decision-making is said to be dominated by medical and other experts, with service-users and other citizens marginalised, and questions of experience, meaning and agency bracketed out (Frankford, 1994). For example, Lancaster et al describe how EBP in public health privileges certain forms of instrumental knowledge (Lancaster, Seear, Treloar, & Ritter, 2017). They argue that, even when users are involved, these are de-legitimised and marginalised.

Some critiques of EBP are grounded in post-structuralist theory. For example, it is argued that:

“Although the demand that health policy be 'evidence-based' is underpinned by the assumption that 'research will produce a higher-order, "objective" knowledge... an established body of social science literature (especially work grounded in science and

technology studies and post-structural theory) has destabilized such claims by illuminating how science itself is constructed, contingent and performed in practices. In this tradition, scholars have critically examined the conditions under which EBM's claims about uniformity, objectivity and universality are obtained and the ways in which the thing we call 'evidence' is constituted by specific policy practices." (Lancaster & Rhodes, 2020 (p.44)

Epidemiological and other quantitative evidence is frequently termed 'positivist' in that it assumes knowledge involves discovering objective facts about the world rather being an artefact of social processes with the selection of topics and construction of data informed by existing intellectual commitments (Robertson, 1998). Influenced, in particular, by the early work of Foucault (Foucault, 1980), many sociological analyses portray systems of knowledge/power operating through the human sciences and welfare systems controlling citizens' behaviour. In such accounts, knowledge is irreducibly a manifestation of power with no rational means of adjudication:

"the thing we call "evidence" does not sit objectively outside the policy process, but rather is constituted within it through practices and the telling of policy stories. Thus, if the reality of what we call "evidence" is enacted and not fixed prior to its expression in policy activity, then it can also be said that the reasons for enacting one version over another are political." (Lancaster, 2016) (p.151)

Within these analyses, evidence generated within different methodological traditions is viewed as incommensurate with little scope for rational adjudication. Applying this to EBP, it is argued that (Standing, 2017):

“The inability of the different protagonists in EBP to productively engage lies not with the differentiated goals of each but rather the incommensurable logics of their ontological and epistemological positions.” (p. 3)

In this paper, we argue sociological analyses of EBP are right to examine where this contributes to de-politicisation, marginalisation of citizens’ voices and restriction in what counts as evidence. However, some such analyses are informed by social theory over-emphasising the role of scientific evidence in subjugation rather than empowerment, and under-estimating the potential for rational adjudication of truth claims. We argue that the Habermas’ work makes possible a more constructive and emancipatory view of EBP, in which processes and power disparities may be assessed, while recognising the positive potential, albeit often not fully realised, of evidence contributing to emancipation and wellbeing. While Habermas’ work has informed some previous analyses of participation and power in evaluation (VanderPlaat, 1997) and policy-planning (Strøm Synnevåg, Amdam, & Fosse, 2018; VanderPlaat, 1998), we offer a broader consideration of its import for EBP.

Habermas’ social theory

Rationalisation

Habermas proposes that the increasing application of rationality has positive and negative consequences. It has led to the questioning of tradition, and the promotion of human freedom and welfare. However, there has sometimes been a prioritisation of knowledge oriented towards prediction and control (Habermas, 1972), which Habermas associates with de-politicised, technocratic decision-making (Habermas, 1981).

Habermas uses the concept of the 'lifeworld' to refer to processes of cultural reproduction and meaning-making, socialisation and identity formation underpinned by taken-for-granted understandings and assumptions (Habermas, 1987b). He acknowledges the lifeworld is increasingly subject to rationalisation, both positively as rational reflection on how tradition inhibits human freedom, but also negatively as the 'colonisation' of lifeworlds by empirical/analytical rationalities. Like early Foucault, Habermas acknowledges the potential for domination whereby questions of mutual welfare are reduced to technical problems for experts to solve. But he does not view this as inevitable.

Knowledge-constitutive interests

Habermas' theory of communicative action identifies different knowledge-constitutive interests: forms of knowledge linked to social actions (Habermas, 1972). 'Empirical/analytical' knowledge focuses on causality, and is oriented towards prediction and control of natural or social phenomena. Habermas argues such knowledge can benefit human wellbeing and social organisation but must first be disabused of its positivist assumptions. He argues scientific knowledge is not assembled inductively from sensory impressions of the objective world as positivists believe, but instead constituted through categories of the knowing subject (such as time and space), faculties of logic and reason, and linguistic interactions between knowing subjects (Habermas, 1972). Habermas accepts there is an objective reality but one which can be only understood through human inter-subjectivity.

Habermas argues that alongside analytical/empirical knowledge are 'hermeneutic' and 'emancipatory' knowledge-constitutive interests, respectively oriented towards meaning/interpretation and criticism/emancipation (Habermas, 1972). Hermeneutics examines questions of meaning and experience (the 'lifeworld' of actors) through dialogic interpretation

between the concepts of the self and other (Habermas, 1977). Emancipatory knowledge seeks to distinguish truth from power to challenge illusions concealing arbitrary power (Habermas, 1971).

The ideal speech situation

Throughout his theory of communicative action, Habermas has aimed to reinvigorate notions of truth. He presents this not as a relationship between a knowing subject and the world but, instead, in terms of procedures for assessing evidence and logical argument to achieve intersubjective consensus (Habermas, 1984, 1987a, 1987b). Habermas views knowledge as based in human subjectivity and constructed through social practices, but does not conclude from this that there is no rational basis for assessing truth claims. Habermas proposes a thought experiment in the form of an idealised standard for assessing truth claims: in an 'ideal speech situation', debating parties reach consensus through open debate, presentation of pertinent evidence and rational adjudication (Habermas, 1984). Habermas argues that, although the ideal speech situation standard is never achieved in practice because of the enduring force of tradition or power asymmetries, it is nonetheless implied in humans' use of language, and can be used to consider the possibilities and limitations on rational and open debate (Habermas, 1984). Habermas' use of the ideal speech situation signals his opposition to the idea that knowledge generation occurs in incommensurate paradigms; rational communication can occur across such divides to arrive at adjudicated conclusions.

Habermas also uses the ideal speech situation to define how societies might democratically decide societal arrangements and policies. He argues social theory should propose procedures for decision-making rather than blueprints for societal structures because human freedom requires that societal arrangements be open to change and because all actions have unintended consequences. He

suggests that social experiments potentially provide a useful way of rationally assessing social interventions (Habermas, 1986):

“Every intervention in complex social structures has such unforeseeable consequences that processes of reform can only be defended as scrupulous processes of trial and error, under the careful control of those who have to bear their consequences.” (p.104)

Habermas’ reference to ‘control’ is instructive about his view of the importance of democratic control of policy formulation and evaluation.

For readers new to Habermas, we recommend an introduction (Outhwaite, 1994).

Implications of Habermas’ work for sociological engagement with EBP

We now return to the various sociological analyses of EBP and draw on Habermas’ work to identify other ways of understanding EBP. We illustrate these with examples drawn from the history of HIV prevention.

The contingent consequences of rationalisation in EBP

The sociological critiques described at the start of this paper engage with rationalisation in four ways. Firstly, they identify a tendency for EBP to contribute to rationalisation by marginalising and delegitimising citizens’ voices while consolidating expert power in decision-making (Lancaster et al., 2017). As we have seen, Habermas’ writings on rationalisation acknowledge such possibilities and the ideal speech situation provides an idealised benchmark to assess the extent to which these

occur. The ideal speech situation could, for example, be applied as an idealised standard for noting how HIV prevention researchers have often failed to consult adequately with affected communities, resulting in evidence failing to sufficiently engage with their priorities (Elford, Bolding, & Sherr, 2001). Marginalisation is most likely when citizens' involvement occurs in discrete events, the attendance and agendas of which are controlled by experts or bureaucrats (Strøm Synnevåg et al., 2018).

But a Habermasian analysis would not see such outcomes as inevitable. Interactions between policy-makers, experts and communities are most likely to approximate the ideal speech situation when communities possess the economic, cultural and social resources to make their voices heard and noted. For example, in the 1990s, gay men's community activists presented research evidence demonstrating the impact that community-led prevention had made and making the case for government funding to support this (Scott, 1997). Decision-making occurred not within discrete events but across broader networks and processes where diverse voices could not easily be excluded or dismissed. Gay men's communities, though diverse, were relatively advantaged in terms of economic, cultural and social resources, as well as being relatively unified in seeking to protect their constituents' rights and health (Gatter, 1999).

Secondly, sociological analyses suggest that EBP turns policy-making away from democratic assessments of values and priorities, and instead towards technocratic processes obscuring questions of politics and power (Robertson, 1998). Habermasian analyses of EBP fully acknowledge the potential for de-politicisation (Newman, 2017; Wildgen & Denny, 2020). An example from HIV prevention was the use of syntheses of evidence recommending 'what works' without consideration of the political context of implementation (Rees et al., 2004). Again, however, Habermas' reassessment of rationalisation suggests this is not inevitable. EBP may be used as a resource in

processes aiming to re-politicise decision-making. For example, a group of UK gay men undertook citizen science, generating evidence on the imbalance between the epidemiological needs of gay men and the lack of government funding for HIV prevention (King, 1993). These different possible outcomes suggest that, rather than assuming EBP will generate de-politicised policy-making, researchers should consider empirically the conditions under which de-politicised policy-making does or does not occur. Habermas-informed studies of health planning have, for example, explored tensions between instrumental strategies seeking to use evidence and communicative approaches seeking community participation (Strøm Synnevåg et al., 2018).

Thirdly, sociological analyses have suggested that one way in which EBP produces a de-politicised policy process is by focusing on evidence emphasising statistical precision over analytic depth, which leads to a lack of attention to the political dimensions and structural influences on health (Schrecker, 2013). Habermas' notion of knowledge-constitutive interests suggests EBP might be dominated by what he terms empirical/analytical knowledge oriented towards prediction and control. An example from HIV prevention is gay men's vulnerability to HIV infection being understood in terms of probabilistic estimates of individual risk-factors for infection, which neglect the deeper structural forces involved (Kalichman, Tannenbaum, & Nachimson, 1998). However, Habermasian analyses would suggest that the production and use of empirical/analytical knowledge need not preclude depth of analysis (Habermas, 1972; VanderPlaat, 1997). In the case of HIV prevention, quantitative research has examined and added to the evidence base regarding the influence of poverty, homophobia and oppressive criminalisation practices on risk, as well as the impacts of structural interventions addressing these (Blankenship, Reinhard, Sherman, & El-Bassel, 2015; Parker, Easton, & Klein, 2000).

This suggests there is no inevitable trade-off between statistical precision and depth of analysis (Wildgen & Denny, 2020). However, Habermas' notion of knowledge-constitutive interests would also suggest that such analyses would be even more powerful if they also drew on hermeneutic and emancipatory knowledge from anthropological or historical studies of the structures and processes generating vulnerabilities and inequalities (Schrecker, 2013; Wildgen & Denny, 2020). Habermas-influenced researchers have indeed argued that evaluation would be more likely to contribute towards emancipation if, instead of assessing whether an intervention has effectively addressed problems in the 'lifeworld' as defined by the state or technical experts, it assesses the extent to which the resources of the state have been reconfigured to address needs as understood within a particular lifeworld (VanderPlaat, 1997). This echoes a broader argument that public-health interventions should be evaluated in terms of the ethical importance of their outcomes (Wildgen & Denny, 2020).

Fourthly, sociological analyses suggest EBP may feed into the rationalised subjugation of citizens (Mykhalovskiy & Weir, 2004). Habermas' assessment of rationalisation would suggest that EBP may feed into the progressive 'colonisation' of the lifeworld. An obvious example from the case of HIV prevention would be the use of epidemiological evidence contributing to gay men defining themselves as 'risky subjects' and feeling compelled to always use condoms regardless of the specific circumstances of their sexual relationships (Gatter, 1999; Kippax et al., 1997). However, again, Habermas' more nuanced view of rationalisation would caution against seeing EBP as only having subjugating potential. The rationalisations enacted through EBP might contribute to challenging traditional distributions of resources or hierarchies of status (Bonell, 2002). For example, the evidence-based 'regaying' of AIDS in the 1990s described above led to governments acknowledging gay men's community organisation as legitimate stakeholders in policy-making, which would have

been unthinkable in the 1980s, likely contributing to gay men's emancipation and wellbeing (Berridge, 1996).

The rational adjudication of evidence claims

Some sociological analyses of EBP described earlier seek to destabilise the knowledge claims made within EBP, challenging what they regard as the positivist claims of objectivity which form the basis of EBP's authority (Robertson, 1998). Instead, evidence is regarded as socially constructed. However, Habermas' consideration of knowledge-constitutive interests suggests the potential for empirical/analytic knowledge to be shorn of its positivist assumptions (Habermas, 1972). Applying this argument to EBP, quantitative evidence could become less positivist by engaging with the world as it is socially constructed by citizens (Morgan, 1998). In the case of HIV prevention, measures of the risk of sexual transmission of HIV sometimes focused only on unprotected anal intercourse, failing to recognise that gay men may choose to manage risk through assessing their own and partners' HIV sero-status (Keogh, Beardsell, Davies, Hickson, & Weatherburn, 1998). Qualitative research was used to inform better quantitative measures taking account of such strategies (Weatherburn et al., 1999).

Some sociological analyses regard EBP as a manifestation of power, with adjudication of truth claims based on power rather than rationality (Lancaster, 2016). Habermas argues such claims are internally contradictory (Habermas, 1987a). Either these claims of the impossibility of rational adjudication of truth claims should not be taken as applying to the critical analysts' own truth claims (without justifying why) or the critical analysts are not engaging in rational argument (in which case their arguments can be disregarded). Habermas offers a social procedure for rational adjudication

rooted in the hypothetical standard of the ideal speech situation and involving the rational adjudication of truth claims via inclusive and open social processes. Applying the ideal speech situation to analyses of EBP should provide sociological analyses with a firmer basis for distinguishing between evidence which is judged authoritative and valid because it is judged authoritative in open discussions versus evidence that is influential despite not being subject to such assessments.

The ideal speech situation also has implications for how sociologists work with other disciplines. It suggests that, rather than viewing different research traditions as being situated within incommensurate paradigms (Standring, 2017), the ideal speech situation could instead be used as an idealised benchmark for talking across disciplinary boundaries. More firmly rejecting notions of incommensurability would support existing inter-disciplinary and multi-method research (Morgan, 1998). The example above of qualitative research on gay men's understandings of risk-management strategies being used to inform quantitative measures is a case in point (Keogh et al., 1998; Weatherburn et al., 1999).

Conclusion

Habermas' work offers the possibility of a more nuanced but no less critical approach for sociologists to engage with EBP. This approach would be alive to the potential for de-politicisation and citizens' marginalisation within EBP but would simultaneously enable the possibility of more positive, critical and constructive forms of rationalisation. This approach would also avoid problems of relativism and so provide a sounder basis for truth claims concerning sociological knowledge whether this be analysing or contributing to EBP.

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