
Normative Theory and Policy Evaluation

Stuart Nagel
MKM-PSO-DSI Center and University of Illinois

I. PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

An interesting question concerns the ethical obligations of people who do policy analysis research. Such research often involves ethical dilemmas that relate to:

1. Whether one's purposes should include prescription or evaluation, as well as prediction or explanation.
2. Whether or not to work to maximize the interests of a political party, special interest group, or only general societal interests.
3. Focusing on intended consequences versus all consequences.
4. Efficiency versus equity as policy goals.
5. Evaluation along versus evaluation plus diverse replication as an obligation.
6. Cost-incurring versus cost-saving in research.
7. Whether or not to share one's raw data.
8. Research validity versus questionable findings that are not sufficiently questioned.
9. Whether or not to put people at risk in policy evaluation.

Openness may be the key factor underlying the resolution of ethical dilemmas in policy evaluation. The situation is like the blue sky laws that regulate the securities markets. A stockbroker can legitimately sell the blue sky so long as he informs potential customers and others what they are

getting. Likewise, policy evaluators may be complying with basic ethical obligations when they make clear exactly what they are doing on matters such as in the above nine dilemmas.

Perhaps, however, to resolve these ethical dilemmas, more affirmative critique may be needed than just openness in reporting one's research. In the analogy to the blue sky laws, one might argue that a stockbroker should have an ethical obligation not to sell worthless stock, rather than merely an obligation to report that she or he is selling stock in a corporation whose liabilities exceed its assets and which has been taking a loss in recent years.

II. SOCIETAL VALUES

In discussing ethical policy analysis, one should discuss both individual and societal ethics. Individual ethics refer to standards of professional behavior, as previously mentioned. Societal ethics refer to the goals that society should be seeking and toward which public policy should be directed. On a high level of generality, one can say that society should be seeking to maximize societal benefits minus societal costs in making policy decisions. The concept of "societal" refers to the collective good in the sense of such ideas as:

1. The greatest happiness for the greatest number, as expounded by such utilitarians as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill and to a lesser extent by American pragmatists such as William James and John Dewey.
2. Bringing up the bottom with regard to those who are least well off, as expounded by John Rawls.
3. Doing things that make everyone better off or at least no one worse off, as expounded by Vilfredo Pareto.

Benefits refer to whatever the society and/or its leaders consider desirable. Costs refer to whatever is considered undesirable. Benefits and costs can refer to monetary or nonmonetary effects. Benefits and costs are interchangeable concepts depending on how they are worded. Thus, high employment is a benefit, and high unemployment is a cost, but they are the complements or inverses of each other. It makes more sense to subtract

costs from benefits in talking about overall goals than dividing costs by benefits. The subtraction criterion gives more of a net gain to one's original assets when one project is better on B-C, but another is better on B/C. Other overall goals are also defective, such as (1) merely maximizing benefits without considering costs, (2) merely minimizing costs without considering missed benefits, (3) maximizing benefits subject to a maximum cost level, (4) minimizing costs subject to a minimum benefit level, or (5) maximizing change in benefits divided by change in costs. The fifth alternative is only a means to maximizing benefits minus costs. The third and fourth alternatives are sometimes justified because benefits and costs are often measured on different dimensions. There are, however, meaningful ways of considering nonmonetary benefits and monetary costs simultaneously, rather than sequentially.

On a less high level of generality, one can say there are six subcriteria beneath the overall criterion of maximizing societal benefits minus costs. The first three are sometimes referred to as the three E's because they start with the letter E and are associated with the field of economics. They consist of effectiveness, efficiency, and equity. Effectiveness refers to the benefits achieved from alternative public policies. Efficiency refers to keeping the costs down in achieving the benefits, generally as measured by benefits divided by costs. Equity refers to providing a minimum level of benefits or a maximum level of costs across persons, groups, or places.

The other three subcriteria are sometimes referred to as the three P's because they start with the letter P and are associated with the field of political science. They consist of public participation, predictability, and procedural due process. Public participation refers to decision-making by the target group, the general public, relevant interest groups, or other types of decision-makers whose involvement appeals to our desire to use democratic procedures for achieving given goals. Predictability refers to decision-making by way of following objective criteria in making decisions so that similar decisions would be arrived at by others following the same criteria. Procedural due process or procedural fairness means those who have been unfairly treated are entitled to have (1) notice of what they have done wrong, (2) the right to present evidence, (3) the right to confront their accusers, (4) a decision-maker who is not also an accuser, and have (5) an opportunity for at least one appeal.

On a still lower level of generality, societal values manifest themselves in specific policy problems such as how to deal with unemployment-inflation, environmental protection, poverty, crime, health care, freedom of communication, world peace, and reforming government structures. The goals of societal values at that level may refer to specific aspects of the three E's or the three P's such as (1) increasing effectiveness by reducing unemployment and pollution, (2) increasing efficiency by reducing the tax costs of public aid and defense spending, (3) increasing the equitable distribution of crime prevention and health care, (4) increasing public participation in freedom of communication and the reforming of government structures, (5) increasing predictability and stability in crime prevention and the business cycle, and (6) increasing procedural due process in the administration of government programs and criminal prosecution.¹

NOTE:

1. For more on normative theory in policy evaluation, see Fischer, Frank and John Forester, eds. (1987). Confronting Values in Policy Analysis: The Politics of Criteria. Beverly Hills: Sage.; Cohen, Ronald, ed. (1986). Justice: Views from the Social Sciences. New York: Plenum Press.; Diesing, Paul (1982). Science and Ideology in the Policy Sciences. Chicago: Aldine.; and Nagel, Stuart (1984). Public Policy: Goals, Means, and Methods. New York: St. Martin's Press.