Policy researcher as an effective promoter of change based on qualitative evidence: mission impossible?

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Abstract: The paper contributes to the general debate about the nature of evidence that drives change in public policy and public administration, and the nature of the way in which this evidence is communicated (Oliver, Cairney 2019, Bromell 2022).

Empirically, the paper relies on the case of communicating sensitive research findings and providing data to drive change. This communication took place in the context of a roundtable organized by me, to which both respondents and actors of the issue were invited - public administration officials from the Office of Government and members of a working group from NGOs and academia. The sensitivity of the results lay in the fact that in the course of the research I identified (a) failures of the Department which mislead other actors and (b) deficits in communication between the Department and members of the Working Group that were of far-reaching significance. If these phenomena were not addressed I would have left the research terrain as a minefield where mutual trust would be more then questioned.

The ambition of the roundtable was twofold - first, it was to meet the ethical standards of social sciences research and avoid possible harm caused by research outcomes, second, it was to provoke a change based on the outcomes.

In my paper I ask the following research questions based on a detailed description of the said case: 1) What are the possibilities of qualitative evidence in provoking change in attitudes and procedures of public administration, its institutions and actors. This question will be anchored in scholarship organised around Howlett et al. (2014), Yanow (2017), Hustedt, and Veit (2017) and others. 2) What possibilities and limitations does the role of the researcher as a provider of such evidence entail? In this area, I will follow the works of Radin (2016), Li (2009), Jungblut et al. (2023) and others.

Methodologically, the paper will draw on extensive research, culminating in a roundtable presentation of the results. This final section will be based on field notes, observation, self-reflection and peer-auditing as during the roundtable there was a colleague of mine who also did an observation.

The added value of the paper lies in a sharing the unique first-hand experience and possibly discussing other conference participants' experiences and also enriching the ongoing debate on the role of evidence in policy-making and policy/public administration researcher in promoting them.

Literature:

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