

**Policy Practitioners' Engagement With Evidence-Based Policy: A
discursive analysis**

BY

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Abstract

The idea that there should be a link between systematically structured knowledge and the policies pursued by governments is not new. Its pre-20th century roots include attempts to establish a 'science of society' by social reformers of the 18th and 19th centuries, aspects of the emergence of the modern state system and, arguably, stretch back to classical philosophy and religious scholarship. Since the late 1990s, however, it has assumed special prominence as a global movement that encourages jurisdictions to explicitly incorporate the language of evidence in their understanding and definitions of good policy. While this agenda goes by a number of names, the most common is 'evidence-based policy' (EBP).

This evidentiary turn in policy has generated an extensive body of associated scholarship, involving a diverse range of theoretical positions, critiques, and debates. However, such literature has largely concentrated on macro- and meso-level system issues: structures for knowledge uptake and transfer, principles for using evidence, and underlying conceptual debates. Far less well-explored – and almost entirely absent in relation to Aotearoa New Zealand – are the experiences and perspectives of the practitioners working in policy development. This gap is especially glaring if policy work is treated not as a process of problem-solving, but rather as a humanistic and socially situated practice. Treating practitioners as active and interested participants in the creation of policy means treating them as the ultimate determinants of how evidence manifests in, and influences the outputs of, policy work. Similarly, through their work policy officials create and adopt formal and informal evidentiary definitions, accepted standards, and relevant weightings. It is through applying these social constructs that 'information' is transformed into 'evidence'. While such practices are constrained by the environments within which they work, it is ultimately the practitioner who locates, analyses, and incorporates evidence within policy work.

In this thesis, I use the concept of interpretive repertoires from discursive psychology as frameworks to explore how those involved in policy work engage with the idea of evidence-based policy. These repertoires are symbolic sets of meanings, characterisations, and relationships that people can use as resources for engaging with phenomena. Just as a musician's repertoire represents a set of pre-existing pieces that they can perform, an

interpretive repertoire is a pre-existing conceptual framework that a person can use to interpret (or establish the meaning of) ideas, actions, or settings and link them to each other in a coherent way. I approach this topic from an interpretive and critical perspective, taking policies as the results of a fundamentally social process shaped by the interaction of different values, interests, and cultural assumptions. The research has involved in-depth interviews with senior officials in the field of skills policy, including advisors and analysts, managers overseeing teams of such officials, and officials focused on developing and generating evidence for policy. I analysed interview texts to identify repertoires operating across three domains: repertoires of practice (what it means to work as a policy official), repertoires of context (what influences the environment in which officials work), and repertoires of evidence (the role of evidence in policy work).

I identified three main repertoires each of practice and context, and five main repertoires of evidence. I also found that individual repertoires clustered across domains to produce three interpretive stances toward evidence-based policy work. The Evaluative stance is characterised by valorising diversity, debate, and judgement; the Scientific stance values rigour, truth-seeking, and consistency; and the Pragmatic stance emphasises utility, compromise, and sustainability. Each stance integrates practitioners' constructions of the work they do, the context for that work, and the purpose of evidence into a coherent framework of meaning that supports them to engage with the abstract concept of evidence-based policy.

This work contributes primarily to two key literatures. Firstly, the thesis adds to a relatively small but growing body of empirical research into evidence use in policy work environments. It makes a particularly novel contribution here by situating evidence use as a type of social process, and focusing on deep exploration of practitioner 'voice' as a way of analysing this process. Secondly, the research makes a methodological contribution to the analysis of policy work by demonstrating the value of using concepts from discursive psychology as a way of exploring the position of practitioners within the policy environment. Through discussion of the repertoires and stances I identified in practitioners' interviews, I present a more nuanced picture of approaches towards evidence amongst policy practitioners in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Evidence-based Policy: The commonsense approach?

There is, of course, something intuitively appealing about the idea that evidence should play a role in professional work, and it is difficult to imagine an argument against engagement with evidence ... Given that professional work is generally oriented towards human well-being, there seems to be a *prima facie* case for basing professional action on the best evidence available.

(Biesta, 2010, p. 492)

The drive to make greater use of evidence within policy development and implementation is a major theme in modern approaches to government. Emerging as a distinct movement alongside the election of Tony Blair's 'New Labour' Government in 1997 (Burton, 2006; Nutley & Webb, 2000) by the mid to late 2000s the concept —or at least the rhetoric—of evidence-based policy (EBP) had become a truly global phenomenon. A variety of reasons have been put forward to account for the global popularity of this movement (Biesta, 2007; Powell, 2011; Solesbury, 2001), but 'evidence-based', 'evidence-informed', and 'what works' approaches are now a core part of most definitions of good modern government (Wiseman, 2010). This has in turn spurred growing interest in such associated areas as knowledge transfer and utilisation, establishing structures to 'broker' knowledge, using 'big data' to guide policy decisions, and the blurring of traditional distinctions between applied and basic research. These trends have grown in prominence as governments and bureaucracies seek to frame their actions and decisions as legitimised by evidence.

Aotearoa New Zealand's public sector has been an enthusiastic participant in the EBP movement (Head and di Francesco, 2019). As elsewhere, the idea that evidence should inform policy was certainly not without precedent and public entities that promoted or used research and technical processes (rather than political considerations) to take decisions pre-dated the emergence of EBP as a named movement. The New Zealand Council for Educational Research was established in 1934 (and received its own legislation in 1945) to conduct and disseminate research into a range of educational issues, while the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research was – though an independent organisation – established in

1958 at the urging of and with significant initial support from states entities including the Reserve Bank. More recently, the PHARMAC model for funding pharmaceuticals developed in the early 1990s is often pointed to internationally as a particularly powerful example of the benefits gained through evidence-based approaches to policy issues (National Health Committee, 2004). However, the early 2000s saw the discourse of EBP take a much stronger hold in the public sector. Leading members of the 1999-2008 Labour-led government (including Prime Minister Helen Clark and key theoretical thinker Minister Steve Maharey) were at least initially keen to proclaim themselves proponents of Blair's Third Way politics, and this included adopting the language of evidence over ideology (Connew, 2006).

A Note on Terminology

A variety of terms are used to refer to the overall movement that is the subject of this thesis: 'evidence-based policy', 'evidence-informed policy', 'science-based policy', 'knowledge for policy' and more. Indeed, as mentioned in chapter 2, debates about the appropriate language to use within the movement is an area where deeper debates about appropriate methodologies or the role of evidence are played out. While my own preference is for the phrase 'evidence-informed policy', I have used the phrase 'evidence-based policy' throughout this research as it is the dominant term used in Aotearoa New Zealand's public sector. Using this name ensured that I was framing the research to participants in a way that was familiar to them, allowing their responses to reflect their engagement with the concept as presented to them in their practice.

This thesis has also focused on 'working' policy people, rather than formal leaders such as agency Chief Executives or senior managers. Following the lead of Colebatch, Hoppe, and Noordegraaf (2010b) I generally refer to these as policy workers or policy practitioners (and occasionally officials) rather than by titles such as advisors or analysts. This represents my focus on exploring evidence-based policy as a characteristic of work and practice, as well as avoiding the assumption that alternate titles might bring about what the work of these practitioners might involve. For the same reasons I generally refer to their activities as 'policy work' or 'policy practice', rather than using a term such as 'policy advice' or 'policy analysis'.

Evidence-based policy as a key theme of policy work in Aotearoa New Zealand survived the passing of the Clark administration and remains a notable feature of language in the public sector. The current Policy Quality Framework identifies “Analysis [being] clear, logical and informed by evidence” as one of the four key characteristics of quality policy advice (The Policy Project, 2019), while reports from the Prime Minister’s Chief Science Advisor (Gluckman, 2011, 2013, 2017) have promoted more use of ‘science’ by the public sector. The Social Investment policy approach championed by the last National Government claimed to be concerned with “... improving the lives of New Zealanders by applying rigorous and evidence-based investment practices to social services” (New Zealand Treasury, 2017), and the 2010 Scott Report on *Improving the Quality and Value of Policy Advice* argued that government agencies needed to enhance their use of evidence – framing evidence-based policy as “... public policy informed by rigorously established objective evidence” (Review of Expenditure on Policy Advice, 2010, p. 107). However, Head and di Francesco (2019) characterise government approaches to evidence in the post-Clark era as typified by “an agenda for cost containment and demonstrable improvement in service outcomes” (p. 306). This can be seen as a shift to using evidence as a performance and disciplinary tool to govern the public sector, rather than more broadly promoting the application of evidence-based knowledge to address policy issues.

Recent years have also seen formal Government initiatives to enhance the contribution of evidence to policy and practice, such as the creation of science advisors within government agencies (Gluckman, 2017), the establishment of entities with knowledge broker functions such as the (admittedly short-lived) Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit and the New Zealand Productivity Commission, and the implementation of the Policy Project within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Perhaps in keeping with this, Lofgren and Cavagnoli’s (2015) exploration of policy workers’ connection to academia found that use of peer-reviewed research was more common than might be expected – though conversely Lofgren and Bickerton’s (2019) exploration of research use in housing policy found weaker connections and strong barriers to use. More publicly, the 2017 and 2020 elections were prominently contested by a political party whose branding was defined around a promise to take an evidence-based approach to developing policy (Simmons, 2016; Smith, 2016).

However, while the basic concept of evidence-based policy might fairly be seen as one of the ‘givens’ in modern policy work, it has also been subject to significant amount of critique (see for example Biesta, 2007; Marston & Watts, 2003; Newman, 2017; Pawson, 2006; Powell, 2011)). These criticisms do not reject the general principle that research and information should inform policy decisions and actions; it would, after all, be odd to claim that we should *not* do something when we have evidence it is likely to work, or that we should ignore what data shows us. Modern critics of evidence-based approaches are instead best thought of as criticising features of EBP as a movement rather than the use of evidence as an approach. For example, Wesselink, Colebatch, and Pearce (2014) argue that advocates of greater evidence use tend toward overly-simplistic treatments of both knowledge and policy, in which inherently contextual phenomena are treated as essentially universal and objective. Similarly, Biesta (2010) critiques the EBP movement for requiring certainty and failing to recognise that how policy interventions are implemented can be as important a factor in outcomes as what is actually implemented. Other critics note that appeals to evidence are often twinned with arguments that particular types of data or methodologies need to be given greater prominence when developing or evaluating policy, and that this can – somewhat ironically – lead to the marginalisation of other forms of evidence such as that generated through qualitative research or indigenous non-western knowledge (Greenhalgh, 2012; Pearce & Raman, 2014; Tauri, 2009).

Such critiques have been taken on-board by many EBP advocates. As a result, while proponents of particular methodologies (such as Cost–Benefit Analysis or evidence from Randomised Control Trials) still argue for their value, official guidance on relating to evidence use in policy now often refers to the need to include a range of evidence types and sources (see for example SUPERU, 2018). Moreover, the interplay between these critiques, responses, counter-critiques, and other factors (such as different disciplinary or professional contexts and cultures) mean that the EBP field is much more diverse than it may superficially appear.

1.2 Practitioner Perspectives: A missing voice in EBP?

The growth of the EBP movement has been accompanied by a large amount of work dedicated toward enhancing the presence and influence of evidence in policy processes.

Some of this has focused on relationship building and communication, emphasising the need for better knowledge exchange, proposing positions and entities such as science advisors or brokerage organisations, and otherwise focusing on interventions for injecting evidence into policy processes. The key feature of these measures is their embodiment of a ‘two communities’ perspective (Caplan, 1979) in which evidence exists in or is generated in a world which is separate to the world of policy. Policy practitioners and what could be called evidence practitioners (such as researchers) are seen as two distinct communities with different drivers, needs, and values. The focus of EBP scholarship in this vein is encouraging connections and relationships between those two worlds, in order that the knowledge generated in the evidence world can flow through to the practitioner world. Some of this work focuses on changing researcher practice (see for example Oliver & Cairney (2019)) but much of is focused on behaviours and structures in the policy world.

A second strand has a stronger ‘technical’ concentration, and focuses on encouraging the use of (often specific) types of evidence by policy makers themselves as a basis for formal decision-making. For example, Fitz-Gibbon (2000) argues for more robust use of quantitative data on which to base education policies, Scobie (2010) claims that policy development in Aotearoa New Zealand needs to involve more extensive use of economic modelling, and the former Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy promoted clinical trial methodologies as the ‘gold standard’ for policy evidence and evaluation given that “the less-rigorous studies that are typically used [in social policy] can produce erroneous conclusions and lead to practices that are ineffective or harmful.” (Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, 2015). The focus of this strand of the movement is strongly on policy workers – specifically the tools and information resources they use to analyse issues and develop policy-relevant outputs.

Both these strands of work are designed to change aspects of policy practitioners’ work. However, in my experience as such a practitioner – including in roles specifically intended to promote evidence use – there has been a significant gap in these discussions: what does it actually mean for practitioners to work in an evidence-based way? To me, it has often seemed that when advocates and agencies talk about evidence use they neglect to consider the point that what they are discussing is a mode of practice – a way that we want policy

workers to approach their jobs. To appreciate what evidence-based policy involves we must therefore explore the experiences and perspectives of those concerned.

Despite the amount of attention paid to evidence in the policy process, however, there is a surprising dearth of work specifically focused on the *experiences* of policy practitioners.⁴ As recent overviews (INASP, 2013; Oliver, Lorenc, & Innvær, 2014; Rickinson, de Bruin, Walsh, & Hall, 2017) have noted, literature on evidence and policy – despite the different focuses discussed above – converges in its focus on structural issues: the operation of systems for promoting evidence use, and the position of researchers and academics vis-à-vis policy development. Those who are expected to actually use evidence are largely absent from the literature, and when work does explore their perspectives it largely focuses on their views of the aforementioned structural issues: the extent to which evidence can be seen in the formulation of particular policies, macro- and meso-level processes for knowledge use and transfer, and the capabilities that practitioners or researchers require to encourage such transfer. In Aotearoa New Zealand, for example, the Prime Minister’s Chief Science Advisor’s official investigation of evidence use in policy development (Gluckman, 2011, 2013) focused on the extent to which policy practitioners thought ‘science’ was or was not used, their opinions of processes for ensuring it would be used, and highlighting examples where (in his view) initiatives had been properly based on relevant evidence. Rather than engaging with those involved in the day-to-day practice of policy work, these reports concentrated on leaders and structures in the public sector.

This is not to say that empirical work on the use of evidence by practitioners is absent from the literature. For example, a growing body of work (see Head, Ferguson, Cherney, and Boreham (2014), Talbot and Talbot (2014), or Oliver and de Vocht (2017)) explores mid-level officials’ practices and preferences around evidence use through surveys. In a directly observational vein, Stevens’ (2011) ethnographic account of his experiences during a placement in a United Kingdom policy agency depicts officials using evidence as a resource to support pre-existing policy narratives. However, these works still tend to focus on actions – reported or observed – related to evidence use, rather than how policy workers themselves perceive EBP to be a distinct way of working.

This gap in the literature may be due to several reasons. For example, the lack of interest in the position of policy makers' experience or action may stem from the environment within which EBP emerged. While the specific drivers behind the prominence of EBP differ from country to country (and policy area to policy area), it was from the beginning positioned as a way of bypassing traditional advice from civil servants – who were seen by the United Kingdom's 'New' Labour in particular as both overly-ideological and captured by bureaucratic inertia (Fairclough, 2000) – and “open[ing] up policy thinking to outsiders” (Solesbury, 2001, p. 6). Conversely – and more cynically – the language of evidence has been used as a rhetorical device to dismiss arguments against particular policy choices. Authors such as Head (2008), for example, highlight the connection between EBP's emphasis on perceived efficiency and accountability, and the agenda of New Public Management approaches to government. Given this, EBP can be seen as a disciplinary tool intended to rein in particular behaviours of officials, forcing them to act in a way that reflected the 'real' interests of the public rather than particular ideological agendas. In this context, it is unsurprising that those who advocated for EBP were not interested in the perspectives of those whose actions the movement intends to direct and control.

A more fundamental reason for this gap may, however, be the concept of policy practice that sits behind the evidence-based movement. Much discussion is dominated by what Mayer, van Daalen, and Bots (2004) referred to as a *rational* style of policy work that frames policy work as ideally a more or less value-free process for solving problems in a recognisably 'scientific' way. A greater focus on evidence use fits with this as a way of avoiding distortions created by personal bias, the influence of vested interests, and external political considerations. By establishing formal processes and standards for incorporating evidence into policy identification, development, and impact assessment, officials can reduce the influence of these other illegitimate factors and ultimately provide better advice and take better decisions (Russell, Greenhalgh, Byrne, & McDonnell, 2008). Importantly, however, this view also minimises the importance and agency of the practitioner within policy processes. In this style, the role of analysts and advisors is to objectively assess the facts around a given issue and provide advice based on those facts, untainted by the vested interests of particular groups (Colebatch, Hoppe, & Noordegraaf, 2010b; Majone, 1989;

Peters, 2004). Such a conception of policy work instead focuses on the decision-making of leaders in what Colebatch et al. (2010b) refer to as *authoritative instrumentalism*.

This view of policy implicitly places less importance on the value of ‘professional judgement’ — which implies a strong role for the experience and informed view of the practitioner — than it does on ‘technical capability’. Moreover — and in contrast to areas where evidence-based practice describes a process of decision-making and professional action — it frames evidence-based policy work not as a characteristic of policy *practice*, but rather a characteristic of policy *outputs*. Evaluating whether a given policy is evidence-based does not rest on the process through which it has been developed, but rather on how well the final outcome represents the weight of evidence on a given issue. Thus, the key concern of ‘policy about evidence-based policy’ is how organisations can ensure that more evidence is included within policy development, in order that the output will better represent what that evidence reflects. The official is essentially positioned as a relatively passive knowledge handler, and the skill of the policy analyst involves accessing the available research, interpreting it appropriately, and then presenting it in a form that shows ‘what works’ and therefore what course of action should be followed.

1.3 Argument, Interpretation, and Evidence: Foregrounding the practitioner

While prioritising systems and structures over practitioner experiences might be defensible within a rationalist approach to policy work, in practice the realm of policy is much more ‘messy’ than this fundamentally technocratic approach would have it. Evidence is almost always partial and often conflictual, relevance and quality are often dependent on the position of both reader and ‘problem’ at hand, and the specific context and process for implementation are often as influential on the outcomes of a policy as the underlying theory or principle (Biesta, 2007, 2010; Marston & Watts, 2003; Pawson, 2006; Powell, 2011). Moreover, many policy debates turn on questions of social and cultural values rather than the types of objective facts assumed by many EBP advocates (Parkhurst, 2017).

This points toward the policy world being represented more accurately by interpretive and critical lenses such as Colebatch et al.’s (2010b) *discursive constructionism*, which treat policy

development as less a technical process of solving clearly defined problems than a social process. A given policy decision will not be the result of a tidy system of logical analysis — even when it is externally positioned as such or even thought of in that way by practitioners themselves. Rather, policy outcomes are produced by an ongoing collage of social networks, shared and conflicting value frameworks, and sets of perspectives and assumptions. It is the interaction of these features that point officials towards reaching a given conclusion about a particular policy issue, and that conclusion (and associated actions) then form part of the background that informs the course of future work. Understandings of the policy world couched within frames such as this, or the debate-focused ‘argumentative turn’ (Fischer & Forester, 1993b), are based on a core assumption that policy work does not and cannot consist of objective and value-free processes. As Majone (1989) puts it, “The policy analyst is a producer of policy arguments, more similar to a lawyer—a specialist in legal arguments—than an engineer or a scientist. . . . To say anything of importance in public policy requires value judgments, which must be explained and justified” (p. 21).

This means that policy work cannot be thought of as a process for finding the ‘right’ solution to a problem, primarily because there is no such thing as a single objectively (or at least relatively objectively) correct solution. Rather, the policy process should be thought of as primarily a forum within which different perspectives make their case for specific ways of thinking about an issue, and attempt to convince a relevant authority of its value. These arguments exist in all aspects of policy, including how policies are framed and defined amongst participants in policy processes, how they are communicated more widely, the appropriateness of responses, and how their success is evaluated (Stone 1988, 2012).

Some might argue that the argumentative approach devalues the position of evidence. As Burton (2006) notes, a standard criticism of this perspective is based on the general critique of philosophical relativism “in which a commitment to avoid the privileging of any one viewpoint becomes a tolerance of anything” (p. 186). The parallel for those grappling with evidence is that if policy work is inherently a process of political argument, then why should we care about evidence at all? The common characterisation of the EBP movement as involving a doctrine of “what matters is what works” (Davies, Nutley, & Smith, 2000, p. 1) presupposes the notion that ‘what works’ will be clear – or at least is relatively amenable to

discovery. After all, if what works is not clear, then how can we be so emphatic about the importance of doing it? And as factors such as professional judgement are given greater recognition and weight, EBP's ability to offer a distinctive way of approaching policy development diminishes. The 'what works' mission statement effectively becomes 'we should do what *we think* is going to work' rather than the far stronger position that 'we should do what *will* work', which begs the question of who – all else being equal – proposes doing things that they don't think will work?

The answer to this problem, I believe, is that evidence can still form a core part of policy work, but that we need to change our view of what we mean by that term. Majone (1989) draws a distinction between on the one hand raw data or information (with information being data processed into a form usable for analysis), and evidence on the other, which is "information selected from the available stock and introduced at a particular point in the argument in order to persuade a particular audience of the truth or falsity of a statement" (p. 10). Information is a key requirement for most arguments – other than those involving pure principle – to occur. However, it is the policy process that transforms a piece of information into a piece of evidence by giving it a particular meaning, linking it to other pieces of information, and associating it with a specific position in policy debates. When we talk about the *use of evidence* in this sense, we are actually talking about engaging in a process of *evidence-making*: constructing particular arrangements of information that can be used to support a particular policy argument – including deciding not to characterise certain pieces of information as evidence. In other words, the critical focus for understanding the position and nature of evidence use in policy is not whether or not a given decision is based on particular research or data, but rather how have the policy practitioners involved in its development used the concept of evidence to argue for (or against) implementing a particular outcome or taking a particular position. In this sense, evidence-based policy is not something that *is* or *is not* done, but rather a way of thinking about and positioning policy practice in relationship to specific contexts and concepts.

However, a corollary of this is that properly understanding policy – including how evidence is mobilised within policy – requires looking at the way in which policymakers participate in these argumentative processes. This includes how practitioners select and discard different

forms of information, whom they regard as trustworthy and untrustworthy sources (and why), and how practitioners construct 'evidence' itself. If our interest lies in encouraging 'better' use of information and research within the policy process, then it is critical that what occurs at this micro-level is understood. The relative absence of policy worker views and perspectives from the current literature is therefore an important gap in scholarship

1.4 Research Aim and Question

The starting aim of this thesis is to begin remedying the identified gap in the existing literature by giving 'voice' to practitioner-centred perspectives on and experiences of evidence use. If policy work is a fundamentally social, rather than technical, process, and evidence use is not about the use of particular techniques or realising particular findings but rather a broader method of approaching policy practice, then we need to understand what evidence-based policy means to practitioners. In other words, we need to ask when policy workers are asked or told to undertake their work in an 'evidence-based way' what do *they* understand this to mean? This is because it is the practitioner — rather than organisational systems and structures — who is ultimately the key determinant of how evidence manifests within policy creation and implementation. An exploration of this should, therefore, emphasise examining those involved in the daily practice of policy rather than 'leaders' or structures; what Noordegraaf (2010) terms a 'second order' approach that focuses on examining practitioners as people operating within organisational formations that shape and constrain behaviours and options for how they can approach their practice.

Importantly, this approach to understanding policy does not position policy practitioners as independent and autonomous agents free to act as they please. Some constraints on their actions are obvious and visible: officials are subject to the directives of their managers, Ministers, and formal institutional processes. More subtly, however, the interpretive approach described in this thesis also posits that the way practitioners work is also shaped by particular social relationships and frames. These guide perceptions of the acceptability of certain actions, the value of particular outcomes, and even the ultimate aim or particular character of a given policy (Yanow, 2000). In this thesis I will draw on concepts from discursive psychology, specifically interpretive repertoires (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), to

explore what lies ‘underneath’ the way that policy practitioners consider evidence and evidence-based policy. The research question to be answered through this thesis is therefore:

What repertoires do policy practitioners use to understand and engage with the concept of evidence-based policy?

1.5 Structuring The Thesis: Chapter Overview

The thesis is split into two parts. In Part One I present the conceptual and theoretical background in which my thesis is grounded; I discuss what evidence-based policy is, the interpretive conception of policy as a socially constructed area of practice, and the design and methodological approach of my research. **Chapter 2** begins this by discussing EBP as a distinct concept. The first part of the Chapter places the movement in historical context; the core idea of EBP – that robust information can be used to improve how entities are governed – is one with a long pedigree, and I provide a brief description of how links between the notion of information use and the practice of rulership, statecraft, and policy have been conceived of over time. This chronology leads into a discussion of the appearance in the 1990s of a broad ‘evidentiary’ turn across a number of fields, beginning with the concept of evidence-based medicine (Evidence-Based Medicine Working Group, 1992) which spread to other health disciplines and from there to areas such as teaching, psychology, and social work (Hargreaves, 1996, 1997; Mullen, Shlonsky, Bledsoe, & Bellamy, 2005; Satterfield et al., 2009). The second part of this chapter discusses the concept of evidence-based policy as a distinct modern phenomenon: its initial emergence in the United Kingdom with Tony Blair’s ‘New Labour’ Government’s *Modernizing Government* White Paper and its subsequent *Professional Policy Making* and *Adding it Up* papers (Nutley & Webb, 2000), how EBP as a movement differs from simply using evidence in policy, and key critiques.

Chapter 3 presents the conceptual notion of policy practice that underpins this thesis. It begins by discussing in more detail the position that different constructions of policy and the role of policy practitioners suggest different ways of considering both the nature of evidence and the nature of engagement with it. Specifically, it contrasts a positivist view in which the role of policy analysts and advisors is to objectively assess the facts around a given issue and provide advice based on those facts, untainted by the vested interests of particular groups, with the interpretive perspective of policy as fundamentally a social phenomenon. Rather

than treating the development of a given policy as the end-product of a relatively linear and compartmentalised activity, I follow the work of Colebatch et al. (2010b) and Colebatch, Hoppe, and Noordegraaf (2010a) and argue that policies are better thought of as the consequence of ongoing relationships and networks; a policy is less a thing in its own right than a way in which a social structure manifests in the world. In this context, understanding the position of evidence within policy requires examining how the practice of policy workers involves and is produced by the structures in which they participate.

A key concern of this chapter is discussing the interplay between power and evidence. The interpretive perspective sees policy – given its nature as a social construction – as something that inherently involves power relationships. This is problematic for EBP given that it involves positioning evidence as antithetical to power: its advocates, after all, focus on the question of ‘what works’ in order to transcend other influences on the policy process – and particularly the power that can be wielded by particular interest groups (Kay, 2011). Power in this sense is treated as an obstacle to using information effectively, and something that the implementation of EBP needs to overcome. However, this relies on what Lukes (2005) calls a ‘one-dimensional’ concept of power, in which the term is effectively conflated with forcing another to act in one’s own interest or winning a particular clash of interests. More sophisticated understandings of power see it as a multifaceted concept that includes not just control over action, but influence over when decisions are and are not perceived as necessary, and the construction of our basic ‘common-sense’ assumptions about how the world should work (Egan & Chorbajian, 2005). In this sense, power relationships suffuse our approach to understanding and acting in the world and the social structures that produce policies embody those relationships. Chapter 3 will discuss some of the implications of this notion for the concept of evidence-based policy, and I return to this point in the final section of the thesis.

Chapter 4 concerns the methodology used in this research. It begins by discussing the broad features of discursive methodologies and the core strengths they bring to the study of policy: their focus on understanding structures and processes not as pre-existing things in their own right, but as the results of social relationships. The ‘argumentative turn’ in policy studies is strongly linked with discursive approaches, and various forms of discourse analysis have

been used to explore a wide range of policy areas from this perspective on policy (see for example Evans-Agnew, Johnson, Liu, & Boutain, 2016; Fairclough, 2013; Fischer 2003; Fischer & Gottweis, 2012; Hyatt, 2013; Olssen, Codd, & O'Neill, 2004). Conceiving of the policy process as a social system of argumentation rather than a technical problem-solving activity links with the notion that there is no fundamental 'truth' to be uncovered, but that rather policy decisions are ultimately the results of competing versions or understanding of truths.

I then present the form of discourse analysis that forms the basis for this research: critical discursive psychology. Key to this approach is the concept of 'Interpretive Repertoires' as a tool for understanding the ways in which actors construct and engage with concepts, and how these drive action. Initially formulated by Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) but fully developed as an approach in the work of Potter and Wetherell (1987; Wetherell & Potter 1988, 1992), these are "recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 149). The chapter will focus on the value of this concept as one that focuses on specific contexts for practice and allows for greater practitioner agency than do the 'tectonic' structures of formal Discourses. This makes the Discursive Psychology approach particularly suitable for this thesis given its focus on the experiences of policy practitioners – rather than the structures that surround them.

Chapter 5 continues this focus on research design describing the research conducted for this thesis. The chapter begins with a discussion of why skills policy was chosen as an organising element for this research, noting the prominence of skills policy in recent years and its nature as an interdisciplinary policy field. As part of this I outline specific features of Aotearoa New Zealand's skills policy community. The chapter then turns to outlining the research method – semi-structured interviews with senior officials in the Aotearoa New Zealand skills policy community – and discusses the approach taken to collecting and analysing the data. In this way, Chapter 5 acts as a bridge between the conceptual and theoretical focus of chapters 2 to 4, and the findings outlined in Part Two of the thesis.

Part Two of the thesis presents the findings from my research, beginning with **chapters 6, 7, and 8**. Each of these chapters addresses an aspect of evidence-based policy as a form of

work, and in each case I draw out and compare the repertoires present in participants' interviews. Chapter 6 discusses *Repertoires of Practice*: those that relate to the position and role of policy practitioners. These represent the participants' constructions of what it is they do, and the limits of and constraints on this practice that they establish as valid. Chapter 7 outlines *Repertoires of context*: those that relate to the environment within which policy occurs. Where Chapter 6 focused on participants' 'internal' nature of policy practice, this chapter focuses on the external factors that are seen to affect policy work – particularly in the context of evidence use. Finally, Chapter 8 discusses *Repertoires of Evidence*: those that relate to what evidence as a concept means in a policy context. This includes not only what is deemed to be valid (and in what settings), but also discussions of the relationship between the participants and evidence as a concept; is evidence something external to be picked up and used by a policy practitioner, or is it something more integrated into policy work.

Chapter 9 explores the relationships these sets of repertoires in the context of my research question: *What repertoires do policy practitioners use to understand and engage with the concept of evidence-based policy?* It does so by describing three clusters of repertoires present within the practitioner interviews, which I have termed interpretive stances. Each of these constitutes a particular framework of meaning that brings together repertoires of policy practice, policy context, and policy evidence, and allows a practitioner to make sense of the concept of EBP. The stances I have identified do not dominate how practitioners approach evidence; each was present at different times in each interview. Instead, they are tools which policy workers can use to reconcile aspects of their own practice with EBP's emphasis on and rhetoric around using evidence within policy processes, with aspects of their own practice.

Finally, the thesis concludes in **Chapter 10**, in which I reflect on the findings and analysis outlined in Chapters 6 through 9 and their implications for considering the issue of evidence use from an interpretive perspective on policy practice. I outline contributions made by this thesis in four main areas: its focus on practitioners, the value of interpretive repertoires, questions of power, and results from the findings. I also note limitations in this work, using them as a basis for discussing areas for extension and further exploration.

PART ONE

In this section I cover the setting and design aspects of this thesis; the role of these chapters is to contextualise the research within three fields and describe the approach I have taken to exploring the research question.

In Chapter 2 I discuss evidence-based policy as a movement, including its antecedents, emergence, and key debates. This frames the area I am exploring in this thesis. In Chapter 3 I discuss the theoretical approach to policy that has underpinned this work. Here I situate the work within a critical (and, more specifically, an argumentation-focused) approach to understanding policies and policy work that frames this as a form of social action – a ‘world’ of people with customs and practices that shape their behaviour.

In Chapter 4 I discuss the theoretical and methodological approach to research that has guided my work and my research design. I describe a discursive approach which use the concept of Interpretive Repertoires from critical discursive psychology to engage with texts generated by people. Finally, in Chapter 5 I present the design of my research, including the data collection method and my approach to analysing the texts for interpretive repertoires. As part of this I also briefly discuss the policy area from which participants in this interview were drawn – that of skills policy.

2 The Evidence-Based Policy Movement: Origins, spread, and critiques

Since the turn of the millennium, the position of evidence has become a key concern of how many jurisdictions construct their ideas of good policy. Whether couched as being ‘evidence-based’ or ‘evidence-informed’, taking a ‘what works’ approach, making better use of ‘science’ in policy, or a number of other terms, basing decisions on evidence is now commonly argued or assumed to be a key characteristic of high-quality government and policy work (see for example Gluckman, 2013; SUPERU, 2018; What Works Network, 2014; Wiseman, 2010). Recent years have seen some argue that this is changing. Most notably, in the United States and United Kingdom there have been claims that governments have entered a populist ‘post-truth’ era given the successful campaigns – and ongoing outcomes – of the 2016 US presidential election and referendum on membership of the European Union (Forstenzer, 2018). In the latter case, the claim of Conservative Minister Michael Gove that “I think people in this country have had enough of experts...” has been widely held up as emblematic of the declining influence of evidence within policy decisions,¹ representing what one commentator referred to as “a dismal debate [in which] the central defining characteristic was its rejection of basic facts, cold analysis, objective assessments or expert projections” (Flinders, 2016).

And yet, the principle that using evidence is a key element of good policy decisions – and, perhaps more importantly, the notion that most current policy decisions are *not* based on evidence – continues to enjoy significant prominence. Public debates over policy continue to involve claims that a given position should be adopted because it is supported by ‘the evidence’, in contrast to value-based arguments over what it is ethical or right to do (Parkhurst, 2017).² Even when the credibility or appropriateness of the evidence concerned is questionable, the point that basing a policy argument on an appeal to evidence is seen as an effective rhetorical tactic speaks to the ongoing power of the EBP position. Moreover, as Boaz, Davies, Fraser, and Nutley (2019) point out, claims that government actions are now

¹ It is worth noting that Minister Gove and others have argued that this soundbite does not fairly reflect the nuanced point he was making (see Gove (2018) and Nelson (2017)).

² Of course, arguments that foreground their evidence claims do involve at least one implicit value claim of their own: that the right decision is the one supported by their evidence.

dominated by populist concerns tend to rest on the example of a few major issues that capture the news agenda. Away from the limelight, they argue, a myriad of policy decisions are made every day across multiple jurisdictions and it is – at worst – too early to claim that the evidentiary turn of the past two decades is being replaced by a contrasting populist shift.

In this Chapter I discuss evidence-based policy as a movement. I begin by placing the EBP agenda in historical context, briefly tracing earlier instances of connecting knowledge usage and governance as well as the ‘evidentiary turn’ of the late twentieth century. I then discuss its emergence as a ‘named’ phenomenon around the turn of the millennium, including some notable associated debates and critiques.

2.1 Knowledge, Governance, and The State: A long tradition

The notion that actions of political entities can be improved through better use of structured knowledge – whether such knowledge is positioned as evidence, information, or science – is often presented as a relatively recent development. However, while the specific term ‘evidence-based policy’ may be of relatively recent invention and commonly framed as representing a new wave in policy work, the association between formalised knowledge and development of policy goes back far further.

2.1.1 Pre- and Early-modern Traditions: The soil and the roots

The question of what makes for good rulership has been a major preoccupation of both Western and Eastern philosophy from the classical period onwards. Some have argued that the roots of ‘policy analysis’ as a field lie in these debates and pronouncements as to how societies should be ordered (see Sharkansky, 1995; Wagner, Weiss, Wittrock, & Wollmann, 1991). While philosophers such as Plato or St Augustine might have been more concerned with defining abstract principles of rulership than the actual machinery and process of ruling, by the time of the renaissance Machiavelli was drawing practical lessons from historical cases to provide advice on how to govern in an effective manner. Similarly, the administration of communities was a significant concern of early Islamic scholarship and what made for effective statecraft and rulership was a key element of Confucian thought. As Shils (cited in Wittrock, Wagner, & Wollmann, 1991) states,

The great figures of classical philosophy considered the fundamental problems of policy from the point of view of men who had to exercise authority and to make practical decisions. Even where they themselves lived in remoteness from practical affairs, the clarification of standards for the judgement of public policy was always close to the centre of their attention. (p. 1432)

While the nature of the advice these scholars provided may seem problematic or questionable from the democratic, secular perspective of twenty-first century Aotearoa New Zealand, their work focused on interpreting and applying lessons from history, natural philosophy, or religious principles to improve the judgement of rulers and thus the quality of political activities. To this extent, they can be seen as the forerunners of modern advocates for using evidence – in the sense of disciplined expert knowledge rather than simply the personal judgement of those in power – to improve the quality of actions taken by the ruling body. Their goal was to identify the rules and principles that would allow the ruler to be effective and maintain a well-functioning, prosperous community, kingdom, or empire.

However, the advice provided by these early precursors is distinct from modern approaches due not only to the quite different frames for what constituted ‘valid’ knowledge, but also differences in the socio-political structure it was intended to influence. Specifically, it was formulated in a time before the emergence of the modern State, when authority was founded on what in Weberian terms were ‘charismatic’ or ‘traditional’ bases. The ability of rulers to effectively exercise power (understood by Weber as a monopoly on coercive force) relied on their personal qualities, or the extent to which they could link their claims of legitimacy to a source such as a particular lineage, personal characteristics, or reference to cultural or religious mores (Nelson, 2006). Whether power was derived specifically from the qualities of the individual or bestowed through an external authority (such as via religious legitimation), political power was seen as something vested in the persona of the ruler and exercised over subjects. While rulers were expected in a broad sense to take actions that would benefit the people living within their realm – ‘tyrants’ were to be denounced on both moral (Plato, 2007) and practical (Machiavelli, 2003) grounds – the authority of these pre-modern ‘states’ and the authority of their rulers were essentially indivisible; “L’etat c’est moi” in Louis XIV’s famous quote. Consequently, the scholars referred to earlier were writing for individuals and their work was predominantly in the nature of ‘how to’ guides

and advice for these figures on how they should behave, the principles that should guide their decisions, and the ways in which they could maintain power. Thinkers of this era were not so much applying knowledge to solve problems of *policy*, but rather drawing lessons to solve problems of *rulership*.

The emergence of the modern, post-Westphalian State system challenged this model. Rather than existing as a personal extension of the ruler (albeit within potential constraints from tradition, religion, competing sources of power, or the like), the State apparatus became seen as a separate entity with functions developed specifically to ensure the good of the population. This was accompanied by a change in the vision from a ruler that inherently *embodied* the people within their person to one whose position was *legitimised* by the people, with the purpose of 'government' similarly shifting from simply protecting and stabilising the current social order to preserving and increasing the wellbeing of its citizens. A common analogy in this period was of the State as a household, with the role of ruler and government being equivalent to that of the head of the family (Ryan, 2009). Although a government might have a monopoly on particular powers and be accorded special status within the 'national household', these capabilities – including the power to impose discipline and punish those who had done wrong – were to be exercised for the good of all. This was accompanied by the emergence of what Foucault terms 'biopower': a conceptual change in the State's focus from exercising force in the interests of a ruler or ruling group, to instead regulating behaviours and actions for a common purpose (Foucault, 1991). The State's legitimacy was thus no longer based around its ability to enforce that claim through direct coercion, but rather established through its ability to claim to be acting in the best interests of the population. Similarly, the aim of the State began to turn from securing the position of the ruler and their associated regime, to controlling the minds, bodies, and actions of individuals and populations (Ryan, 2009).

This shift, in turn, required an expansion in the knowledge requirements of governments. If the State was the embodiment of the people, and its *raison d'être* was to make their lives as good as possible, then the State needed to know about the people and things it governed. In order to exercise power in the interests of the population, it needed to understand its own position, the position of the elements that constituted it, and what would improve the

position of people within the State. Thus, the formation of the modern State was intrinsically bound up with 'the process of knowing'. Ash (2010) demonstrates this by highlighting the parallel and mutually reinforcing relationship between the evolution of the early modern state and the development of 'the expert' as a distinct source of advice on government behaviours and activities.

One of the first prominent examples of this, and the point at which a relationship between knowledge and rulership starts to more closely resemble that of the modern era, was the emergence of the Cameralist movement over the 16th and 17th centuries. Developing in the German-speaking principalities of the former Holy Roman Empire, this movement was distinctive in its drive to apply explicitly 'scientific' principles to issues such as prudent fiscal management, agriculture, and the deployment of technology – what came to be termed *Polizeiwissenschaft*, literally 'policy' or 'police' sciences (Seppel, 2017). These scholars viewed themselves as advocates of both the 'science' and 'practice' of governing, in which capacity they developed training programmes in what were termed cameral sciences intended to replace the legal orientation of most officials' education programme at the time (Garner, 2017; Tribe, 1988).

These training programmes point to a distinctive element of Cameralism: it represented a shift not only in the sources of knowledge that it advocated, but also in the direction of its advice. Rather than advising rulers how best to lead their territories, Cameralists focused on the administration of that territory and directed their advice primarily towards the officials that supported these regimes. Cameralism thus represented a transition in focus from providing personal advice to the sovereign (or equivalent) to providing advice to the people involved in the day-to-day running of the State. In comparison to other schools of thought Cameralists saw themselves not only as developing theories of administration, but also as providing practical advice to the proto-bureaucracies that were increasingly taking responsibility for the process of governing (Wakefield, 2009).

2.1.2 Modern Antecedents: The first flowerings

As the modern State developed in sophistication, so too did its engagement with knowledge. This became particularly apparent in the nineteenth century United Kingdom, where faith in the power of science to resolve social ills underpinned significant change in

areas such as health, education, criminal justice, and social policy (alongside darker developments such as the emergence of eugenics and racial science). Converging intellectual and social trends, including the emergence of political liberalism, Comtean epistemological positivism, utilitarian philosophy, and disciplines such as political economy, convinced reformers of the Victorian era that society – like the rest of the world – operated according to certain natural laws that were amenable to discovery through disciplined investigation. Thus, while the impetus for social reform sprang from moral concerns, the key to improving wellbeing was not to be found in philosophical values and debate but rather through creating a ‘science of society’ that would provide an objective basis for political and administrative action (Collini, 1980).

The establishment of the 1832-1834 *Royal Commission into the Operation of the Poor Laws* is often pointed to as an emblematic point in this period, being generally accepted as the first time that formalised research, based on a wide range of evidence sources, was explicitly used to understand a particular issue and identify possible policy solutions (Nutley & Webb, 2000). Similarly, new disciplines such as epidemiology emerged as part of the effort to uncover the scientific laws that governed society, leading to the passing of the first *Public Health Act* in 1875 and the emergence of specialty fields and bodies of knowledge such as urban planning that involved applying scientific principles to how people lived. Interestingly, at least some of the arguments of the time presage modern arguments around the position of expert knowledge. For example, Brown (2009) notes that advocates for the reform of medical charities characterised the existing models as based on self-interested political and social concerns, and contrasted that with the benefits professional scientific expertise could bring.

Presenting the existing system of lay governance as one of patronage and nepotism, a relic of ‘Old Corruption’, they emphasised the epistemological (as opposed to charitable) function of such institutions, demanding greater authority for themselves and claiming cultural capital based less upon the social performance of genteel benevolence than upon the possession and application of rational, expert knowledge. (Brown, 2009, p. 1357)

While Britain might have provided the most prominent examples of this model examples can be found worldwide. Intellectual exchange within Europe meant that many continental reformers were following the same paths as in the United Kingdom, while major political upheavals in many states – including the overthrow of existing regimes and the creation of newly unified states through nationalist movements – made the question of how these new governments should rule a major concern. Reform organisations and professional associations such as Germany's *Verein für socialpolitik* and the Netherlands' *vereeniging voor de statistiek* were established not simply to explore new 'sciences' but to ensure that they were applied to resolve social questions (Augello & Guidi, 2001; Wittrock et al., 1991). In France, the *Académie des sciences morales et politiques* was established in 1832 explicitly to support the post-Napoleonic state through research on practical issues of relevance to government administration and statecraft, such as addressing poverty, public health, and criminal behaviour (Heilbron, 2004). Meanwhile, in America the Progressive movement of late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was characterised by the same concern with scientifically-based societal transformation as the Victorian reformers – albeit taking an approach grounded more in the pragmatic philosophy of figures such as Peirce, James, and Dewey (Leonard, 2015; Recchiuti, 2007). This was accompanied by major urban research universities such as Columbia and the University of Chicago began developing a stronger focus with social problems such as poverty, while the University of Madison began articulating what would later be known as the 'Wisconsin idea' that universities had an obligation to use their expertise and generate research specifically for the benefit of the public (Harkavy, 2000; Witte, 2000).

Although this optimistic faith in the power of science to solve social ills was challenged in the early twentieth century by two world wars, the great depression, and similar major disruptions, the core belief that government administration could benefit from scientific knowledge remained. The structured and purposeful use of information to inform the work of government gained renewed prominence in the United States with the articulation of the post-World War Two Policy Sciences approach articulated by Lasswell, Lerner, and others (deLeon & Vogenbeck, 2007; Fischer, 2003). Significant war-time investment in scientific knowledge and its application to challenges such as logistics, intelligence analysis, industrial productivity, and military technology, had shown clear benefits for government, and the

development of Policy Science represented an extension of this principle to the issues facing states in peacetime (deLeon, 1991). This in turn led to large-scale projects of the 50s and 60s such as Johnson's 'War on Poverty' in which research insights were used to implement major policy changes, and the emergence of think tanks such as the RAND Corporation which sat at the intersection of knowledge generation, distribution, and utilisation and whose existence was built around providing scientific advice to government agencies (deLeon, 1991; Head, 2010). This in turn is often presented as a profound transformation of thinking about how governments should make policy, from what was previously a relatively amorphous activity to a – theoretically – more structured process of problem-solving based on the rigorous application of (predominantly quantitative) analytical techniques to clearly defined issues (Brewer & deLeon, 1983).

Accompanying this, the second half of the twentieth century saw a growing interest in the broader area of 'knowledge utilisation'. Ironically, in the United States one element of this was the perceived failure of many of the 'great society' programmes noted above (Alkin & King, 2016). These initiatives had supposedly been based on clear scientific knowledge, and yet they had not resulted in the types of deep social change they had been designed to create; this in turn led to a renewed interest in evaluation – to understand why programmes failed – and how knowledge flowed around and between sectors (Blake & Ottoson, 2009). This led to key works by Carol Weiss, Robert Rich, and Nathan Caplan exploring the generation, diffusion, and use of information throughout society.

2.1.3 The Late Twentieth Century and The Evidentiary Turn: In full bloom

Modern EBP emerged in the context of a broader 'evidentiary turn' that developed in many professional disciplines toward the end of the 20th Century. This originated in the health sector, with the emergence of Evidence-based medicine (EBM). This term had first been coined in the 1980s (Rosenberg & Donald, 1995), and similar themes were present in Archie Cochrane's work in 1970s promoting the use and results of clinical trials as the basis for medical decision-making. However, it gained true prominence following a 1992 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* describing a new approach to managing a medical residency programme at Canada's McMaster University.

While this foundational article related to teaching medical residents,³ its focus was not primarily educational. Rather, this and later publications were actually articulating a different philosophy of medical practice, one that “de-emphasized intuition, unsystematic clinical experience, and pathophysiologic rationale as sufficient grounds for clinical decision making and stressed the examination of evidence from clinical research” (Evidence-Based Medicine Working Group, 1992, p. 2420). Specifically, the approach advocated in this model involved five steps (adapted from Sackett (1997)

1. Translating clinical information needs into questions;
2. Identifying the best evidence to answer those questions;
3. Critically appraising that evidence for both its *validity* (closeness to the truth) and *usefulness* (clinical applicability);
4. Integrating the critical appraisal with clinical expertise and applying the results as an intervention; and
5. Self-evaluation of performance.⁴

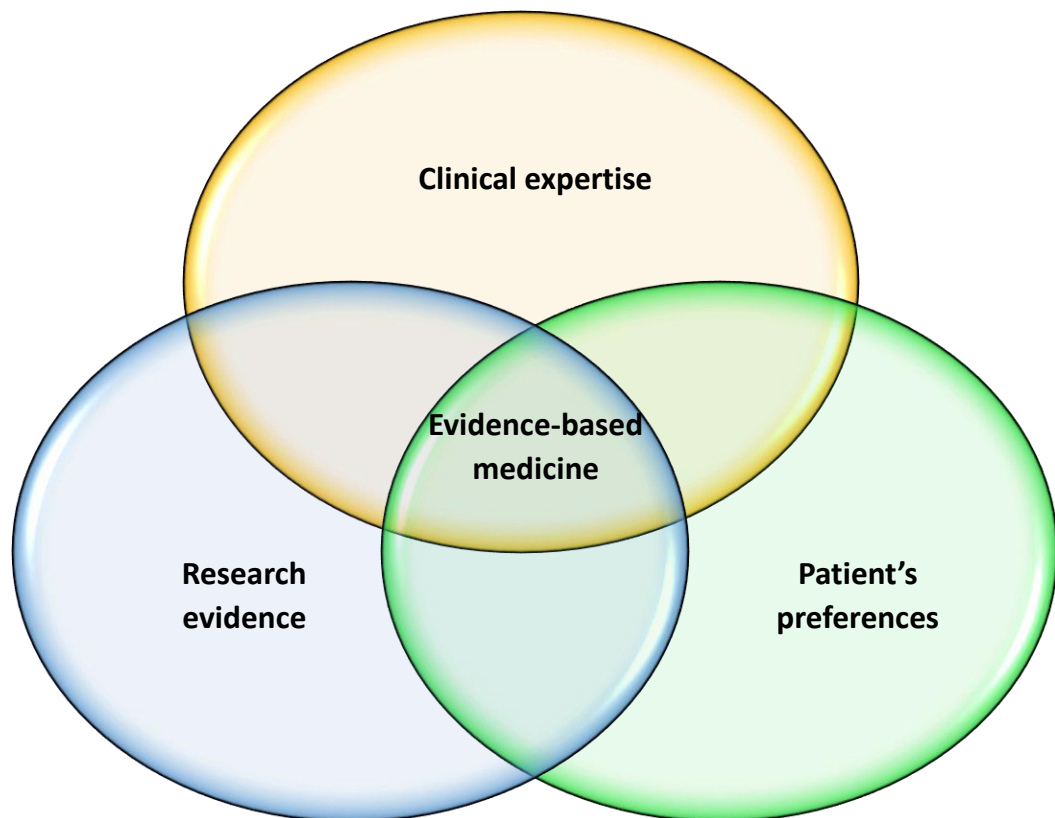
Importantly, and despite some caricatures of EBM as advocating ‘cookbook medicine’, this was not an attempt to remove professional judgement or eliminate the circumstances and desires of patients from the clinical process. Instead, the initial formulation of EBM was framed as “... integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research ... [including] the more thoughtful identification and compassionate use of individual patients' predicaments, rights, and preferences in making clinical decisions about their care” (Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes, & Richardson, 1996, p. 71).⁵ Figure 1 overleaf shows a common representation of this as a Venn diagram representing the contributions made by the clinician, the patient, and research evidence. Evidence-based medicine does not sit solely within the research sphere, but rather occurs when all three areas intersect.

³ The original article on EBM specifically related to teaching physicians, but the concept quickly broadened to include other areas of medical practice.

⁴ Importantly, this involved not simply identifying the effects of the clinical intervention but reflecting on one’s practice in that case to identify areas where improvement might be possible – including in cases where the intervention itself had proved successful.

⁵ Indeed, according to Gilgun (2005) EBM allied itself with advocates for patient-centred models of healthcare.

Figure 1: Positioning evidence-based medicine



from Satterfield et al. (2009)

This approach quickly became influential in the medical profession, and subsequently in other health disciplines such as nursing (Satterfield et al., 2009). From there, the broader notion of evidence-based practice rapidly spread to other disciplines and professions across human and social services. Social Work was a particularly enthusiastic early adopter of this approach, with models based strongly on that of EBM – including specific use of the five steps model – largely replacing the earlier ‘Empirical Clinical Practice’ model (Okpych & Yu, 2014). In other fields the specific practice formula advocated through EBM was often taken as less important than the core concept it embodied: that greater emphasis should be placed on evidence when designing systems or in professional practice. In education, for example, the strongest early advocate of ‘evidence-based teaching’ paid little attention to classroom practice but instead concentrated on arguing for reforms of education research to focus on what would be relevant to the daily work of teachers (Hargreaves, 1996, 1997).

2.2 Evidence-based Policy: Definitions and Emergence

The job of government is to meet the needs and aspirations of the people. That depends on deciding on the right policies and then delivering them effectively.

Getting policies right depends on accurate data and analysis.

(Tony Blair in Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000, p. 3)

Despite its popularity as a concept, EBP is a contested (and arguably inherently contestable) phenomenon; simply framing it as ‘we should do what evidence shows is the best course of action’ belies the diversity of thought and contested ideas that exist behind those words. Not only does the literature on EBP involve debates on what it involves on a practical level and priorities for action, but it also includes arguments over the precise meaning of the term and even if it is possible (Biesta, 2007, 2010; Boaz et al., 2019; Lewis, 2003; Parkhurst, 2017; Powell, 2011; Standring, 2017). Indeed, for critics such as Fairclough (2000) or Wesselink et al. (2014), EBP simply represents a buzzword or rhetorical tactic designed to suppress opposition to and claim superiority for a particular policy prescription. From this critical perspective evidence-based policy can be seen as what Pollitt and Hupe (2011) term a ‘magic concept’; something that becomes fashionable in policy settings because of its positive connotations, the breadth of potential meanings, and its potential for obscuring underlying conflicts. In other words, EBP has become popular precisely because it lacks a clear, fixed meaning. This allows actors within the policy world to project their own meanings upon the concept, and justify a range of actions with reference to it.

Given that the purpose of this thesis is to explore understanding of what evidence-based policy means to practitioners, I have approached EBP not as a specific style of public policy, but rather as a movement. In a similar manner to Boaz et al.’s (2019) use of the term ‘agenda’ to refer to the collected work of evidence advocates, my approach characterises EBP as essentially a social phenomenon: a grouping of people with a fundamentally shared goal, but who may often disagree on how to achieve it. This movement is diverse in nature; Montana and Wilsdon (2021) use the concept of discourse coalitions to frame the community as including an analytical strand focused on describing evidence–policy relationships, an advocacy strand focused on promoting specific techniques and methodologies, and an application strand focused on building evidence capability. At the heart of this movement,

however, are two claims: firstly, that current policy processes do not make sufficient use of robust data and research findings, and secondly, that actively working to improve the influence and prominence of such evidence will lead to a significant improvement in the quality of policy and, consequently, better public services and outcomes. Given this, advocates for EBP argue that enhancing the influence of evidence should be treated as a structural and professional priority within public sector agencies; what this actually should and can involve is where differences within the movement emerge.

In this sense, the appearance of EBP as a distinct concept – and consequently its emergence as a movement – is generally agreed to have originated in the United Kingdom in the late 1990s. Sayer (2019) locates the movement's genesis in a 1996 address to the Royal Statistical Society, in which the Society's President unfavourably compared the use of quantitative data in public policy with the role of evidence in medicine. However, it was the 1997 election of Tony Blair's Labour Government which provided the point at which EBP clearly began to embed itself in policy practice. The party's manifesto had explicitly linked better use of evidence to an agenda of reforming government (Wells, 2007), while in 2000 then-Minister of Education David Blunkett's address to the Economic and Social Research Council promised an end to the 'irrelevance' of social science research in public policy – provided that such research accorded with the Government's own ideas and preferences around what such research should involve (Hodgkinson, 2000; Parsons, 2007).

Meanwhile, the 1999 *Modernising Government* White Paper and subsequent publications including *Professional Policy Making For The Twenty First Century*, *Adding it Up*, *Getting the Evidence*, and *Trying it Out* set out the philosophy of that government's 'Third Way' approach to making policy, defined by the phrase 'what matters is what works' (Burton, 2006; Nutley & Webb, 2000).⁶ In doing so, these papers established the use of evidence as a critical element of good quality policy, and proposed an extensive range of measures (some implemented and some not) to enhance both the availability of policy-relevant evidence and the ability of agencies to use that evidence effectively.⁷ From this point, the concept – or at

⁶ Though Parsons (2002) notes that these were far from the only notable 'markers' of EBP's emergence, with other government publications, conferences, and the establishment of the Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice (and associated research network) by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council.

⁷ Specific proposals outlined in Strategic Policy Making Team (1999) included establishing departmental research strategies, improving agencies' economic modelling capability, greater use of secondments from the

the least the language – of evidence-based policy quickly spread across jurisdictions. What was initially characterised by Solesbury (2001) as “a peculiarly British affair” (p. 6) was, by the late 2000s, part of the global orthodoxy of policy practice (Wiseman, 2010).

The drivers behind the spread of the evidence-based movement are somewhat complex and differ from country to country (and policy area to policy area), but nevertheless some common themes can be identified. These can in turn be broadly grouped into three types of explanation: professionalisation, politics, and power; though not an exhaustive set of categories, these three organising concepts serve to highlight some of the diversity in how the movement has been characterised. Of these, professionalisation explanations describe the growth of EBP as part of the public sector maturing; officials began to recognise the advantages using rigorous information brings to policy development, analytic and research methods (including technology) became more advanced and sophisticated, and there developed a broad desire to reduce the perceived influence of political factors in public sector decision-making. Some social factors also sit within this strand, such as an increased willingness to challenge accepted practices and ‘reform’ perceived inefficiencies. For example, Davies et al. (2000) cite such factors as declining public trust in traditional authority structures and improvements in the quality and accessibility of data. Similarly, Solesbury (2001) attributes the spread of the movement to a growing utilitarian approach to research, and somewhat paradoxically to an increased willingness on the part of professions and the public to question the primacy of experts and professional judgement – what he terms a “retreat from the priesthood” (p. 5). From this perspective, the movement’s popularity was an inevitable result of technological and culture change: the result of practical advances that make it more feasible to use evidence in decision-making, and a desire to “ensure that what is being done is worthwhile and that it is being done in the best possible way” (Davies et al., 2000, p. 2).

Political explanations recognise these changes but also highlight the utility that the language of evidence has for parties and politicians. A particularly important element of this is that evidence is framed as a non-partisan or ideological concept; when used as a rhetorical device

research community, implementing a new ‘policy researcher’ role, and establishing what are now often termed ‘knowledge broker’ institutions to share evidence across institutional boundaries.

evidence involves appeals not to values or theories of society, but rather to ideas of effectiveness. Presenting one's own proposals as based on "what works" not only implicitly positions one's opponents as "what doesn't work" but allows a political actor to claim a type of pragmatic virtue: that their programme is driven by a concern with the best possible material outcome for constituents rather than an abstract ideological goal. These types of positions were particularly relevant for New Labour in the late 1990s, which explicitly framed itself as having transcended ideology in its Third Way approach to politics (Fairclough, 2000) and believed that large numbers of civil servants had been captured by the ideas of previous Conservative administrations. One of the core elements of the 'Third Way' approach was the claim that it represented a new mode of politics that would focus on effectiveness and efficiency rather than what it claimed was outmoded dogma.

[New Labour's] stance was anti-ideological and pragmatic. It had a new agenda and so new knowledge requirements. It was suspicious of many established influences on policy, particularly within the civil service, and anxious to open up policy thinking to outsiders. (Solesbury, 2001, p. 6)

In this way, claims to being 'evidence-based' provided both a way to reinforce the brand of New Labour to the public, and a method for neutralising resistance to its policies within the public sector. As Newman (2017) notes, governments across countries and the political spectrum have adopted this approach, using the language of EBP both to claim legitimacy for their programmes and to contrast their own positions with that of their opponents.

The professionalisation and politics explanations converge in the connection made by many authors between the growing popularity of EBP and views of the public sector that emphasised the need for greater productivity, competitiveness, and accountability (Davies et al., 2000). The argument that public services need to use evidence in order to be more 'effective' and 'efficient' is a recurrent theme in EBP, leading some to draw connections to the ascendancy of neoliberal ideologies and approaches such as New Public Management (NPM) theory within government (Davies et al., 2019; Head, 2008; Newman, 2017). While the basic act of using evidence might not be inherently connected to, for example, greater use of markets and privatisation of public services, historically there has been a clear alignment of interests between advocates of EBP and NPM. Both presented themselves as

reforming movements that challenged supposedly ineffective public services and practices. And NPM's emphasis on performance metrics, understanding the cost-effectiveness of government programmes, and the reduction of perceived waste within public services all have clear – though not intrinsic – links with both the basic principle of EBP ('good policy needs good information') and much of the 'what works' rhetoric that surrounded it.

A third set of explanations for EBP's appeal emphasises the role of power relationships within policy development. Wesselink et al. (2014), Parkhurst (2017) and others note that the supposedly apolitical nature of evidence ironically makes it a powerful tool for socio-political ends. This focuses on the term 'evidence-based' incorporating an implicit claim that a given action (or decision not to act) sits outside the subjective desires and beliefs of individuals or communities, and represents a form of objective, unchallengeable 'truth' as to the right course of action (Biesta, 2010). Labelling a policy as evidence-based or conversely claiming that it lacks an evidence base can thus be used to mask social, political, or cultural dimensions and sidestep debates on the societal or ethical implications of a proposal. Parkhurst (2017) notes that the language of evidence has been used in this way for arguments in areas as diverse as abortion rights, taxation policy, and dog control legislation.

Importantly, shifting the grounds of policy debate from the *desirability of the policy* to the *strength of the evidence* can lead to policy development becoming focused on sometimes quite arcane arguments about specific technical details, modelling assumptions, or the strengths and weaknesses of particular methodologies. This can marginalise the influence of people without the cultural, educational, and/or financial capital to access comparable expertise and challenge proposals on not simply normative but evidentiary grounds. As a result, controlling the definition of acceptable evidentiary forms and standards can be a significant source of power in policy processes. A less obvious exercise of this power can be seen in respect of climate change, where opponents of policy measures have used the uncertainty inherent to most scientific analysis as a justification for rejecting measures to reduce emissions, fossil fuel dependency, and the like (Sharman & Perkins, 2017). By establishing unrealistically high standards for what constitutes definitive or clear evidence, these stakeholders can prevent action on the basis that the state of knowledge – and thus the actual need for action – remains inconclusive.

2.3 Debates, Critiques, and Developments

As noted earlier, EBP does not exist as a single, clearly-defined method of ‘doing policy’. Instead, it is a movement or agenda that broadly advocates for improving linkages between policy work and evidence; “... putting the best available evidence from research at the heart of policy development and implementation” as Davies et al. (2019, p. 366) put it. However, that apparently simple point of agreement masks significant diversity within the field – even to an aspect as fundamental as naming. Boaz et al. (2019) state that the complexity and scale of issues associated with the use of evidence in policy work have appropriately led to the term ‘evidence-based’ falling out of favour in comparison to ‘evidence-informed’. On the other hand, Banks (2018) argues that this complexity is self-evident amongst those who would use the term, and those who have concerns with the original term are using an overly-literal interpretation of the word ‘based’. Such disputes over language might seem superficial, but they can mask significant underlying differences in view. For example, referring to ‘science-based’ policy implicitly frames the movement as being based on knowledge generated through traditional scientific processes rather than other forms.

Moreover, while linking evidence and policy might have been highly successful on a rhetorical level, the extent to which this has translated into practice is far more questionable. The movement has faced both practical obstacles and conceptual critiques since its emergence (see for example Biesta, 2007, 2010; Hammersley, 2013; Lewis, 2013; Marston & Watts, 2003; Pawson, 2006), Head (2013) identifies seven ongoing challenges that EBP advocates have been forced to grapple with, including the ongoing lack of ‘sufficiently’ rigorous research findings and how to compare multiple types of evidence, the complex and inherently political nature of the policy environment, and the ongoing lack of communication between those who generate knowledge and those who could use it. In response to these, the movement has been adapted and refined over time by its advocates (Boaz, et al., 2019). And yet there also appears to remain an influential ‘hardline’ strand that continues to promote a form of EBP grounded in the traditional sciences.

2.3.1 Dissemination and Brokerage

One of the primary points on which all EBP advocates – and many of its critics – can agree is the need to prioritise better connections between the generation of evidence and the

implementation of policy. This is commonly grounded in some variant of the influential 'two communities' model articulated by (Caplan, 1979) in which research and policy practitioners inhabit separate worlds characterised by distinct and different drivers, values, and priorities. This leads to a lack of understanding between evidence-generators and evidence-users, and communication failures so that when policy-relevant findings are generated by researchers they don't end up influencing the work of policymakers (see for example Grimshaw, Eccles, Lavis, Hill, and Squires (2012), Tetroe et al. (2008)). Advocates argue that it is a core task of EBP advocates to address this, and a key priority should be to build the research capability of policy practitioners, encourage policy-relevant research, and create structures to encourage sharing and interaction.

Concern with how knowledge gets taken up and has effects outside research communities predates the concept of EBP, and yet this is probably the area in which the movement has made its most visible contribution. Parkhurst (2017) notes that EBP's concern with linking these two communities has led to "... a veritable cottage industry of work dedicated to some form of 'knowledge transfer', also referred to by linked terms such as knowledge mobilisation, knowledge translation, knowledge management, knowledge exchange and knowledge brokering" (p. 23). Under this umbrella a variety of strategies, initiatives, and structures have been developed, including those directed towards the research side, such as encouraging policy-relevant research or developing evidence reviews for policymakers, those directed towards the policy-side such as training officials to understand evidence, and 'linkage and exchange' programmes designed to promote interaction between researchers and practitioners (DFID Evidence into Action Team, 2013; Innvær, Vist, Trommald, & Oxman, 2002; Lawrence, 2006; Oliver, Innvær, et al. 2014; Parkhurst, 2017).

The growth of knowledge broker centres is a particularly visible example of EBP's contribution in this area. These differ from the think tank model that arose in the post-World War 2 era, in that where think tanks directly develop and provide their own advice on a given issue, knowledge brokers (whether individuals, organisations, or structures) are focused on supporting other organisations. They do this through three main types of activities (Boaz & Nutley, 2019; Ward, House, & Hamer, 2009): knowledge management work that promotes research to potential users (dissemination), fostering linkage and

exchange (socialisation), and building the capacity of organisations to access and use evidence (education). Prominent examples of such centres include the UK's original Centre for Evidence-Based Policy and Practice and its more recent network of 'What Works' centres, and the Canadian Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research, while in Aotearoa New Zealand bodies such as the New Zealand Council for Educational Research, the New Zealand Institute for Economic Research, the Policy Observatory, the Institute for Governance and Policy Studies, and Ako Aotearoa: The National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence fulfil this role.

However, the focus of EBP advocates on such transference models has been criticised as essentially reductive and preoccupied with simply identifying barriers to and facilitators of evidence use (Parkhurst, 2017). Notably, transfer approaches can be criticised for embodying a researcher perspective, beginning from the point of view that research *should* be included in policy development and treating it as a failure of policy development structures when it is not. Broader topics such as what constitutes 'appropriate' evidence in a particular context or what different meanings the term evidence 'use' might have, are more rarely explored.

A further point worth noting here is that such models often rest on a more or less unstated assumption of what 'counts' as evidence. The two worlds hypothesis and similar conceptions rest on the notion that there is a relatively clear distinction between an 'evidence' community (which generates information) and a 'policy' community (which uses information). This evidence generation community is often equated with the world of academic or scientific research (see for example Talbot and Talbot (2014)) and such knowledge is privileged over other forms of knowing. Importantly, the notion that the policy community can generate evidence itself is missing from most conceptions of this (barring some forms of the organisational excellence model noted above), as is the possibility that this community might have *more* knowledge and understanding of a particular area than the evidence generation community.⁸

Moreover, while these models do not require the existence of homogenous communities they tend to assume them. There often appears an implicit framing that the evidence

⁸ For example, as discussed later in this thesis, one of the interviewees pointed out that the official science advisor in their agency had significantly less knowledge – both practical and research-based – of their particular area than most of the policy practitioners.

community in particular is characterised by consensus, and that knowledge transfer can involve passing on a ‘single source of truth’ on an issue. In many – possibly most – cases, however, the evidence community will be fractured along many lines: theoretical, methodological, and interpretive. For example, ‘economic evidence’ will look very different and likely point to different conclusions depending on whether it has been generated from neoclassical, wellbeing, or Marxist lenses. Arguably then, accurately transferring knowledge should be less about passing on ‘facts’ and improving certainty than it should be about transferring knowledge of the debates, tensions, and unccertainties in a given area.

2.3.2 The Nature of Evidence

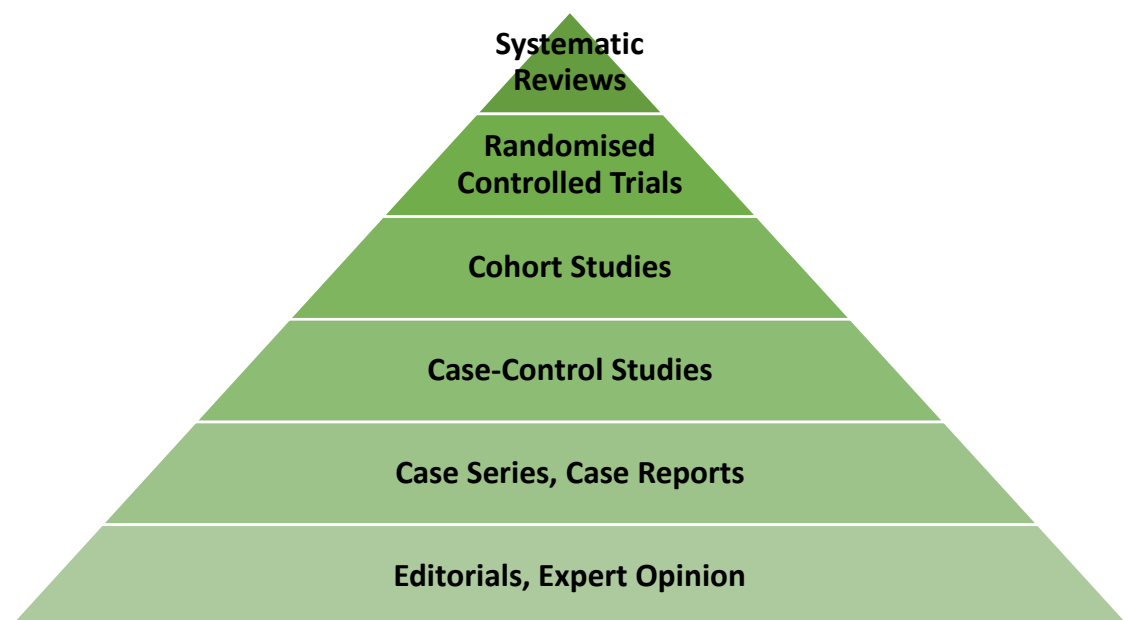
One of the most significant challenges and debates within the EBP movement concerns the conception of ‘evidence’. For at least one strand of the movement, improving the quality of evidence use by practitioners involves not only an argument that more frequent use of evidence is necessary, but also that the right *type* of evidence needs to be used. For example, in outlining her views about the state of evidence in education, Fitz-Gibbon (2000) speaks of the need for greater use of experimental designs, while in Aotearoa New Zealand Scobie (2010) argues that greater evidence use must involve more frequent economic modelling of policy proposals and their impacts – specifically, greater use of cost–benefit analysis. While initial discussions of EBP often emphasised diversity of evidence sources and methodologies, the forms of evidence that were prioritised under the name quickly became relatively limited in practice (Nutley, Davies, & Walter, 2002).

Overall, the EBP movement has often been taken as synonymous with a drive for greater use of quantitative data and positivist approaches to research, involving relatively little reflection on epistemological issues such as how knowledge is generated in practice, and marginalising or even completely discounting particular forms of evidence (Biesta, 2007, 2010; Greenhalgh, 2012; Newman, 2017; Pearce & Raman 2014; Russell et al. 2008; Wiseman, 2010). Head (2008), for example, points out that discussions of policy development often devalue the contribution which can be made by non-positivist forms of evidence, when genuine evidence-based policy involves the equal integration of scientific, political, and practical knowledge. This notion that better evidence use inherently means greater use of

positivist forms of evidence is possibly not surprising given the lineage of EBP and specifically its links to the world of medicine.

A particularly prominent aspect, which not only serves as the basis for criticisms of EBP but also divides its proponents, is the extent to which ‘evidence hierarchies’ are appropriate for evaluating policy. Indeed Head (2010) argues that this is the most fiercely debated notion in the entire EBP community. This concept turns on the idea that it is possible to rank the value and utility (and – implicitly or explicitly – the objective quality) of evidence primarily according to methodology. A variety of designs have been developed over time, such as the Oxford Centre for Evidence-based Medicine hierarchy, the Maryland Scale of Scientific Methods, GRADE (Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and Evaluation), and various organisation and discipline specific models. However, they share a basis in traditional scientific models in which the results of Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) – or better yet, the meta-analysis of such trials – sits at the top. Figure 2 below shows a typical hierarchy, in this case one promoted by Australia’s Institute of Family Studies.

Figure 2: Example Evidence Hierarchy



from Rush (2012)

The idea that whole types of evidence could be categorised and ranked for quality quickly became an influential one in EBP. Calls to embrace the so-called ‘medical model’ of strict methodological hierarchies, with RCTs and meta-analyses situated at the top, were a key

feature of early advocates for evidence-based approaches in multiple policy fields (Parkhurst, 2017). However, hierarchies have been subject to significant criticism – including within the medical community from where they originated – and over time they have become less favoured by advocates of EBP (see for example Head, 2010; Nutley, Davies, & Hughes, 2019; Nutley, Powell, & Davies, 2013; Oliver & Pearce, 2017; Parkhurst & Abeysinghe, 2016; Pearce & Raman, 2014). This has led to modified hierarchies that incorporate more than simple methodological elements. The GRADE model mentioned earlier is an example of this, which focuses more strongly on confidence and strength of recommendation than methodological purity; though as with other hierarchies it continues to focus on randomisation as the key to quality (Nutley et al., 2019).

There has also emerged a stronger emphasis on matrix and principle-based approaches; these avoid establishing rigid, pseudo-objective criteria for quality based on methodology and instead focus on supporting users to evaluate what types of research are *appropriate* for a given policy issue and point in the policy process (see Nutley et al., 2019, 2013; Parkhurst, 2017; Petticrew & Roberts, 2003). Moreover, not only have many academic writers on EBP stressed the need to include a relatively diverse range of evidence right from the movement's early years (see (Wyatt 2002)), but one of the key ways in which advocates have responded to critics is through becoming more inclusive of different forms of knowledge (Davies et al., 2019). Even those who strongly advocate for EBP increasingly note that what counts as high quality evidence will vary from case-to-case and is likely to always be contested (Nutley et al., 2019, 2013). Oliver and Pearce (2017) claim that “the narrow technocratic version of EBP which subscribes to the primacy of the RCT is now mainly used as a straw man” (p. 3).

And yet, despite this evolution it seems that the ‘hardline positivist’ approach to evidence retains a tenacious hold in the movement – especially with regard to the prominence of RCTs. Pearce and Raman (2014) point to a resurgent influence of RCTs within the language of the UK policy community, while in the United States the United States-based Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy had (until its recent demise) the core goal of promoting clinical trials as the ‘gold standard’ for policy evidence and evaluation.

Rigorous studies, such as well-conducted randomized controlled trials, are still uncommon in most areas of social policy. Meanwhile, careful investigations show that the less-rigorous studies that are typically used can produce erroneous conclusions and lead to practices that are ineffective or harmful. (Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, 2015)

Similarly, Baron's (2018) history of evidence-based policy is explicitly a history of how RCTs have been used to support policy, on the basis that policies only truly count as evidence-based if they draw on such work, while Haynes, Service, Goldacre, and Torgeson (2012) state simply that "Randomised Control Trials (RCTS) are the best way of determining whether a policy is working" (p. 4). More recently, in a review of the UK What Works initiative, the What Works national advisor lauded RCTs as "rapidly becoming the new normal" in public policy (What Works Network, 2018, p. 4). All this suggests that the more nuanced approach to 'what counts' as valid evidence in modern EBP literature may be yet to influence practitioner and stakeholder views – a somewhat ironic situation given the common equating of evidence with academic scholarship.

This question has particular relevance in Aotearoa New Zealand given the position of Māori, the enshrinement of tino rangatiratanga within Article Two of the Treaty of Waitangi/ Te Tiriti o Waitangi,⁹ and successive modern governments' commitments to recognising that in practice as well as principle. Tauri (2009) and Larkin (2006) highlight the point that, from a post-colonial perspective, EBP has tended towards eurocentrism and a lack of self-reflection on the cultural foundations of knowledge, minimising the value of both traditional indigenous knowledge and the types of emancipatory knowledge needed to address social inequity. Sources such as mātauranga Māori (knowledge generated through indigenous forms and methods; see Broughton and McBreen (2015)) might be paid lip service, but they are positioned as ancillary sources of knowledge at best. (Gluckman, 2013) provides an illustration of this in his discussion of the relative merits of information from sources other than science.

⁹ Although the precise meaning and implications of tino rangatiratanga within the context of the Treaty/ Te Tiriti has been debated, the most straightforward interpretation of the concept is that of 'self-determination'.

Māori culture and ways of knowing can have a positive influence on policy. Such perspectives, however, must be seen as complementary to knowledge derived from rigorous research methods rather than equated with it. This is not to say that social and cultural perspectives cannot be reflected in the research undertaken ... But the knowledge resulting from formal scientific processes must strive for a high degree of objectivity and should be used as a relatively neutral base on which the policy and political process must weigh all other inputs into the decisions that a democracy requires. (p. 12)

In other words, mātauranga Māori is not part of the “rigorous research methods” that should form the basis for policy. Rather than being part of the world of evidence, Gluckman positions such knowledge in the realm of social values and beliefs. While this might have a “positive influence” in the policy process, it is fundamentally different – and less valuable – than the knowledge generated by “formal [and implicitly western] scientific processes”.

In Aotearoa New Zealand this is not simply an epistemological question, given that modern interpretations of Article Two of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and its guarantee of tino rangatiratanga accept that it provides for a significant and specific role of Māori within our policy and government framework. The extent of that authority and the acceptability of particular manifestations might be debated, but it is generally agreed that at the very least Māori must play a central role in determining ‘what works’ for Māori (Jackson, 2013; Ruckstuhl, 2018). This idea can, however, sit uncomfortably with traditional EBP’s assumption that policy issues are essentially technical issues, that the basis for solving them is essentially objective and universal, and that responses to policy questions should not differ depending on who is making them. If evidence advocates assume that Māori and non-Māori will always agree on evidentiary issues and what should be done as a result, then they arguably reduce Article Two to more of a symbolic concession than a meaningful element of governance. And yet if they accept that self-determination will have real impacts on policy – and that the existence of such difference is desirable – then they undermine the position that evidence exists outside of social constructions. On both a theoretical and a practical level, then, EBP in Aotearoa New Zealand faces the twin questions of who should be responsible for

determining the role of evidence in developing policy to meet Māori needs, and who is the authoritative voice in establishing appropriate forms and standards for using it.

2.3.3 The Nature of Policy Work

Importantly, most critiques of EBP are not aimed against the general principle that research and information should inform the practice of policy, or that when there is clear evidence a given course of action is a good or bad option this should be ignored. Rather, modern critics of evidence-based approaches focus on the movement itself, arguing that the common manner in which advocates for EBP treat the relationship between knowledge and action is overly-simplistic both in terms of its view of knowledge and its understanding of the policy process. The core of this is that mainstream EBP discourse goes beyond simply framing policy development as something which *benefits* from evidence to something that *requires* evidence (and ideally little else). Much discussion is dominated by what is referred to as a *rational* style of policy practice in which

it is assumed that the world is to a large extent empirically knowable and often measurable [and] knowledge used for policy must be capable of withstanding scientific scrutiny. . . . Policy should come about — preferably — in neat phases, from preparation to execution, with support through research in each phase. (Mayer et al., 2004, p. 179)

The links between this view of policy and EBP are clear. The rational style sees policy work as ideally a more or less value-free problem-solving process, and a greater focus on evidence use is a way of avoiding distortions created by personal bias, the influence of vested interests, and external political considerations. By establishing formal processes and standards for incorporating evidence into policy identification, development, and impact assessment, officials can reduce the influence of these other illegitimate factors and ultimately provide better advice and take better decisions (Russell et al., 2008).

In practice, however, evidence is almost always partial and often conflictual, relevance and quality can depend on the situation of both the policy worker and ‘problem’ at hand, and the specific context and process for implementation are often as influential on the outcomes of a policy as the underlying theory or principle (Biesta, 2007, 2010; Marston & Watts, 2003; Pawson, 2006; Powell, 2011). Moreover, many policy debates turn on questions of social and

cultural values rather than the specifics of evidence (Parkhurst, 2017). Some critics have therefore decried EBP as a technocratic and anti-democratic approach that centralises power within government agencies by marginalising arguments and perspectives that turn on people, power, or values (Hammersley, 2013; Lewis, 2003; Parsons, 2002).

For many then, the ‘promise’ of EBP is an illusory one. It is built on an overly idealised view of what policy practice involves and, sometimes, on a challengeable notion what it *should* be (Newman, 2017). This leads to a disjunction in which the rhetoric and ideal goal of evidence-based approaches are constantly in conflict with the reality of the context in which policies are developed and enacted.¹⁰ For example, in introducing a 2014 special issue of the journal *Policy Sciences* devoted to evidence and practice Wesselink et al. (2014) argue that EBP’s call for decontextualised, universal applicable truths to be applied in a neutral manner is difficult to reconcile with what they see as the inherently contextual nature of policy work in actual practice – although they argue that it is important to understand EBP as a rhetorical style. Similarly, Russell et al. (2008), discussing UK health policy, argue that EBP advocates understand policy to be a fundamentally technical process of problem-solving, rather than the “communicative process of sense-making, embedded within specific political and institutional structures, and influenced by the interaction of individual and collective values” (p. 40) that they see as a more accurate model. Drawing more strongly on theories of knowledge and knowing, (Biesta, 2010) identifies three key weaknesses in the EBP position that make it an unworkable approach to policy work: that it requires certainty when knowledge can only be partial, that in societal settings the actions of both agencies and recipients cannot be controlled in the same manner as in traditional ‘scientific’ settings such as laboratories, and that the process of implementing an intervention or change to practice can be as influential on outcomes as the content of the intervention or change itself.

2.3.4 The Position of the Practitioner

One notable criticism related to the nature of policy work is that EBP advocates tend to underestimate the position of the policy practitioner. In the rationalist policy style, the role of analysts and advisors is to objectively assess the facts around a given issue and provide

¹⁰ As Cairney, Oliver, and Wellstead (2016) note, this can lead to frustration amongst those seeking to influence policy through evidence, when such evidence appears to have little impact on the actual decisions that are made.

advice based on those facts, untainted by the vested interests of particular groups (Colebatch et al., 2010b; Majone, 1989; Peters, 2004). Indeed, in the United States ‘the policy analyst’ as a distinct professional role was originally framed as being equivalent to that of a (traditional) scientist. Analysts were intended to bring independent expertise to bear on how problems of governance were formulated and optimal solutions identified, in the same way that physicists might apply their expertise to problems of physics (Wildavsky, 1979, cited in Colebatch et al. (2010b)). From this point of view policy work is essentially a technical process of problem-solving, and officials are meant to come to the ‘correct’ decision or provide the ‘right’ advice, where these qualities are determined by how well they reflect messages from the evidence.

Colebatch et al. (2010b) refer to this conception of policy as *authoritative instrumentalism*, where government is “a mechanism for official problem solving, centred around decisions made by authorized leaders, with official practice seen as the ‘implementation’ of the decision” (p. 12). This positions policy work as a fundamentally linear activity (represented through classic stage-based models such as the policy cycle), and leads to both a focus on exploring macro-level policy structures and the role of policy ‘leaders’, and a tendency to treat the development of an individual policy as an isolated event separate from other influences. Within this rationalist style, the official themselves is largely positioned as a relatively passive knowledge handler. The skill of the policy analyst involves accessing the available research, interpreting it appropriately, and then presenting it in a form that shows ‘what works’ and therefore what course of action should be followed (what policy should be implemented, whether a programme should be cancelled or extended, and so on). This involves less exercise of *professional judgement* — which implies a strong role for the experience and informed view of the practitioner— than it does relatively un-nuanced *technical capability*.

Importantly, this conception of policy work frames ‘evidence-based’ not as a characteristic of practice, but rather a characteristic of policy outputs. Evaluating if a given policy is evidence-based does not rest on the process through which it has been developed, but rather on how well the final outcome represents the weight of evidence on a given issue. Thus, the key question for ‘policy about evidence-based policy’ becomes how both organisations and

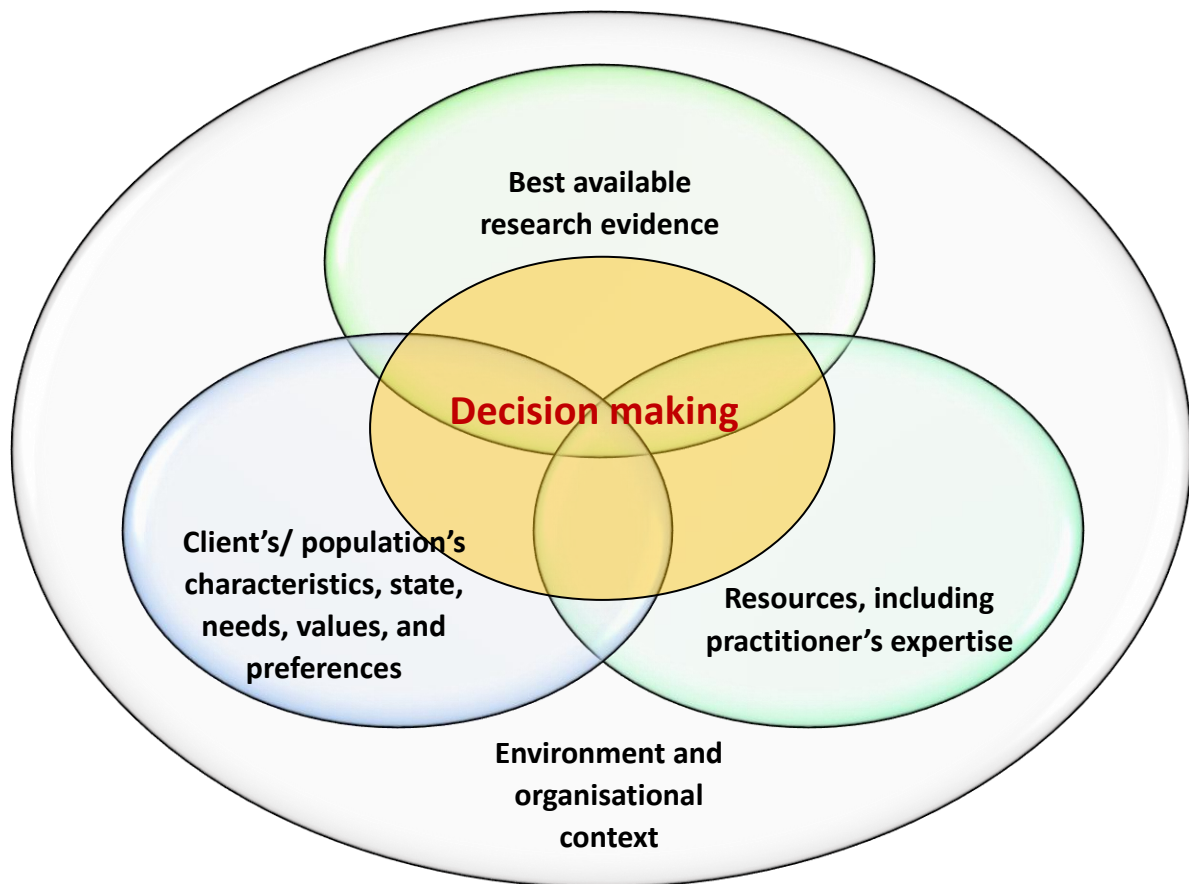
stakeholders can ensure that more evidence is included within policy development, so that the output will better represent what that evidence reflects. This leads to a type of 'knowledge stockpiling' that can include strategies such as capability development, building links between research and policy communities, and instituting explicit requirements for 'evidence' into policy processes (see for example INASP 2013; Innvær et al., 2002; Oliver, Innvær, et al., 2014). Although these strategies all involve changing the process by which policy is developed, they are done so with the aim of producing a 'thing' (a piece of policy advice, an initiative, or the like) that can be pointed to as evidence-based.

This critique is particularly interesting when one compares EBP to its antecedents in the medical world and other professional fields. As noted earlier, while one of the early criticisms of evidence-based medicine was that it reduced medical practice to a 'cookbook', the original model in fact positioned the judgement of the practitioner as a central part of the EBM approach. As Satterfield et al. (2009) note, the original developers of the model explicitly stated not only that clinical judgement and the specific state and preferences of the patient were to be given equal weight to research findings, but that sometimes those factors would override what evidence pointed to. Similarly, in Social Work – a discipline sitting across the boundary of health and society – the influential model of Regehr, Stern, and Shlonsky (2007), takes the 'three circles' model and places it explicitly within two contextual layers: an immediate layer relating to the immediate context of the practitioner (for example, training, organisational mandate, and available resources) and a second layer consisting of the context political, economic, socio-historical, and professional contexts in which both practitioner and the service-user experience practice.

The transdisciplinary model of evidence-based practice developed by Satterfield et al. (2009) and shown in Figure 3 overleaf, is relevant to considering how EBP can be approached as a form of practice. Drawing on models used in a variety of care and support fields, this focuses on the notion of professional practice as a form of decision-making. In this model, an evidence-based approach to such decisions involves incorporating knowledge from research, understanding of the population, and the resources and skills of the practitioner (including their professional expertise). It also expands the 'zone' of focus to acknowledge that at different times different combinations of these can be required – what evidence-based

practice means is context-dependent. Moreover, this model recognises that such decisions are made within a broader institutional environment.

Figure 3: A transdisciplinary model for evidence-based practice



from Satterfield et al. (2009)

Arguably, however, the more recognition given to the role of context and personal practitioner judgement, the weaker becomes the claim of EBP to be offering something new for policy making. Its tenet becomes reduced to the apple-pie statement 'we should do what we think is going to work' that is essentially meaningless in a practical sense. While, as noted earlier, this is a position which is difficult to argue against, it also has little to offer in the way of guidance for developing or implementing policy. One method of resolving this problem is through concentrating on the first 'strand' within the EBP movement: a concern with creating environments that better support policy workers' use of evidence – whatever that may be. To this end, significant attention has been paid to developing organisational models that encourage evidence use. These do not focus on creating new additional structures for transferring knowledge, so much as considering how organisational design can contribute to effectively accessing and using knowledge. For example, Nutley, Walter,

and Davies (2009) draw on earlier work to identify three broad models for encouraging interaction between research and practice:

- *The Research-Based Practitioner Model:* This model focuses on the micro-level activities of individual policy practitioners, with promoting evidence use being primarily a matter of ensuring they have access to relevant data sources and are capable of using those effectively. Promoting EBP is therefore largely a matter of available resources and ensuring appropriate training.
- *The Embedded Research Model:* This model focuses on the structures within which practitioners work. Whereas the Research-Based Practitioner model assumes that individuals have a significant amount of autonomy, this model assumes that practice is subject to significant influence from organisational processes, policies, and standards, and therefore focuses on ensuring that these are developed through or represent principles of good evidence use.
- *The Organisational Excellence Model:* Moving up from the meso-level of the Embedded Research model, this approach focuses on the macro-level of organisational leadership and culture, arguing that these need to exemplify evidence-based principles. It differs from the previous models in that it conceives of an organisation and its members not as simply accessing existing evidence, but also as generating their own evidence and developing and evaluating innovative practices – often in active partnerships with research organisations.

These models focus primarily on how the ‘evidence-using’ organisation operates. Parkhurst (2017), in a somewhat Hegelian attempt to incorporate insights from both EBP advocates and its critics, offers an alternative to this through a framework that concentrates on processes that frame and oversee how evidence is selected and incorporated into policy decisions. The eight principles in Parkhurst’s framework relate not only to the technical elements of evidence use, but also on how evidence relates to larger elements of the policy process. The first three principles (appropriateness, quality, and rigour) relate to ensuring that ‘good’ evidence is used by policymakers. The next three (stewardship, representation, and transparency) can be characterised as revolving around the concept of accountability – essentially ensuring that officials, agencies, or governments do not use EBP as an excuse for

avoiding principles of open government. These six principles seem as though they would be acceptable to even many hard-line 'naïve rationalists' in the EBP movement. However, with his final two principles – deliberation and contestability – Parkhurst goes further. Drawing on earlier work (Hawkins & Parkhurst, 2016), he describes the principle of deliberation as

Engagement with the public in ways that enable multiple competing values and concerns to be considered in the policy process and to give attention to different points of view, even if not all concerns can be selected in the final policy decision.
(Parkhurst, 2017, p. 162)

While contestability is

Having technical evidence and scientific research used in policy decisions that are open to critical questioning and appeal. This can involve challenging particular scientific findings, but also enables challenges over decisions about which evidence to utilise (e.g. to question the appropriateness of the evidence for a specific case).
(Parkhurst, 2017, p. 162)

By including these components, Parkhurst quite boldly inserts notions of democracy – separate from simple accountability – as a fundamental part of what good evidence use looks like. This incorporates the critiques discussed earlier, such as the essentially contested nature of most forms of evidence and views of policy work as an inherently political and values-based process (rather than a technical exercise), while preserving the notion that we can reasonably argue for better use of systematically-collected information within the process of developing policy.

3 Policy Practice as Social Process

The first thing we do when studying public policy is to try to define it. . . . We then conclude that there is no single, satisfying, definition of public policy.

(Cairney, 2016)

What was it, then, that could be learned but not explained, that all of us could sometimes do but that none of us could ever define (at least to anybody else's satisfaction)? Our inscrutable ineffable friend, policy analysis.

(Wildavsky, 2018, p. xxxiii)

As the quotes above illustrate, while policy work might be an activity in which literally hundreds of thousands people engage every day, and a field that has given rise to a substantial body of literature, both the nature and object of such work remain contested (Birkland, 2015; Gill & Saunders, 1992; Guba, 1984; Peters & Zittoun, 2016; Smith & Larimer, 2018). Even as expansive a definition of policy as Dye's (1984) often-cited "Public policy is what governments choose to do or not to do" (p. 1) has been critiqued for minimising the role of non-government organisations in establishing policy, treating policy work as synonymous with decision-making, and framing policies as primarily the result of conscious and intentional action, while neglecting the role played by less visible social structures and relationships (Colebatch, 2006b).

In this Chapter I discuss the theoretical conception of policy practice that underpins my research, and the implications of this for both evidence and questions of power. Given that this research explores the practice of policy, it is critical that I examine the question of exactly what activity it is in which policy makers engage. Moreover, as noted in Chapter 2, the EBP movement or agenda is often couched within a specific framing of what policy involves. My approach to this research is grounded in a critical conception of policy work that sees it as a fundamentally social process or set of social practices, and I begin this chapter by discussing critical approaches to understanding the work of policy practitioners. I then move to discussing two important elements of critical policy approaches: the role of language, and the role of power. Finally, I discuss the potential implications of critical policy approaches for understanding and positioning evidence-based policy.

3.1 Critical Approaches to Policy Work

Critical or post-positivist policy studies is an umbrella term that encompasses and is used synonymously for, a variety of specific stances toward the nature and production of policy, including interpretive, deliberative, argumentative, or discursive policy studies (see (Durnová & Zittoun, 2013; Fischer, 2003; Lovbrand & Stripple, 2017; Wagenaar, 2011; Yanow, 2015) These are unified by their belief that decisions and behaviours around policy are best thought of as primarily social rather than technical processes, and an emphasis on the non-‘rational’ aspects of policy creation, continuance, and change. Such aspects include the central roles played – visibly and invisibly – by theoretical assumptions, societal and personal values, narratives, and systems of power. This stance’s rejection of rationalism as a guiding principle of policy work does not mean that policy processes are not logical from the viewpoint of those engaged in them; there will be reasons why policies are formulated and implemented in particular ways. However, the systems of logic on which policies depend are contextual rather than universal, and stem from often unspoken sets of assumptions about the nature of the world and how it operates. In the words of Fischer, Torgerson, Durnová, and Orsini (2015), “critical policy studies has emerged as an effort to understand policy processes not only in terms of apparent inputs and outputs, but more importantly in terms of the interests, values and normative assumptions . . . that shape and inform these processes” (p. 1).

These approaches to understanding policy emerged as a reaction to what might be termed the classical or positivist construct that underpinned the ‘policy sciences’ phase of policy scholarship (Dien et al., 2014; Fischer et al., 2015; Stone, 1988). The key elements of this view are well-embodied by Dunn’s (2014) definition of policy analysis: “a process of multidisciplinary inquiry aiming at the creation, critical assessment, and communication of policy-relevant information. As a problem-solving discipline, it draws on social science methods, theories, and substantive findings to solve practical problems.” (p.2). Such a description presents policy work as fundamentally a technical process; it involves “problem-solving” based on established “methods, theories, and substantive findings”. The role of policy practitioners is to objectively assess the facts around a given issue and provide advice

based on those facts in a similar manner to an expert engineer or chemist, untainted by the vested interests of particular groups (Colebatch et al., 2010b; Majone, 1989; Peters, 2004).

Critical approaches to policy studies on the other hand, are grounded in a fundamentally different way of thinking about the nature of policy and its development – and consequently about the work of policy practitioners. Its roots lie in a broader stream of thought that emerged in the 1970s around the nature of knowledge and knowing within the social sciences, specifically the growing popularity of post-positivist critiques found in the work of such scholars as Bernstein, Foucault, Habermas, Weiss, and others (Diem et al., 2014; Dryzek, 1993; Fischer et al., 2015; Fischer & Forester, 1993a).¹¹ These critiques concerned the supposed neutrality of systems for interpreting the world, instead pointing to the ways in which they were grounded in or took for granted certain ways of thinking, treated specific cultural norms as universal, and marginalised specific perspectives or modes of thought. A particular focus of such critiques was on the way in which unspoken assumptions worked to reinforce existing social structures – for example, by designating certain qualities as normal and others as deviant (Foucault, 1991). In contrast to emancipatory forms of reason which focused on critiquing existing structures and relationships, societies instead privileged ‘instrumental’ reason which encouraged people to interpret the world in ways that aligned with the status quo – thus reducing the likelihood of challenges to the social order (Stockman, 1983). Within the context of growing political tensions and the emergence of new socio-political movements that challenged power structures in new ways, the hard dichotomy between ‘facts’ and ‘values’ – and the allied position that facts were preferable as the basis for policy decision-making – that underpinned the traditional policy sciences model came under significant challenge (Fischer et al., 2015; Yanow, 2015).

Critics of the rational-positivist approach have pointed out that it not only contains a set of assumptions about policy, but also rests on beliefs about wider epistemological and social topics. (Stone 1988), for example, refers to the paradigm as resting on three ‘models’: a utilitarian rationalist model of decision-making that focuses on quantifying and maximising value, a production model for making policy in which its development should mirror this

¹¹ It is worth noting that despite the similarity in name, formal Critical Theory as articulated by Habermas and the Frankfurt School was just one influence on the development of critical policy studies (Fischer et al., 2015).

rational decision-making process (as in the classic conception of the policy cycle), and a model of society founded on the interaction of autonomous and self-interested units within markets. Similarly, Diem et al. (2014) describes four key features of this approach. Firstly, it starts from the basis that policy work can be consciously planned and managed through deliberate processes; while political considerations, competing interests and the like may make developing and implementing policies more difficult, it is ultimately possible to stand apart from these influences and make policy in a systematic and (supposedly) logical way.¹² Secondly, it assumes that policy is created and implemented with specific goals in mind and defines ‘good’ policy as the actions or settings that result in the best goal-related outcomes for the lowest potential costs. Thirdly, it relies on knowledge about the ‘real’ effect of policy choices being able to be gathered and communicated to others with (relative) ease, enabling the fourth assumption: that through sufficiently robust evaluation different potential policies can be *objectively* compared (and existing policies objectively rated and improved).

Like all broad overviews, such characterisations can be accused of over-simplification. For example, Dye (1984) points out that while rationalist decision-making is often seen as prioritising economic value, at least in theory “Rationalism involves the calculation of all social, political, and economic values sacrificed or achieved by a public policy, not just those that can be measured in dollars” (p. 31). Similarly, it has been contended that the original policy sciences model was less technocratic than it has often been portrayed. For example, Torgerson (2007, 2015) argues that Lasswell’s formulation places more significance on elements such as participatory democracy, diverse perspectives, and epistemological pragmatism than is often appreciated. Moreover, the direct influence of the ‘pure’ positivist model on scholarship can be overstated. While it may have provided the foundation for modern policy studies as a discipline, it has proven less useful as an empirical description of how policies develop in practice, leading to the development of concepts such as ‘garbage-can’ policy development (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972) and relational models based around issue networks (Heclo, 1978) and advocacy coalition frameworks (Sabatier, 1988). Cairney (2012) claims that modern study of policy treats the positivist approach as more of an ‘ideal

¹² As part of this, policy domains are often treated as discrete spheres. For example, education policies are usually developed around their effects on education-specific aims, institutions, and stakeholders, rather than including significant analysis of their effect on labour markets, relationships with social support policies etc.

type' than an empirically-based model. Rather than hewing closely to the classical form, accounts of policy development now tend to pay greater attention to the (legitimate) role of non-government actors, assume that rationality is bounded rather than comprehensive,¹³ and often treat the accounts of policy change found in incrementalist models as providing a more accurate portrayal of how policies emerge in practice.

Nevertheless, it is reasonable to take the core assumptions of this model as representing the dominant ideas of what policy work *should* involve. Authors may acknowledge that practitioners have to operate in a 'messy' reality whose corrupting touch is difficult or even impossible to avoid, and so truly rational policy work might rarely occur in practice.

However, this is often presented as an unfortunate state of affairs; the scientific model is still presented as the Platonic 'pure form' to which those working in policy should aspire. In this sense, the rational-positivist model might not have directly controlled policy scholarship or practice in a prescriptive sense, but it has been the core approach which shaped the field in a discursive sense. It does so by establishing what constitutes 'best' practice and what counts as deviation from the ideal. The task of practitioners is to, as far as possible, cut through the complex and confounding factors surrounding a policy topic in order to identify the objectively most efficient method of achieving a set of desired goals. To do this, they should use tools that allow them to separate out illegitimate influences on the policy development process and rigorously evaluate the actual value of policy proposals, options, or current settings. Colebatch et al. (2010b) refer to such a stance as the *authoritative instrumentalist* paradigm of policy work, according to which government and policy processes are idealised as "a mechanism for official problem solving, centred around decisions made by authorized leaders, with official practice seen as the 'implementation' of the decision" (p. 12).

In contrast to this model, critical perspectives such as the argumentative orientation (Fischer & Forester, 1993b), interpretive policy analysis (Yanow, 2000), deliberative policy analysis (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003), or discursive constructionism (Colebatch et al., 2010b), treat policy development as less a technical process of solving clearly defined problems than as a social phenomenon. These see a given policy output as not the result of a neat and logical

¹³ In other words, policy makers can usually be treated as behaving in rational ways but the actual decisions they make will be affected by the information they can process, their resources, and similar factors (Simon, 1957).

system of analysis, but rather a consequence of the operation of a linked system of values, network of interests, and assumptions that point officials towards reaching a given outcome. There may be individual ‘facts’ or points of data on which all (or at least the vast majority of) participants agree, such as the increasing price of houses, the existence of changing climate patterns, or the educational results of particular social groups. However, the relative importance of these issues, what we should see as their underlying causes, and the range of potential solutions are all the product of social relationships.¹⁴ Similarly, policies are not formulated by officials through stages of development that involve rational application of expert knowledge, but are rather produced by networks of power, values, and meanings that involve many different players. Therefore, when we talk about ‘a policy’ we are not really talking about something produced through the state’s decision-making powers — as the rationalist model posits — but rather

an exercise in meaning-making, in which participants, from inside and outside government address questions in which they share an interest, but which they approach from different angles, for a range of reasons, and apply varying criteria to define both the problem and the appropriate response. (Colebatch et al., 2010a, p. 230)

From this perspective, a given policy cannot be understood in isolation from the full range of forces that have led to its production. Deciding to charge fees for tertiary education, deinstitutionalise mental health services, or subsidise a particular industry is not a reified ‘object’ in its own right, but rather an outcome that illustrates not just the direct power of different interest groups (as in ‘mainstream’ relational models of policy formation), but also the relative strength of different moral and ethical frameworks, conceptions of society and human behaviour, and ways of constructing policy phenomena and solutions. Policy development is thus an inherently ideological and social activity.

This conception of policy work represents a fundamental challenge to the rationalist-positivist model. In place of a position that holds practitioners should strive to develop a ‘view from nowhere’ (Nagel, 1989) free from the distortion created by the lobbying of self-

¹⁴ And — quite apart from debates about epistemology in the classical sciences — even these ‘facts’ are often the product of applying certain implicit values and assumptions. For example, identifying different health outcomes between ethnic groups involves decisions around categorising ethnicity, which outcomes are relevant (and how to classify them), and deciding that ethnic health differences are significant enough to explore in the first place.

interested stakeholders, critical approaches see this as an impossibility. Instead, policy processes are understood to be part of a wider set of social structures, with those involved in developing policy being active participants in those structures. Trying to develop a neutral, disinterested, and objective position simply leads practitioners to mask the assumptions that guide their work. Importantly, this does not mean policy workers have a conspiratorial desire to conceal true motivations and goals, but rather that they uncritically accept contestable ideas and frameworks as 'obviously true' without reflecting on the types of social, economic, and cultural outcomes that they privilege, and those that they marginalise or ignore (Fischer et al., 2015). For this reason, critical approaches incorporate a strong commitment to ideals such as participatory democracy, and empowering perspectives and groups that are marginalised by current structures and practices.

Critical policy analysis has been subject to criticism, most of which involves claims that it offers little basis or guidance for action; it can offer critique of policy maker's actions, but little guidance as to what they should do instead. Weimer (1998), for example, claims that while such approaches have value in highlighting the need for policy practitioners to be reflexive, sceptical, and appreciate that theories are always simplifications of a complex world, adopting this position over the rational positivist model would involve "reducing policy analysis to a casting of bones" (p. 125). Others have criticised this school of thought for failing to establish a robust theory of policy process – though such views are usually based on critical policy analysis not meeting the criteria of the positivist stance it is critiquing. Perhaps most famously, Sabatier (2000) defended the exclusion of post-positivist approaches from his 1999 text on public policy theory by stating that the lack of features such as testable hypotheses, sequential relationships, and the like meant that they did not meet the minimum scientific standard of "being clear enough to be proven wrong" (p. 138).

Some have responded to these criticisms by developing variant approaches that adhere more closely to traditional scientific standards, such as the Narrative Policy Framework model (Jones & McBeth, 2010; Jones, Shanahan, & McBeth, 2014). Conversely, others have responded out that while it is true that critical approaches do not provide a readymade toolkit for analysts, one reason for this is that the underlying philosophy of practice in the critical paradigm is one of pragmatism and methodological diversity; analysts should use

the tools that suit the particular context, including traditionally positivist tools when these are appropriate (Dryzek, 2008). From this perspective it is the way in which these tools are deployed – to expand the range of voices that have influence in policy processes – that distinguishes their position.

3.2 Language and Argumentation

A key feature of critical approaches to policy work is the attention they pay to the use of language in policy processes. The late twentieth century growth of post-positivism in which the approach emerged is often termed the ‘linguistic turn’ due to the importance it placed on the social role of language; “language is taken not as an instrument in social practice but rather as its ground” (Fynsk, 2001, p. 8913). Instead of treating language as a fundamentally neutral tool used simply to represent (or conceal) an essentially ‘true’ world that existed separately from the speaker, the linguistic turn involved positioning language as a system that establishes certain ways of thinking about phenomena (Hajer, 1993). Communication therefore does not simply reflect social structures, but plays an important role in constructing and maintaining those relationships. Chapter 4 discusses this stance in more detail, but the core effect of this was to refocus social analysis from looking simply at *what* is said,¹⁵ to also exploring *how* it is said and *why* it is said in that particular way, and what this reveals about social relationships (Wagenaar, 2011).

For critical policy analysis, this manifests itself in a concern with how language and communication is used to frame policy issues and how this influences the production of advice and decisions. For example, the narrative approach examines how officials construct policy scenarios through ‘stories’ – policy narratives – that describe situations and the potential effects of action or inaction (Roe 1994). These allow officials to make sense of an issue, but also marginalise particular ways of thinking or acting that fall outside the bounds of the narrative. Similarly, interpretive policy analysis is concerned with how language is used to establish the meaning of different aspects of a policy and transmit such meaning to others (Yanow, 1996, 2015).

¹⁵ ‘Said’ in this context not referring simply to spoken dialogue, but more broadly meaning the articulation of a concept and associated values, desirable behaviours, etc.

Language is an especially important element of the highly influential ‘argumentative’ strand within critical policy analysis, originally developed in the work of Majone (1989) and fully articulated in Fischer and Forester’s *The Argumentative Turn in Policy and Planning* (1993). As the name implies, this school of thought holds that the fundamental ‘unit of analysis’ for considering policy work is ‘the argument’; Majone (1989) defines an argument in this sense as the link between a given conclusion and evidence for it, while others define it as establishing that a given choice is or would be beneficial Saretzki (2015). Whereas the classical policy sciences approach idealises the world of policy as a laboratory in which truth can be ascertained through the application of reason, the argumentative approach frames policy work as more like a courtroom in which perspectives contest with each other to be adopted; “The policy analyst is a producer of policy arguments, more similar to a lawyer – a specialist in legal arguments – than an engineer or a scientist” (Majone, 1989, p. 21).

On one level, the notion that making arguments is an important part of policy work is not a controversial position; few would likely disagree that policy work almost inevitably involves debating with people who hold differing views and advocate different positions, and convincing others that a particular course of action should be followed. Where the argumentative model is distinctive, however, is in its view of the scope and nature of such arguments; for those working within the ‘argumentative turn’ all aspects of the policy process – from defining an issue to taking actions and making decisions – are defined by their basis in argument. As part of this, argumentative approaches accept that the term ‘argument’ has at least two meanings that are relevant to policy work, one analytical and one performative (Buchstein & Jorke, 2012; Fischer & Forester, 1993a). In its first sense, an argument is a technical object: an assemblage of ‘facts’ that justifies a particular conclusion. In its second sense, however, an argument is also an act of communication: it is not simply the case itself but also the *process* of making the case. The work of policy practitioners is therefore inherently one of articulation and presentation.

Moreover, in keeping with the post-positivist understanding of language described above and in Chapter 4, arguments are not seen as part of the positivist model of argumentation as a method of establishing ‘truth’; rather they embody particular representations of the world and assumptions of correct values and behaviours that their proponents wish to see adopted

(Fischer & Forester, 1993a). In this sense, arguments do not simply *support* policy decisions but can be said to *construct* them; policy work involves not simply amassing information to support a decision, but establishing – through argument – the dominance of a particular way of thinking about an issue and the nature of possible responses. In the words of Fischer and Gottweis (2012), “Policy making is fundamentally an ongoing discursive struggle over the definition and conceptual framing of problems, the public understanding of the issues, the shared meanings that motivate policy responses, and criteria for evaluation” (p. 7). This of course involves significant variation between contexts; the ‘ground rules’ for policy arguments in defence or health are likely to be quite different than the rules governing arguments in fiscal policy.¹⁶

The argumentative turn is therefore based on an understanding of policy work as a relational process in which policy actions are the result of actors communicating with each other in order to assert a) the existence or non-existence of a problem requiring action, b) the nature of the problem at hand, and c) the efficacy of a particular course of action to solve that problem. Language is not simply the neutral ‘means’ or tools by which these arguments are conducted, but the ‘medium’ in which they are created, transmitted, and contest with each other (Hajer, 1993). This approach points toward exploring policy processes through the ‘on the ground’ work and experiences of policy practitioners, focusing on the constructions they use to make sense of the world and issues they deal with, the types of arguments they develop and communicate as a result, and how these relate to broader social structures and systems. In Fischer’s (2003) words, the argumentative turn “... calls attention to the inclusion of some concerns and the exclusion of others, the distribution of responsibility as well as causality, the assigning of praise and blame, and the employment of particular political strategies of problem framing as opposed to others.” (p. 183).

3.3 The Role of Power

In addition to language, critical approaches to policy studies focus on the role of power in policy processes. Apple (2019) states that “Critical policy analysis is grounded in the belief

¹⁶ Although there may be attempts to ‘colonise’ the argumentation of different policy fields; the growth of New Public Management theory, for example, could be understood as an attempt to assert the supremacy of argumentative forms used in economic fields over the forms indigenous to other policy areas.

that it is absolutely crucial to understand the complex connections between [a policy area] and the relations of dominance and subordination in the larger society—and the movements that are trying to interrupt these relations” (p. 276) while Dryzek (2008) claims that “critical policy analysis specifies that the key task of analysis is enlightenment of those suffering at the hands of power in the interests of action on their part to escape suffering” (pp. 191–192). Such perspectives assume that power relationships form the basis of social structures, and given that policies emerge from these structures, they are therefore produced by – or at least reflect – those same power relationships.

Power is one of the most central concepts across the social sciences; its source(s), maintenance, and distribution is an underlying concern for many schools of thought, and as a concept it has generated over literal centuries a very large body of literature concerning its definition and nature (Haugaard & Clegg, 2013; Haugaard & Ryan, 2012; Hearn, 2012). And yet, for something that has attracted so much attention and is so key to understanding the way in which people experience the world, there is surprising little consensus around what phenomenon the term actually describes.¹⁷ For example, power can be equated to illegitimate dominance, such as when we talk about powerful stakeholders being able to affect policy processes to suit their own interests. On the other hand, power can also be equated with legitimacy and motivation, such as a powerful argument providing a clear reason to act in a certain way. Moreover, while popular conceptions might largely equate the concept with direct force and control, power can manifest in many different ways. Bachrach and Baratz (1970), for example, identify five forms of the overarching power phenomenon (*Power, Influence, Manipulation, Force, and Authority*), reserving the term ‘power’ specifically for achieving compliance through threats. Gohler (2013) notes that these different understandings and manifestations have a significant impact on how power is discussed; when power is equated with controlling or influencing the behaviour of others it is often framed as a negative phenomenon that needs to be minimised, while power defined as the ability to act in one’s *own* interest is often framed as a positive, desirable characteristic.

¹⁷ Indeed, Haugaard and Clegg (2013) effectively argue that modern literature on power is defined by its diversity and recognition that there is no single ‘true essence’ of power.

Drawing on Wittgenstein, Haugaard and Clegg (2013) argue that the diversity of such usages mean that it is futile try and develop a singular definition of the concept. Instead, it is better to approach power as a set of 'family resemblances' that "do *not* share a single essence. Rather they embody a cluster of concepts that share overlapping characteristics. . . . As a family resemblance concept, 'power' covers a cluster of social phenomena central to the constitution of social order" (Haugaard & Clegg, 2013, p. 4). In other words, while there may be common elements in how the term is used in different contexts, it does not have one single definition – even a contested one. Rather, what is meant by 'power' will inevitably differ in nature depending on the specific topic being discussed and the theoretical frame used to interpret that topic (Haugaard & Lentner, 2006).

Hearn (2012) provides a useful way of considering these different family resemblances through a series of five 'concept pairs' that concern key questions or issues within the study of power. These sets are themselves linked with each other,¹⁸ and each pair is best thought of not as a hard division between theorists, but rather as a series of continua representing the relative emphasis or importance a given theorist or school of thought gives to that particular dimension of power, or how they define themselves through rejection of the pair. For example, in his discussion of the *Structure-Agent* pairing Hearn argues that it makes sense to consider both structure and agency together – as in Giddens' structuration theory (Stones, 2013) – and Allen (1999) takes issue with the common *Power To* vs *Power Over* dichotomy and argues for a third form: *Power With* (the ability to act collectively). Rather than a device for categorising specific approaches to power, Hearn's pairs are intended as an aid for considering how to define power as a theoretical concept, in order to use it as tool for understanding society. In summary, these pairs consist of physical vs. social power, power 'over' vs. power 'to', asymmetrical vs. balanced relationships, structural vs. agentic power, and actual vs. potential power, and they are outlined further in the boxed text overleaf.

¹⁸ For example, the 'physical' construction of power as a resource to be expended has a clear connection to agentic rather than structural approaches, and emphasises actual over potential power.

Summary: Subject pairs in power theory (derived from Hearn, 2012)

Physical vs social: Whether power is possessed 'thing' that is applied to act on or in the world with clear material results (as in Russell's (2004) analogy of power as societal 'energy') or involves mobilisation and influence. The metaphor of political capital is an example of the physical viewpoint, in that it treats the power of a given government as a resource that is built up and expended to achieve particular actions. In contrast, social models see power as not a resource to be expended but a quality that is ascribed to or resides within something (with its direct effects often not easily visible).

Power 'over' vs power 'to': Stemming from Pitkin (1972), this refers to the exercise of power: whether it must involve the ability to control and affect others or can consist of the ability of an individual or a group to take action (irrespective of whether it affects or involves anyone else). The Barach and Baltz typology of power referred to earlier, based as it is on the ability to ensure compliance of others, is an example of *Power Over*, while Allen (1999) associates *Power To* with concepts of emancipation and resistance.

Asymmetrical vs balanced: Whether or not power inherently involves unbalanced 'zero-sum' relationships in which for one entity to possess or gain power, another entity must lack or lose power. The essence of the *asymmetrical* position is that power essentially disappears if everyone has equal amounts Wrong (1995). The alternative view is that it is possible for power (especially of the *power to* form noted above) to be equally possessed or gained by all players in a given context, or for entities to be bound together in such a way that it is difficult to say who has the greater power except regarding a very specific situation or from a specific perspective.

Structural vs agentic power: Whether power exists within discrete 'agents' who exercise power to specific intended ends, or can reside in more passive forms, such as macro-level economic, and cultural relationships separate from the people within them. Morriss (2002) distinguishes conceptually between 'influence' and 'power' on this basis; influence is about simply affecting the world in some way, while power involves purposefully effecting the existence of a desired action or end-state. As structures cannot express desires and have goals in their own right, power has to ultimately be possessed and used by particular agents. Conversely, the core of *structural* formulations is that relationships such as class,

gender, and national identity have power through their effect on phenomena such as group behaviour or the distribution of resources.

Actual vs potential: Whether power exists only when it is actively exercised, or whether the actions of others in anticipation of an entity's desires should be treated as equally important. For example, theorists in the pluralist tradition such as Dahl (1957), generally hold that identifying the existence of power requires a visible demonstration that one actor is changing their behaviour due to the desires of another. The contrasting view is that power can exist without explicitly being exercised – that power is a quality that can be possessed and have effects even when it is not clearly used. This widens the scope for possible manifestation of power, such as leading others to adopt one's values or interests as their own, but has been criticised for being inherently subjective and unclear.

Based on these pairs, popular conceptions of power be said to draw on *physical*, *power over*, *asymmetrical*, *agentic*, and *actual* elements of these pairs: power is a thing that is possessed by certain people or groups that means they can make others do things in the interest of that person or group. However, the perception of power that underlies critical policy studies – as with most modern theories of power (Haugaard & Clegg, 2013) – takes a more socially constructivist view. This draws on the *social*, *balanced*, *structural*, and *potential* sides of the relevant continua to emphasise the nature of power as a relationship between entities; power is not a specific quality to be possessed but rather a quality of systems and structures that leads people (policy practitioners in the context of this research) to act in certain ways (produce particular forms of policy in particular ways). At the same time, the emphasis within critical policy studies on emancipatory ideals such as social justice and community empowerment points to its focus on a *power over* model. Such a stance can be referred to as a *domination* conception of power (Hearn, 2012) which emphasises the deep or invisible ways in which power relationships regulate actions and social order, such as by constructing what is seen as normal behaviour or values in a particular context (Fischer, 2003).

In the context of this research, however, it is important to recognise that these domination structures are not the only power influences on policy practitioners. Officials are also subject to many formal and semi-formal power structures that shape and constrain their actions and advice, including management structures, statutory requirements, and the primacy of

Ministers and their offices. Former Minister of Finance Michael Cullen's dismissal of the New Zealand Treasury's 2005 Briefing to the Incoming Minister as an "ideological burp" (Taylor, 2005) is a public example of how these supposedly 'shallower' forms can trump the deep forms of power within an organisation. Given that this research focuses on practitioner experiences, it is important that these power relationships are acknowledged when considering how power might shape engagement with evidence. In this context, Lukes' (2005) Three-Dimensional model provides a useful way of approaching power in policy work.

In Lukes' formulation, power is a quality that structures relationships, and can be thought as involving three layers or dimensions. The first of these, and probably the closest to a 'common' understanding of power, is essentially based around the explicit ability to force particular actions (including decisions) to be taken. This can be exercised through formal structures, such as laws or hierarchies, or more informal ways such as through lobbying. A critical element of this, however, is that such power is conscious, agentic, and necessarily observable; power involves someone being able to get "... *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise do" (Dahl, 1957, p. 203), and must be seen to clearly influence behaviour before it can be said to be possessed (Polsby, 1963). The second dimension of power – most closely associated with the work of Bachrach and Baratz (1962, 1970) – involves digging underneath this visible layer to explore the role power plays not simply in causing specific decisions to be made, but also in the creation of 'non-decisions'. This concept relates to ensuring that certain phenomena are not subject to question, that challenges are confined only to marginal aspects of that phenomena, or that particular approaches to an issue are dismissed as invalid before they are actually examined (Cairney 2012). In terms of policy development, this dimension concerns power over the setting of policy agendas. It involves being able to establish a given issue as something that requires public action rather than being a private concern – a 'policy problem' requiring a 'solution' – and being able to affect how that problem is framed, such as treating excessive gun violence as primarily a criminal or mental health issue, rather than about access to firearms. Elite groups in a given context can use their control over procedures, social and organisational patronage, and similar tools to secure their interests and position by ensuring that potential threats to the status quo are kept away from public consideration (Bachrach & Baratz, 1970).

The third dimension in Luke's formulation is both the most powerful and the most complex, and involves establishing certain behaviours or viewpoints as natural, normal, or inevitable. This dimension has many similarities to the forms of social control associated with such concepts as Bourdieu's *habitus* (1977), Foucault's *governmentality* (1991), and Gramsci's *hegemony* (Femia, 1987); linking all of these accounts is a rejection of the notion that power must involve conscious action by 'the powerful' upon a given subject. Instead, the strongest forms of power are those which involve shaping how people understand the nature of the world. Where both the first and second dimensions of power involve understanding the role of power in shaping conflicts between different interests, the third dimension involves avoiding such conflict in the first place by leading the marginalised to adopt the interests of the powerful as their own (Lukes (2005)).¹⁹ By controlling what is perceived to be the ordinary state of affairs; people essentially become active in their own 'subjugation'.

A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants. Indeed, is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have – that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires? (Lukes, 2005, p. 27)

For Lukes, these three dimensions concern definitions of what power involves and establishing a normative prescription of where analysis of power relationships should focus; a 'liberal' theorist will focus on one-dimensional power, but a 'radical' theorist should focus on three-dimensional power. However, the model itself is also useful for understanding how different forms of power relate to the experiences of policy practitioners. As noted earlier, officials are subject to formal power relationships such as reporting lines, ministerial decisions, or the requirements of Budget processes – these are examples of the first dimension of power. Beyond this, certain policy conclusions or types of advice might be recognised as possible but not followed up, or framed in certain ways, in anticipation or

¹⁹ Lukes' reference here to 'real interests' has drawn criticism from those who see this as redolent of the concept of false consciousness, and thus intrinsically problematic. However, following Haugaard (2003, cited in Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006)), the problems raised by positing a 'false' and a 'real' consciousness can be resolved through replacing this with 'practical' and 'discursive' consciousness. In this position, practical consciousness is what allows us to live our day-to-day lives, and the role of the radical theorist is to "make actors aware of aspects of their practical consciousness, knowledge that they have never previously confronted in a discursive fashion ... Thus social critique involves converting practical consciousness into [critical] discursive consciousness" (Clegg et al., 2006, p. 216).

reflection of the individual characteristics of ministers or the position of particular groups – examples of the second dimension. Although government agencies have their own internal logics that govern how practitioners think of an issue and possibly the advice they would *like* to provide, the requirements of a particular minister or the view of an influential stakeholder group that this is caused by issue X rather than Y may ultimately have a more significant effect on a given policy issue. These three dimensions can be seen as having a foundational relationship to each other: the third form structures the broad values and context in which policymakers will act, the second form establishes what will and will not be seen as an issue requiring action within that context and the range of possible policy options, and the first form then structures the particular advice, actions, and outcomes that are produced through the process. Lukes' work thus links both the deep cultural types of power relationships which create unexamined assumptions and beliefs that structure policymakers' approaches to their work, and the visible power relationships that directly affect practice.

3.4 The Challenge for Evidence-based Policy

The vision of policy development and formulation put forward by critical approaches presents a significant challenge for EBP advocates. However formulated, a positivist conception of policy work lies at the heart of the evidence-based policy movement. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 2 the policy sciences model can be seen as part of the intellectual heritage of the modern EBP movement. The common definition of EBP as a doctrine of "what matters is what works" (Davies et al., 2000, p. 1) presupposes the notion that 'what works' will be clear – or at least is relatively amenable to discovery – and can be agreed upon independently of the structures and norms that are of concern to critical perspectives on policy. Social and cultural factors might be taken into account when implementing a policy; for example, an effort might be made to understand what messages will resonate with a particular community and so encourage particular behaviours. However, the classic EBP position holds that the intrinsic value of a policy exists independently of these contextual factors. After all, if value lies purely in 'what works' but asking what works will lead to different answers depending on the perspective or situation of those asking and those responding, then on what basis can we argue for any position? Indeed, the whole point of evidence is that it supposedly transcends the effects of existing social structures,

preconceptions, and personal values, and represents a 'true' objective reality on which a policy practitioner can base their analysis and advice.

Critical policy analysis, however, rejects this position. The approaches sitting under this umbrella are all associated with the emergence of post-positivist theories of society, systems, and structures, and hold that knowledge and meaning are largely contingent, in that they emerge from particular historical and socio-cultural patterns. And beyond that, the paradigm effect (Kuhn, 1996) makes equitably comparing the results of evidence generated through different epistemic traditions especially difficult, given that they involve different accepted research practices, methods of interpretation, and even understandings of core concepts.²⁰ Even if they have the fairest of intentions, a practitioner will be approaching information with preconceptions about the features that constitute quality research, derived from the paradigm within which they operate. From such a perspective, developing a universally-applicable statement of 'what works' as an abstract concept is therefore an essentially impossible task. The work of policy practitioners cannot be separated from the environment in which they practice, the desirability of a given course of action will always involve the application of subjective judgement, and the evidence used to determine what works will almost always be partial and contestable.

Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 2, there is a tendency amongst EBP advocates to equate improving the quality and frequency of evidence use by practitioners with using the right *type* of evidence. Historically, EBP has often been taken as synonymous with a drive for greater use of quantitative data and positivist research designs as the primary influence on policy decisions (Hammersley, 2013; Wiseman, 2010). From a critical stance, however, this involves excluding or devaluing particular forms of evidence or analysis that have just as much explanatory power as economic modelling, large-scale surveys, or the like (Biesta, 2007, 2010). The emphasis placed on RCTs in particular as the 'gold standard' for evidence has been critiqued as presenting a relatively naïve vision of not just the policy process, but of how knowledge is generated and synthesised (Greenhalgh, 2012; Pearce & Raman, 2014). From this viewpoint, the value of evidence derives not from an inherent quality (for

²⁰ For example, whether the term 'theory' refers to a potential explanation for phenomena that can be proved or disproved, or an interpretive lens used to make sense of a phenomenon (Abend, 2008).

example, a randomised double-blind control trial is potentially no better or worse than a focus group), but rather because of decisions made by those engaging with it. Sources or types of information may be treated as constituting more valid evidence in one context than another, but this is due to the overt and covert social 'rules' that govern behaviour and perceptions of value in a setting – rules that often exist because they align with the interests of elite groups in that setting (Fischer & Gottweis, 2012; Sanderson, 2002; Yanow, 2000).

In the critical paradigm, both generating and using knowledge are not the neutral and objective processes portrayed by EBP advocates, but rather inherently political acts.²¹ For example, privileging large-scale quantitative data as the basis for policy inherently advantages those with access to such data or the resources to collect it, marginalises topics and areas where such data does not exist, and strengthens the influence of those who develop the 'accepted' systems, definitions, and methods relating to the capture of such data. Moreover – referring back to the argumentative perspective described earlier – this establishes the effective rules for policy argumentation. People and communities who are not able to present their position or engage with an argument in terms of the 'language' of such data can at best hope to provide supplementary material in the evidentiary process. This is a core plank of the critique noted in Chapter 2 that the EBP movement represents a 'technocratic impulse'

Similarly, one of the key rationales put forward for adopting evidence-based approaches to policy is to reduce other influences on the policy process, and particularly the power that can be wielded by particular interest groups (Kay, 2011). Power in this sense is treated as an obstacle to using information effectively, and something that the implementation of EBP needs to overcome. However, this stems from a focus on the 'one-dimensional' form of power discussed above, in which the concept is largely defined as forcing another to act in one's own interest, or winning a particular clash of interests. As discussed above, more sophisticated understandings of power see it as a multifaceted concept that includes not just control over action, but influence over when decisions are and are not perceived as necessary, and the construction of our basic 'common-sense' assumptions about how the

²¹ 'Political' in this context referring to the ordering of society and distribution of power, rather than electoral or government systems.

world should work (Egan & Chorbajian, 2005). In this sense, power relationships suffuse approaches to understanding and acting in the world, and the social structures that produce policies will inevitably embody those relationships.

From a positivist viewpoint, within a given issue or situation there is a single 'truth' about that phenomenon that exists independently of personal or social values; because of this, there therefore must exist a single correct way of thinking about a given topic and a single truly 'right' policy answer. If all else is equal – there is access to all relevant information, skilled analysis, and irrational influences such as 'ideology' or 'politics' are removed – then every practitioner would come to the same conclusions and provide the same policy advice. This characterisation of policy processes may help explain the apparently contradictory association between the growing popularity of EBP and decreasing public trust in experts noted by Solesbury (2001). As discussed earlier, the positivist model positions policy work as a fundamentally linear activity (represented through classic stage-based models such as the policy cycle), with policy development existing as a series of largely independent isolated events, and best understood through examining the work of structures and 'leaders' (Colebatch et al., 2010b). This in turn situates the practitioner as ideally having a relatively passive epistemic position. The role of a policy analyst is to access, understand, and present existing knowledge to clearly identify 'what works' and therefore what should be done in a situation; they do not generate new interpretations, and knowledge generated primarily through their practice (or *techne* (Tenbensel, 2006)) has little value in decisions. In this framework the idea of *professional judgement* (deriving from the experience and informed views of an official) is less important for providing advice than the more 'objective' concept of *technical capability*.

This also relies on constructing evidence as a reified object – a thing that exists in its own right. In contrast, expertise is a thing that resides within people. If the relationship between evidence and expertise is severed, so that the latter is not seen as a prerequisite for using or understanding the former, then it becomes possible to apply 'evidence' without the involvement of 'experts'. Rather than being skilled at understanding the meaning of evidence, experts instead become framed as gatekeepers who control access to evidence, and thus EBP becomes to some a call to let the evidence speak for itself, rather than be subject to

possible distortions from this elite group. Increasing distrust of the role of experts in the development of policy does not necessarily mean that the public sees less of a role for the knowledge generated through disciplines such as economics, psychology, or environmental science. Rather, it is distrust in the importance given to expert *interpretation* of that knowledge. In its worst forms, this can be seen in calls to “do the research” which have become emblematic of anti-vaccination movements, COVID-19 conspiracy theories, and the Trump-Qanon axis. Such cries are grounded not simply in denial of evidence but also in the supposed existence of ‘real’ evidence which can be found by determined personal effort.

In contrast to the positivist model of policy work, critical perspectives position the practitioner as an active participant in the creation of policy outcomes. Policy work cannot be thought of as a process for finding the ‘right’ solution to a problem, primarily because there is no such thing as a single objectively (or at least relatively objectively) correct solution. As Majone (1989) puts it, “to say anything of importance in public policy requires value judgments, which must be explained and justified” (p. 21). Moreover, policy work is an activity that not only has effects on social structures, but is also subject to such effects. Policy work can therefore be thought of as what Bourdieu terms a *social field* (Schirato & Roberts, 2018); in keeping with the argumentative turn discussed earlier, the policy process is a space within which different actors and perspectives contest with each other, making their case for specific ways of thinking about an issue, and attempt to convince a relevant authority of its value. These arguments exist in all aspects of policy, including how policies are framed and defined amongst participants in policy processes, how they are communicated more widely, the appropriateness of responses, and how their success is evaluated (Stone, 1988, 2012).

While all but the most hard-line advocates for EBP would likely accept that the nature of evidence means that in most cases some professional judgement will need to be exercised – and as discussed in Chapter 2 allied movements in medicine, social work, and the like placed significant importance on such judgement – this is often viewed as more of a necessary evil than an inevitable element of good policy work. As noted earlier, however, the core problem here is that the more recognition is given to the role of context and judgement, the weaker becomes the claim that EBP offers a distinct approach to the practice

of policy. It becomes a statement to the effect of ‘we should do what we think is going to work’ rather than EBP’s guiding philosophy that ‘we should do what will work’.

However, adopting a critical perspective does not mean that we need to discard the notion of evidence-based policy altogether. Indeed, Fischer and Forester (1993a) and Majone (1989), writing before the emergence of the EBP movement, place significant importance on evidence use as a basis for understanding and evaluating policy development. However, it leads toward understanding evidence-based policy on two levels. Firstly, it changes the frame of what evidence use within policy work actually means. The first point lies in conceiving of policy work as a process of argumentation alluded to earlier. Information is a key requirement for most arguments – other than those involving pure principle – to occur. However, it is practitioners working within a policy process that transform a piece of ‘information’ into a piece of ‘evidence’ by giving it a particular meaning, linking it to other pieces of information, and associating it with a specific position in policy debates. When we talk about the *use of evidence* in this sense, then, we are actually talking about engaging in a process of *evidence-making*: establishing particular arrangements of information that can be used to support a particular policy argument – including deciding not to characterise certain pieces of information as evidence. Secondly, it points us towards the position articulated by Wesselink et al. (2014) that EBP represents less a distinctive *approach* to policy practice than it does a distinctive style of *positioning* particular policy outcomes. Rather than appealing to, for example, cultural mores, moral principles, or even legal foundations as the basis for a given decision, EBP involves appealing to the authority of a supposed outside party as the basis for a given policy.

From this viewpoint, the adoption of a particular policy output is based not on the extent to which that output can refer to a valid ‘truth-claim’ — as in the policy-rationalist approach — but rather the extent to which others accept it: that others agree that *a* is (or is not) an issue, that *b* is an appropriate way of thinking about that issue, and that *c* constitutes the best policy or set of policies to address *b*. This significantly changes how to think about analysing the results of policy, because it leads to a focus on *why* or *how* particular policy decisions are reached, and why a given perspective had such persuasive capacity — and notably it assumes that this process is not a neutral one, but one that privileges certain meanings,

goals, and stakeholders. Where rationalist approaches start from an assumption that all those involved in a policy process should have equal influence and see power imbalances as likely to create the 'wrong' outcome, interpretive approaches assume that outcomes from a policy process inherently reflect of how power is distributed between different participants. In Fischer's (2003) words, thinking of policy work as a form of argument "calls attention to the inclusion of some concerns and the exclusion of others, the distribution of responsibility as well as causality, the assigning of praise and blame, and the employment of particular political strategies of problem framing as opposed to others" (p. 183).

Taking an evidence-based lens to analysing policy work thus means not focusing on whether evidence has been used or whether the 'right' decisions have been made. Instead, it involves considering what types of information have been constituted as evidence in a given situation by different groups, exploring why that occurred, and analysing the role that these different pieces of evidence played in policy decisions or advice. In other words, the critical question in understanding the position and nature of EBP is not whether or not a given policy is based on evidence, but rather how have the policy practitioners involved in its development used the concept of evidence to argue for (or against) implementing a particular outcome or taking a particular position. In this sense, evidence-based policy is not something that *is* or *is not* done, but rather a way of thinking about and positioning policy practice in relationship to specific contexts and concepts.

Focusing on evidence-making processes and the importance of positioning situates the practitioner — rather than organisational systems and structures — as the key determinant of the nature of evidence within policy creation and implementation. An exploration of this should, therefore, emphasise examining those involved in the daily practice of policy rather than 'leaders' or structures. (Noordegraaf 2010) terms this a 'second order' approach, in which practitioners are considered to exist as both agentic people in their own right and as subjects of structures that shape and constrain how they are able to approach their work. Officials therefore exercise a form of bounded autonomy, with limits set by formalised processes (such as codes of conduct, ministerial directives, strategies, and work plans), traditions and accepted practice, and underlying cultural values. When working within a rationalist policy paradigm, attention naturally falls on formal systems, structures, and

policy leaders, as these are intended to set the rules by which the process of policy development operates. 'Good' policy practice is a process of following and applying these rules to specific cases and instances. From an interpretive perspective on policy, however, focusing on these aspects of policy work presents only half an account of the policy process. The work of officials is certainly subject to and directed by the operation of formal processes. However, those structures manifest through their effect on the actions of practitioners. To properly understand policy — including how evidence is mobilised within policy — therefore requires looking at the way in which policymakers participate in these argumentative processes. This includes such aspects as how practitioners select and discard different forms of information, whom they regard as trustworthy and untrustworthy sources (and why), ways in which evidence might *implicitly* inform advice and decisions, and indeed, what practitioners see as 'evidence' in the first place. If the interest is — in broad terms — in encouraging 'better' use of information and research within the policy process, then it is critical that what occurs at this micro-level is understood. When policy workers are asked or told to undertake their work in an 'evidence-based way', what do *they* understand this to mean?

4 Exploring Policy Practice Through Interpretive Repertoires

Where Chapter 3 discussed the theory of policy that underpins this thesis, in this chapter I outline the methodological theory that has shaped my inquiry.²² It is worth noting that this research was conducted within what Anfara and Mertz (2006) term a ‘theory as more’ orientation, in which the theoretical elements of the work have played an important part in all aspects of the project. The broad theoretical framework for this research – discourse analysis – has shaped this thesis from the beginning of the work, including framing of the concept to be explored, to the data that is collected, and how that data is explored for meaning.²³ In other words, part of the purpose of this research has specifically been to explore the notion of evidence-based policy, and practitioners’ engagement with it, from a discursive perspective.

In this chapter I firstly discuss the key elements of discourse analysis as a broad theoretical approach, and its use as a method for analysing public policy. I then discuss the specific strand I draw on in this thesis – critical discursive psychology – and specifically how the concept of Interpretive Repertoires central to this approach can contribute to understanding policy issues and policy work in particular.

4.1 Features and Theories of Discourse Analysis

4.1.1 Background and Emergence

Discourse analysis is a label covering a diverse set of research methodologies drawing on a range of different theoretical and disciplinary foundations, including those of critical linguistics, sociology, psychology, and more (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). While unified by a focus on ‘discourse’ as the key organising principle, the wide-ranging heritage of the various discursive approaches under this umbrella means that discourse analysis is a field characterised by heterogeneity. Different schools are characterised by focusing analysis on

²² Please note that elements of this chapter have been presented in Huntington, Wolf, and Bryson (2019).

²³ Anfara and Mertz (2006) contrast this approach to orientations that do not engage strongly with existing theory – sometimes, as with grounded theory, in order to allow theory to emerge unhindered from the research – and orientations that associate theory primarily with methodology.

different types of phenomena, the methods and tools used to explore them, and the nature of key concepts deployed to interpret the findings. For example, (Taylor, 2013) highlights the difference in emphasis between strands that adopt a linguistic emphasis and focus on how people's language use is connected to social phenomena such as identity and presentation, and strands that are interested in how large-scale social structures (such as gender) are represented and maintained through the language people use. Both highlight the relationship between social phenomena and language, but simplistically, the 'linguistic' group incorporates social context into the study of language and communication, while the 'social' group is interested in exploring what language use can demonstrate about social order and society as a whole. This difference is perhaps best illustrated through debates between the 'micro-sociological' focus of Conversation Analysis on defined instances of communication in specific settings, Critical Discourse Analysis' focus on how social power relationships are actively represented (and resisted) through language, and Post-structural/Foucauldian Discourse Analysis' focus on high-level societal patterns over how language is used in practice (Angermuller, Maingueneau, & Wodak, 2014; Fairclough, 2013). As the name indicates, however, all approaches are interested in exploring social phenomena through the concept of discourse.

Discourse analysis as a broad approach is defined primarily by its focus on language, communication, and meaning as the way to explore and develop understanding(s) of particular concepts, social structures, and behaviours. It is epistemologically constructivist in that it assumes our knowledge of the world derives not from interacting with things that have a more-or-less objective existence prior to our experiences, but rather from a system of socially constructed meanings that we ascribe to those phenomena.²⁴ Gill (2000), for example, argues that all discursive approaches share a concern with communication as a thing in its own right rather than simply as a method of describing an external reality, the idea that language is both 'constructed' and 'constructive', the notion that using language constitutes a type of social action, and finally the notion that discourses are 'rhetorically

²⁴ For example, in the clichéd koan regarding trees falling in forests, the Constructivist perspective would hold that the tree does not inherently make a sound because the concept of 'making a sound' only makes sense in the context of a human both perceiving noise and constructing that as the product of a given tree.

organised' — that they are designed to establish the dominance of particular meanings.²⁵

Similarly, in the words of Jørgensen and Phillips (2002),

Discourse analytical approaches take as their starting point the claim of structuralist and poststructuralist linguistic philosophy, that our access to reality is always through language. With language, we create representations of reality that are never mere reflections of a pre-existing reality but contribute to constructing reality. That does not mean that reality itself does not exist. Meanings and representations are real. Physical objects also exist, but they only gain meaning through discourse. (pp. 8–9)

Thus, ways of talking are ways of understanding specific concepts or phenomena that allow someone to make sense of things, to understand how to interact with them, and to relate them to other features of the world. An important element emphasised in the quotation above is that emphasising the importance of discourse does not involve, as it is sometimes caricatured, claiming there is no such thing as 'reality'. The physical world exists, and events occur irrespective of people's perceptions. However, the *meaning* that people ascribe to these features and phenomena is flexible and shifts depending on the context of the person or group perceiving and talking about them. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) put it,

An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of 'natural phenomena' or 'expressions of the wrath of God' depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied [by the concept of discourse] is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive conditions of emergence. (p. 108)

This focus on the relationship between language and meaning emerged as part of the same mid-late twentieth century linguistic turn that underpinned the development of critical policy studies as discussed in the previous chapter. It developed in large part as a reaction against orthodox Marxism's dominance of critical approaches to understanding society, and

²⁵ Discourses may also lead to privileging specific groups alongside those meaning. For example, political discourses that characterise property rights more positively than state intervention may disproportionately benefit those with wealth, and all discourses marginalise those who do not fit well within their order (for example, binary gender discourses do not cope well with transgender people). However, such inequities are outcomes from the meaning that the discourse establishes rather than being produced directly by it.

a growing sense that its basis in nineteenth century economic production led it to ignore or marginalise categories of oppression and exploitation such as gender, ethnicity, or sexuality. Such challenges emphasised both that the interests of people represented by these categories had been largely ignored in social and political analysis, and that prioritising their perspectives often involved reinterpreting existing ways of understanding relatively accepted phenomena. For example, Postcolonial approaches reconstructed national identity (or at least that of indigenous people colonised by the West) so that it was not a tool for oppression and division but rather a unifying, emancipatory concept.²⁶ Similarly, Feminist approaches to labour studies and the concept of work highlighted not only the greater exploitation of women within employment compared to men regardless of class (thus challenging the notion that exploitation stemmed purely from the organisation of economic production) but also identified how definitions of 'work' failed to recognise the social and economic significance of the labour involved in women's traditional roles (see, for example, (Haraway, 1994; Hartmann, 1979).

The emergence of these 'New Left' challenges was particularly strong in France, where they were accompanied in the 1960s by first the application and then critique of concepts from Saussure's Structural linguistics to non-linguistic areas through the work of theorists such as Lacan, Althusser, and Lévi-Strauss. Structuralism starts from the point that language fundamentally consists of two elements: the 'signified' – a physical or ideational object being referred to – and the 'signifier' – the term used to refer to that object (such as 'mouse', 'birthday', or 'employment'). The association between these two elements (termed the process of signification) is linguistically arbitrary in that the signifier 'mouse' could just as easily be associated with hats or mountains as its signified object, so the meaning of the signifier does not depend on its relationship to the pre-existing world of signified things. Instead, meaning is derived from the signifier's relationship to other signifiers within a system or network of meanings which establishes that meaning, relates that meaning to other signifiers, and establishes opposition and difference within the signifier. For example, the meaning of 'mouse' establishes notions of what a mouse is not, while the meanings

²⁶ Often ironically echoing European nationalist movements of the nineteenth century, though as Doran (2019) notes postcolonial theory has an ambivalent relation with the notion of nationalism and has often been highly critical of actual nationalist movements.

associated with that term allow someone to be described as physically having 'mousy' brown hair or abstractly as having a 'mousy' personality. Societal (as opposed to linguistic) Structuralists extended this theory to social structures and concepts: phenomena and categories like class or gender did not exist objectively in their own right, but were rather signifiers existing within a network that gave them meaning (a semiotic order). The goal of Structuralist approaches to social phenomena was to identify societal counterparts to Saussure's *langue* – the underlying system that established these meanings; as Wagenaar (2011) characterises it: "Forget about the individual actor and his subjective experiences. Reveal the large, anonymous symbolic structures that govern individual behavior and consciousness" (p. 109).

Structuralism might have formed the basis for injecting language into social analysis, but it swiftly came under criticism. Most notably, the post-structural strand of critique spearheaded initially by Derrida and later closely associated with the work of Foucault accepted the fundamental point that social phenomena are essentially symbols. However, it also pointed out that Structuralist approaches treated the structures they uncovered as largely deterministic and static; 'class' might be a symbolic representation rather than an objective thing, but the meaning of that symbol was to a large extent permanently fixed by the underlying order that produced it. In contrast, post-structuralists focused on the point that symbolic meanings – including their relationship to other symbols – shifted over time and often contained a level of 'slippage' or ambiguity that relied on the particular situation in which a term was used to resolve. Similarly, in most cases there are a range of particular terms and meanings that could potentially be used to describe a situation or concept. For example, talking about a piece of undeveloped land in economic terms as a resource for development means choosing not to talk about that land in environmental terms as a source of ecological diversity, or as a site of spiritual or historical significance. The type of orders that Structuralism focuses on provide little explanation for how this selection process occurs.

In other words, meaning – and by extension the social phenomena and actions constructed through those meanings – is not established by the sort of fixed structures that Structuralists focused on, but is both linked to contextual and established through decisions that people make (Howarth, 2000). In place of uncovering objective rules that govern human behaviour

and social phenomena, then, post-structural theorists (and others influenced by them) concentrated on how specific types of interpretation were established and sustained, and the relationship between interpretation and social structures (Angermuller et al., 2014). Conceptually, discourse represents this more fluid approach to the association between language, meaning, structures, and action; a discourse embodies a semiotic order that is not fixed and unchanging but rather exists within a particular time, place, and culture.

4.1.2 Defining Discourse

In its most simple form, Discourse refers to the way in which communication is structured at a level beyond the expression of single concepts – what Stubbs (1983) refers to as “language above the sentence or above the clause” (p. 1). Just as rules of grammar and syntax organise individual words into phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that communicate meaning – expressing a specific idea or describing a specific thing – so discourse creates a framework to structure the process of communication itself; “a discourse provides a set of possible statements about a given area, and organizes and gives structure to the manner in which a particular topic, object, process is to be talked about” (Kress, 1989, p. 7). Importantly, however, a discourse is not simply a set of rules for selecting and organising linguistic units and statements into a specific text (a book, speech etc.), but encompasses how that productive process is connected to phenomena outside the person or people involved in it. From a discursive perspective, the actual meaning of a piece of communication exists not only in the strict definition of words used, but in how and why those words have been used in that particular setting.

Furthermore, in discursive approaches people are not assumed to be autonomous or objective communicators, and are not necessarily assumed to make linguistic choices in a fully conscious way. Rather, their language use – not simply word choice, but the *way* in which they use language – is shaped by the social and cultural environment in which they operate. Communication thus has both a functional purpose (such as asking someone to do something or describing an object) and a symbolic purpose (such as positioning the speaker as more powerful than the listener or characterising an object as either desirable or unpleasant). In counterpoint to the traditional view of language as a fundamentally neutral vehicle for imparting information about states, behaviours, facts, or things, the discursive

perspective holds that the way things are talked about is fundamentally *productive* or *constructive* (Billig, 1996; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In traditional understanding, communication is simply a conduit for transmitting concepts and ideas; in this model language is a neutral medium that allows a speaker to 'encode' ideas and concepts and one or more recipients to 'decode' them (Taylor, 2013). Communication is positioned as equivalent to the infrastructure that allows cellular or broadband information to be uploaded and downloaded, and like a modem or mobile phone is generally irrelevant to how that information is produced or used. In discursive approaches, however, language provides a set of connected meanings that allow a person to make sense of an object or concept, and thus to meaningfully engage with it in some way. In this sense language is not "merely a channel through which information about underlying mental states and behaviour or facts about the world are communicated. On the contrary, language is a 'machine' that generates, and as a result constitutes, the social world" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 9).

As a simple example, during the current pandemic a military or wartime discourse (involving phrases such as 'the war on COVID-19', 'winning the battle', or 'under siege') has emerged in many countries; this presents the disease as an anthropomorphised enemy currently attacking the country, and something that can be defeated by coordinated collective action. For speechwriters and politicians, making use of this discourse might be a deliberate rhetorical tactic, but its effectiveness is not predicated on the listener explicitly seeing the virus as equivalent to a military threat. Rather, the language used makes the speaker unconsciously connect COVID and an invasion force, and thus associate actions and behaviours they are asked to do or accept as equivalent to those that might be asked of them during invasion by another country. The wartime discourse invokes concepts such as making sacrifices for the benefit of others, that authority structures must sometimes take drastic actions to 'win', and the need for unity against a common foe. Such a discourse encourages feelings of solidarity, willingness to adhere to public health measures, and arguably provides comfort by implying that the disease can be 'defeated' if 'we' are 'strong enough'. It encourages people to accept what might otherwise be seen as overly-intrusive restrictions on behaviour, and equates transgressions against those restrictions as betrayal of a national effort.

Discourse is therefore not just 'grammar writ large' but refers to the social process whereby language is connected to a context and interpreted by others (Widdowson, 2004). Hajer (1993) characterises this as "an ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena" (p. 45), while Howarth (2000) refers to discourses as "historically specific systems of meaning which form the identities of subjects and objects" (p. 9). They can apply to tangible material things, such as land, social concepts that involve people and relationships (such as ethnicity or gender), and purely ideational concepts like morality or accountability. From this they set out a (relatively) coherent framework that allows a given topic to be defined in a particular way – what possible meanings are ruled in or ruled out as acceptable (Hall, 2001) – and present a pre-existing set of legitimate and illegitimate behaviours attached to those definitions. Analysing discourse thus involves looking not just at the direct concepts expressed through the specific words which have written down or said, but the way in which they are produced, how different elements within a text are connected to each other (and to elements outside the text), and often what possible meanings are absent. The discursive position holds that through examining these processes, relationships, and exclusions, it is possible to better capture the full significance and meaning of a given instance of language. In addition, by extension a given text provides inductive evidence for the social forces, cultural values, and accepted meanings that lay behind its production.

Bringing these points together, Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) identify the foundational principles common to all discursive approaches as "a critical approach to taken-for-granted knowledge ... historical and cultural specificity ... a link between knowledge and social processes ... and a link between knowledge and social action" (pp. 5–6). The first two principles relate to the nature of our interaction with the world; these hold that the world around us cannot be 'known' directly, but rather that in order to interact with and make sense of things we have to interpret them through frameworks that establish their meaning. Moreover, these frameworks are not universal but rather vary across different historical, geographical, and/or sociocultural contexts. Critically, different frameworks are not inherently 'right' or 'wrong'; although people may find them more or less useful in certain circumstances, they have no objective truth-value in their own right. The second and third principles are extensions of this point: the frameworks used to interpret the world are

produced and transmitted to people through the social world in which they participate, and societies and communities encourage people to privilege some frameworks for understanding the world over others.

This leads to the final core principle, that the frameworks we use lead us to see certain things as natural or unnatural and desirable or undesirable, which in turn steers us towards accepting or rejecting certain situations and behaviours; “Different social understandings of the world lead to different social actions, and therefore the social construction of knowledge and truth has social consequences” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 6). A corollary of this is that – as noted earlier – there are multiple ways to provide an account of a given phenomenon, object, or situation, and engaging in oral or written ‘talk’ requires choosing one of these accounts as primary. To take a simple example, the way that a public health physician talks about fats and sugars is likely different to the way that a chef talks about those same aspects of food. The *medical discourse* used by the doctor focuses on the effects that (over)consumption may have on populations and likely emphasises the dangers that these pose, while the chef’s *culinary discourse* focuses on the effects that they have on the taste, consistency, and other features of a meal. Neither of these are inherently right or wrong. Instead, each represents a particular way of conceptualising these food elements (meaning), and whether they are to be thought of as a potential risk to health, or as a contributor to dining experience (description and understanding). Within those discourses there will be debates over the ‘right’ course of action, such as the right selection of spices to use in a dish or for how long to cook it. But those are occurring within a pre-existing framework of more or less agreed statements about shared goals and practices; chefs will not generally argue over which spices will or will not address ischaemic heart disease but instead over which will result in a tastier meal.

From this perspective it is not possible to talk about something without taking a position on how it should be seen, which involves closing off other ways of interpreting a concept. In this sense, language is not simply a vehicle for purely linguistic or communicative action, but for social action as well (Billig, 1996). As a result, the concept of discourse is usually seen as closely intertwined with the concept of power (Taylor, 2013). On one level, discourses often ascribe particular roles and power relationships to people in a given social setting; for

example, the traditional teacher-student discourse allocates authority between participants in a learning situation in particular ways, and establishes constraints on how those occupying each role should act (Fairclough, 2001). However, Fairclough (2001) notes that in addition to such cases of power manifesting *in* discourse, power also sits *behind* discourse. In other words, discourses are not neutral systems of meaning but embody particular social structures that exist outside the given instance of interaction, and are used to perpetuate those structures by constraining the permissible – and thus potential – actions available to people.

This is particularly significant when a given discourse is presented not as a potential way of thinking about a concept or situation, but the only possible way of thinking about that situation. This happens not through a process of explicit argument over the merits of the discourse, but rather through treating its underlying assumptions and meanings as common sense or as the only ‘sensible’ or ‘logical’ way of understanding a concept. In this way, discourses become institutionalised within a group or organisation in that they come to represent the only acceptable definitions for what constitutes appropriate practices, meanings of concepts, and methods of reasoning (Hajer, 1993). For example, when a chef enters a setting dominated by frameworks of medical meaning they need to adopt the language and rhetoric of that discourse.²⁷ The meanings, descriptions and actions suggested by the culinary discourse have already been closed off as valid options, and so the chef needs to adapt their practices or face being ignored. When combined with the notion of power-behind-discourse, the process of discourse institutionalisation supports the hegemony of power and social orders within society; such structures no longer have to actively support themselves (either through argument or physical force) because the discourses that support them have become seen as representing natural states of being. In this vein Fischer (2003) highlights the point that the academic teaching of economics is almost always grounded in Capitalist economic models, and yet terms such as ‘Capitalism’ rarely appear in economic textbooks. The basic premises of this order are instead treated as natural and beyond ideology, while other understandings of key terms such as ‘profit’ (such as surplus value from human labour appropriated by a managerial class) are at best

²⁷ Or a more powerful competing discourse, such as the value of clients to an expensive clinic in an economic discourse.

presented as marginal alternative perspectives. Thus, the assumptions of Capitalism are treated as representing the normal way of understanding economic systems and the default baseline against which all other perspectives need to justify their value.

In broad terms, then, discourse analysis within the social sciences refers to the process of working with texts (examples of communication) to identify the underlying ideas of social order and action that sit behind them. Discourse analysts maintain that discourse is the central ‘explanation’ for social phenomena on the basis that behaviours and social structures are ultimately shaped by the meanings ascribed to them; people are not fully autonomous agents who engage with an objective outside world, but rather interact with the world as it is socially constructed. This can be represented (in very simplified form) through figure 4 below; discourses structure meanings, meanings structure how people describe and understand things, and description and understanding structure the types of behaviours people display. At each point there are a range of possible meanings, descriptions, and behaviours, but the previous point has already channelled people into considering only a subset (or only one) of the potential options.

Figure 4: The relationship of discourse to behaviour



4.2 Using (Critical) Discursive Psychology to Understand Policy Practice

4.2.1 Discourse Analysis and Public Policy

Although discourse analysis might not be a dominant approach to the study of policy, it is well-established within the field – notably in the analysis of environmental policy (Leipold, Feindt, Winkel, & Keller, 2019), educational (Anderson & Holloway, 2020; Gildersleeve & Kleinhesselink, 2017), and international relations policy (Ripley, 2017). Key to its value here is that discourse analysis focuses attention to how policy debates are constructed and framed, and how this constrains both the process of policy development and the potential end points. The acceptability of certain actions, the value of particular outcomes, and even

the ultimate aim or particular character of a given policy issue are the products of particular interpretive frames that different stakeholders bring to the policy process (Yanow, 2000), and discourse analysis focus on uncovering how these frames are established. In this sense, discursive approaches provide a good methodological fit with the 'argumentative turn' in policy studies discussed in the previous chapter; indeed, Fischer's and Forester's (1993a) foundational work outlining that perspective defines policy as "a constant discursive struggle" (p. 2; emphasis added). Conceiving of the policy process as a site of argument rather than a problem-solving activity sits well with the notion that actions – policy decisions in this context – are not objectively rational but instead the result of specific ways of conceptualising, reasoning about, and valuing issues and outcomes.

Returning to the earlier example of a tract of land as an example, an economic policy discourse will frame that object in terms of its value as resource to be exploited. The precise type of resource and its value might be determined in a variety of ways that might conflict with each other, for example as a mining site, a location for housing, a transport route, or a possible tourism and recreation venue. But the land will be understood in terms of its potential to add value for particular groups and the costs involved in particular uses of that land; crudely, decisions around use will involve attempting to extract the maximum value from that land for the minimum cost. In contrast, an environmental discourse will portray the land as a home for flora and fauna, and part of a system of natural processes (such as waterflows). Policy debates within this discourse will relate to supporting these elements effectively, such as how best to reduce pollution, the best way to protect the land from harms, and whether native species in that land should be privileged over imported species. Critically, of course, many policy debates involve multiple discourses competing for influence, and it is here that discourse analysis provides an important contribution by highlighting that such debates are often not about whether measures X or Y are the best way to achieve goal Z, but rather involve unstated disagreement over whether a policy should be designed to achieve Z or another outcome. Notably, the complexity and range of possible issues involved in land use has been suggested as one reason for the popularity of discourse analysis in environmental policy studies (Feindt & Oels, 2005; Hajer & Versteeg, 2005)

Discourses manifest within the development of a given policy – for example, the question of what to do with a piece of land. But importantly, they also embody themselves within policy agencies; in line with Colebatch's (2006b) characterisation of policy work as a social structure rather than a productive, technical process, discourses structure how agencies perceive the world, the types of issues they say as needing to be addressed, the main relevant stakeholders and interest groups, and the desirability of certain courses of action.²⁸ This also includes the types of policy approaches that are seen as valid, and the necessary requirements for making 'good' policy. For example, the policy wheel is the product of a particular discourse about the development of policy – that it should be highly structured and 'rational' – which is challenged by more socially grounded models such as Colebatch's. Notably for the purposes of this research, this includes the types of evidence seen as applicable to a given policy area. Economic policy discourses, for example, are likely to privilege evidence derived from formal economic analysis and techniques as those methods are both grounded in the same set of meanings and constructions of the world.

The concept of discourse institutionalisation is particularly relevant for exploring policy work and decisions. In the broadest sense, a form of such institutionalisation is inherent within policy processes as the agencies involved in policy work will be affected by dominant discourses in their area(s) of responsibility, and may be specifically charged with providing advice from a particular viewpoint. For example, it is difficult to think of situations in which a Treasury would not work within an economic framework, or in which a (functional) Ministry of Women did not construct its approach to policy through a gender lens. Indeed, one of the most powerful discourses in policy is the existence of discrete policy areas: 'Health Policy' is different from 'Environmental Policy' is different from 'Labour Market Policy' is different from 'Foreign Policy'.²⁹ Even when inter-area work is specifically established this is often framed as bringing together different policy areas; inter-agency action on Social Housing might involve weaving together strands from Health, Welfare, and

²⁸ Note also that these discourses may exist separately from the advice an agency provides to their Minister; the notion of 'free and frank advice' is itself the product of a particular discourse around the nature of the public service, and the strength of this can wax and wane over time

²⁹ And precisely what these policy areas are is also produced – at least in part – through discourse. For example, whether International Development and Aid policy or International Trade policy are treated as areas in its own right or seen as a subset of Foreign policy may partly be the result of organisational and ministerial politics, but also depends on particular constructions of the 'legitimate' concerns of policy in a given area.

Construction policy, but these are still treated as separate perspectives on the issue. Given this, the practical and organisational structure of the policy world sets boundaries around the available discourses available to a policy practitioner. This can create problems and friction when agencies interact with each other; for example, a Ministry of Health and an economic development agency may come to very different conclusions about appropriate responses to public health issues.³⁰

Beyond this (fairly obvious) point, however, is that discourses exist *within* policy areas. One of the points highlighted by discursive approaches is that a discourse is never 'complete'; a discourse can never perfectly account for all aspects of given phenomenon, and there are always alternative options that may explain those options more satisfactorily. For example, the field of education policy encompasses (amongst others) discourses of education as a private economic good, as a source of skills for the labour market, or as a vehicle for social empowerment. These shape approaches to policy issues such as access to education, the types of behaviours policy settings should encourage, or the provision of financial support to students and public subsidies to institutions. Any of these may be in the ascendant at a particular point in time, and they may have different levels of strength in different areas; for example, a 'social empowerment' discourse might dominate discussions of early childhood and primary education, while the 'skills supply' or 'private benefit' discourses may exert stronger influence in secondary and tertiary education.

Given this, agencies can themselves sites for discursive struggle. For example, a Ministry of Health might be the site of evolving discourses of disability, or an Education agency could be characterised by competing discourses of education as individual development, lifetime pathways, or as a labour force supply system. The relative influence of these differing discourses can be traced not just through the policies they advocate and the advice they provide, but also through the relationships they prioritise, organisational design, changing spheres of influence (for example, whether Foreign Trade and Foreign Affairs exist within a single agency or multiple entities), and even the names of agencies and their responsibilities (such as referring to 'social development' rather than 'social welfare').

³⁰ On the other hand, such conflicts are not inevitable. The early 2000s Wanless Report into public health in the United Kingdom might have been conducted from an economic perspective, but many of the conclusions and recommendation chimed strongly with views in the Health community (Hunter, 2003; Shannon, 2004).

4.2.2 Introducing Discursive Psychology

As noted earlier, the term discourse analysis refers to a broad set of practices, ranging from the clearly post-structural to those that resemble positivist linguistics. In this research I am specifically using interpretive repertoires as a tool of analysis, a concept associated with the Discursive Psychology (DP) branch. Discursive Psychology emerged during the 1980s and 1990s specifically as a reaction to cognitivist or logical empiricist approaches to conceptions of the self and its relationship to society. An example of an institutionalised discourse, Cognitivism posits a strong divide between individuals on the one hand and society on the other; from this perspective

The social world is treated as information to be processed, and people are understood as isolated information processors who, by way of cognitive processes, observe the world and thus accumulate knowledge structures and experience that govern their perception of the world. (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 98)

Alongside this divide between the individual and the social world, there sits a corresponding divide between the 'outward' and 'inner' life of a person. The inner life represents their identity, emotions, values, and the like, while the outward life represents how they interact with and in the world – their actions and behaviours. As a discursive approach, DP broke sharply with that traditional formulation by characterising people and society as inherently intertwined with each other. Rather than the Cartesian model proposed by cognitivism, DP proposed that people are not autonomous agents who engage with a fundamentally objective outside world, but co-creators of a socially constructed world. This meant that rather than having a relatively fixed internal self that could be measured or evaluated through traditional scales and questionnaires schedules, people's identities and opinions are in a state of flux. The purpose of Discursive Psychology is to explore how this flux is given form by structures and processes, specifically by identifying how they are represented and reflected through language.

It should be noted that, as with discourse analysis itself, there are multiple forms of Discursive Psychology. Wiggins (2017) points out that the field fractured less than a decade after its emergence; perhaps the most notable of this was the break between Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell. After co-authoring some of the foundational works of the

movement the two diverged, with Potter focusing more strongly on individual speech settings (and analysing examples of ‘natural’ language) and Wetherell continuing to focus on the connection between language and broader social systems – an approach that is often distinguished as ‘critical’ discursive psychology. The first approach represents a focus on language as action within a specific environment; it might focus on exchanges between a General Practitioner and patient, and how features of that interaction reveal certain relationships between those two roles. The critical form, on the other hand, explores how language reflects the way in which people’s language reflects broader concepts and identities, such as ‘masculinity’ or being a member of a particular profession. While this research is not specifically following one of these approaches, its focus on action and wider contexts – how practitioners’ understanding of EBP translates to their practice – rather than the specific characteristics of practitioners’ speech in a given context aligns it more closely with the critical end of the spectrum (see Edley (2001)).

4.2.3 Interpretive Repertoires

Within the spectrum of discursive approaches, the most distinctive feature of discursive psychology is its replacement of the overarching concept of ‘discourse’ with that of ‘interpretive repertoires’.³¹ Initially formulated by Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) but fully developed as an approach in the work of Potter and Wetherell (1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988, 1992), these are “recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 149). While clearly within the discursive tradition, conceptually they diverge from more clearly post-structural approaches by focusing on the position and situation of the person. One of the common critiques of discourse – and especially those forms drawing on the work of Foucault as starting point – is that it over-reifies and privileges abstract concepts, positioning them as so dominant that they allow little space for individual positions, sentiments, and choice (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Discourses such as ‘medicine’, ‘science’, or ‘the market’ are often positioned as overpowering, impersonal forces consisting of relatively fixed sets of meanings that *act on* a person and allow little room for agency in the

³¹ As a school of social psychology, Discursive Psychology is built around three linked concepts: Interpretive Repertoires, Subject Positions, and Ideological Dilemmas (Edley, 2001). This thesis specifically focuses on the concept of Interpretive Repertoires.

construction of meaning and ways of talking (Edley, 2001). This creates problems for projects that aim to explore the position of people *as people*, since it positions them as passive agents of an external phenomenon—as agents who adopt pre-existing discourses that then direct them to particular endpoints. These strands of discourse analysis explore individual acts or contexts of speech primarily as a way of revealing what discourses are operating to shape meaning in a given situation, and what that tells us about the influence of power in that setting, rather than as points of interest in their own right.

In contrast to this totalising model of discourse, an interpretive repertoire is best thought of as a form of the discourse concept that emphasises the agency of people within a given situation. Repertoires are “broadly discernible clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors or vivid images. . . . They are available resources for making evaluations, constructing factual versions and performing particular actions” (Potter & Wetherell, 1995, p. 89) that people use to make sense of particular phenomena and concepts. Critical to this is the notion that using a particular repertoire in a given context serves a purpose. Rather than simply being the subject of impersonal forces, people choose from a set of repertoires and combine them in particular ways to achieve particular conversational or social goals (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Specific instances of talk can therefore reveal both context-specific elements and the play of broader social forces.

People are treated as both products of specific discourses and producers of talk in specific contexts; as such, they are both subjects of discourse and agents in social and cultural reproduction and change. They are limited by the words which exist as resources for talk but use them as flexible resources in arguing and, by combining them in new ways, can contribute to change. (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 110)

One of the key elements of this agency is that the particular set of interpretive repertoires that a person uses to explore a phenomenon may not be consistent. Whereas discourses represent a relatively coherent way of thinking about an issue or concept, particular people will shift between different repertoires in different settings and given different prompts. For example, in Wetherell and Potter’s (1988) exploration of Pākehā attitudes to race in 1980s Aotearoa New Zealand, they identify shifts between, on the one hand, condemning racist attitudes and praising indigenous Māori culture and on the other, emphasising the need for

Māori to assimilate and the potential dangers of (non-white) ethnic identities. Critically, this does not mean that one of the ways of speaking was somehow more real and accurate than the other: that the interviewee advocated assimilation in one part of the interview does not invalidate their earlier praise for multiculturalism or reveal that their 'true' self holds racist views hidden behind a progressive veneer.

The interpretive repertoire expression of the concept of discourse thus has a stronger focus on speech in context than that found in explicitly critical forms such as CDA or Foucauldian approaches. However, at the same time, this concept accommodates the view that these instances are not isolated (a common critique of more directly linguistic forms of discourse analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002)) and that the language people use in these situations can be used to understand broader currents at work within a society or setting. In this way the model combines the perceived rigor of focusing on specific instances of talk with a connection to broader patterns outside those instances, thus identifying argumentative threads or 'texture' that run through a text (Wetherell, 1998).

In their initial work developing the DP approach Wetherell and Potter (1988) point out how they identified three particularly prominent themes present in how participants talked about Māori: *Culture Fostering*, *Pragmatic Realism*, and *Togetherness*. Each of these repertoires served purposes within the interview context — for example, positioning the speaker as not racist. Importantly, however, they also connected to broader elements of social and cultural structure. They provided an excuse for the slow pace of change, placing boundaries on the scale of such change, and placing an obligation for starting such change on Māori themselves. In the context of naturally occurring language (Wiggins, 2017) uses an example of how conversations about a family dinner can be connected to broader social repertoires reflecting the nature of choice, gender, or age.

As discussed earlier, the core strength that discursive approaches bring to the study of policy is their focus on understanding social structures and processes not as pre-existing things in their own right, but as the products of sets of social relationships. In particular, conceiving of the policy process as a system of argument rather than a problem-solving activity aligns well with the notion that there is no fundamental 'truth' about the world awaiting discovery. The interpretive repertoire concept sits within this discursive tradition,

but diverges from more clearly post-structural approaches by focusing on the context of the person. This is important for my research because it shifts the focus for examining EBP away from impersonal structures and on to the practitioner themselves. The repertoires a practitioner uses might be *constrained* by the environment around them, but they are not *predetermined* by impersonal and remote structures. Within the context of understanding official's engagement with policy practice, the interpretive repertoire concept thus allows the identification of a richer picture of on-the-ground engagement with evidence than does the broader concept of discourse. Rather than searching for an overarching and totalising picture of how policy workers engage with the concept of evidence-based policy, interpretive repertoires allow for recognising that practitioner accounts will almost certainly contain variation and variability — that the way these are talked about will shift depending on the topic and context at hand (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002).

5 **Design and Context**

In this chapter I lay out the method chosen for the research, as well as describing the context or 'landscape' for the case under examination. As noted in Chapter 4, this research was conducted from a 'theory as more' standpoint in which the theoretical elements of the work informed all aspect of the design. Specifically, the notion that my topic would be undertaken as a discourse analysis shaped the way in which the project was designed. This included a concern with language, and a focus on accessing rich information rather than a concern with ensuring that the findings would be clearly generalisable.

Discourse analysis is not intrinsically associated with a specific research method; it is defined more by its areas of concern (language, power, and social practice) than any specific technique (Wodak & Meyer, 2010). However, the first step of undertaking discourse analysis is the construction of a group of texts that are to be analysed – the 'corpus'. This corpus is then analysed not simply in terms of the surface message being presented, but for the way in which the 'act' of speaking or writing communicates meaning. In spoken contexts, for example, this can include word choices that characterise concepts in particular ways, conversational techniques such as particular metaphors or the use of disclaimers, or points at which speakers undermine, contradict, or retract statements. These are then explored and connected to each other to establish an underlying picture of why the speaker has used particular language at particular times in particular ways. For example, Simpson and Mayr (2010) identify three dimensions on which texts can be analysed: as texts in their own right (focusing on the language used), the discourse practices within the corpus (focusing on how texts are produced and how they relate to and vary from each other), and as social practices (focusing on factors such as how the above two dimensions reflect or challenge particular power relationships). My design therefore needed to be qualitative in nature, with data collection focused on gathering or generating texts.

5.1 Contextualising the Data: Introducing Skills Policy

This research was not designed specifically as a case study of evidence engagement in a particular area. However, given the breadth of different agencies, structures, and stakeholders within the Aotearoa New Zealand public sector it made sense to focus on one

specific field for sourcing participants. This would ensure that all interviewees were operating within a basically similar context, dealt with similar institutions and frameworks, and used similar language in their policy work. Sourcing participants from a single relatively coherent policy area thus ensured a baseline level of similarity that would enable interpretive repertoires to emerge more clearly. Sourcing participants from a range of policy areas might allow for a greater range of repertoires to manifest, but would make identifying them significantly more complex.

For this research I elected to concentrate on the area of Skills policy. This was chosen for both practical and theoretical reasons. On a practical level, it was a field in which I had a personal interest and in which I was working at the time; this meant that I was familiar with the context in which the participants would be describing their practice and would understand relevant terminology, references to people and events, and the like. My own position, reputation, and contacts within the field could also be leveraged to encourage participation.³² Skills policy was also an area where very little prior work on evidence use had been undertaken. A Scopus database search using the terms *skills policy* and *evidence* found Bartlett (2013) as the only record relating specifically to evidence-based skills policy, with this article exploring how evidence could be used to support skills policy reform in the European Union's 'transition economies'.

On a theoretical level, however, skills policy represented an interesting case in its own right. Skills policy inherently crosses traditional departmental boundaries, including education, labour market policy, social support, economic development, and others (International Labour Office, 2011). As a result, it is a field characterised by diverse perspectives and discourses, including those based around economic profitability, access to employment and career progression, to social mobility and wellbeing. Similarly, associated academic disciplines and fields of research include – amongst others – economics, labour relations, human resource management, industrial relations, and education. This diversity meant that, in Flyvbjerg's (2004) typology, skills policy thus seemed to represent an 'extreme' case – one that is likely to be particularly rich in information relevant to the issue being explored.

³² Conversely, as I was not a particularly senior figure in the field with little personal status and power, participants would be unlikely to feel especially wary of me.

Although skills policy refers to the ways in which governments attempt to engage with and influence skills, this seemingly self-evident notion is complicated by ‘skill’ itself being a contested – or at least context-dependent – concept. For example, Bryson (2017) identifies at least three broad disciplinary perspectives: a political economy perspective that positions skills as economic and/or sociocultural resources for people and communities (depending on the particular discipline), an organisational perspective that sees skills as fundamentally resources to be deployed and utilised by organisations, and a learning perspective that focuses on skills as individual capabilities. In a similar vein, Mournier (2001) argues that there are three ‘logics’ (stable relationships between individuals, institutions, and norms) present in literature that each define skill in a different way: technical (skills as task-focused capabilities), behavioural (skills as the ability to participate in process and structures), and cognitive (skills as the capabilities needed to successfully live in the world). Moreover, (Green 2013) notes that different national cultures and traditions can lead to significant variations between countries on what the term ‘skill’ encompasses.

Given this, the breadth of topics on which ‘skills policy’ can touch is significant and there are consequent difficulties in defining skills policy. It is inherently multisectoral, sitting at the intersection of the worlds of work, education, migration, development, as well as involving specific sectors and industries. Indeed, the breadth of topics potentially relevant to skills development, and issues to which it is often seen as a ‘cure’ (see for example Leitch (2006)) provide a case for it being seen as a policy domain encompassing a wide range of areas in which policy actors engage with each other (Burstein, 1991). Its core element, however, is that it relates to the identification, development, and utilisation of the capabilities of the workforce; it “is separate from, though often linked with, general education or labour policies. It focuses not only on young people who have completed their formal schooling, but also on adult workers, school drop-outs, workers in the informal economy and disadvantaged groups.” (International Labour Office, 2011, p. 1). Given this, skills policy can be seen as having three major concerns: skills supply, skills demand, and skills utilisation (Skills Australia, 2011). These can be constructed as three key questions of interest:

- What skills do peoples and business need to be generated (demand)?
- What types of skills are created and in what way (supply)?
- How can the skills we have available be used most effectively (utilisation)?

As with evidence, skills policy is an area of growing global interest to governments and where it was once considered a second-order concern has now become a core priority in many countries (Bryson, 2010; Buchanan, Finegold, Mayhew, & Warhurst, 2017; Keep, 2010). The International Labour Organization provides a rationale for this that can be seen as integrating the three perspectives identified by Bryson (2017); it argues that addressing skills will improve employment-related capabilities of individuals (learning), the productivity of firms (organisational and economic), and the inclusivity of modern economies (sociocultural) (International Labour Office, 2011). Achieving this requires actions across six dimensions: lifelong learning pathways, support for core skills such as literacy and numeracy, equitable access to advanced education, portability of learning, and employability based on the previous dimensions (International Labour Office, 2008). Others, such as Keep and Mayhew (2010), see a significant political dimension in the prominence of skills policy. They argue that, within a neoliberal paradigm, investment in skills is an ideologically-acceptable 'answer' to a range of policy areas.

This transformation is reflected in the expanding list of issues that skills can be conceived of addressing ... These include: anti-social behaviour, welfare dependency, low levels of intergenerational social mobility, poverty, widening income inequality, insufficient innovation by firms, the weak relative economic performance of some regions, concerns about perceived weaknesses in international competitiveness and the relative rate of improvement in productivity. (Keep & Mayhew, 2010, p. 566)

From this point of view, governments can use a focus on skills policy to avoid questions about structural inequality, the social effects of other policy settings, and similar elements. Instead, social and economic problems are turned into problems with the way skills development systems work, and 'fixing' that system will solve a wide range of societal ills – regardless of the point that skills systems are often characterised by nebulous responsibilities and sharply divergent interests (Gleeson & Keep, 2007).

5.1.1 Aotearoa New Zealand's Skills Landscape

Aotearoa New Zealand currently lacks an explicit, formalised 'skills policy' or agency devoted to skills development. In the mid-2000s, growing interest in business productivity

did see an increasing interest in the position of skills as a policy issue, culminating in the 2008 establishment of Aotearoa New Zealand's first national *Skills Strategy* (Minister for Tertiary Education & Associate Minister for Tertiary Education, 2008). However, the Labour Party's loss in the election later that year led to the quiet cancellation of that document by the National Party-led government without any replacement.³³ Although the Strategy did provide the impetus for a rationalisation of non-degree qualifications in the education system and a renewed focus on literacy and numeracy, other strands – such as addressing the management capability of firms – had little impact in the Strategy's short lifetime.

Aotearoa New Zealand governments have instead largely maintained an implicit approach to skills policy that focuses solely on addressing supply issues. This has primarily involved two policy areas. Firstly, because of the size and importance of Aotearoa New Zealand's migrant workforce immigration policy has a strong skills dimension. In 2018 31% of employed people were originally born in another country (Te Kawa Mataaho the Public Service Commission, 2020), while the majority of permanent migration to Aotearoa New Zealand falls under the 'skilled migrant' category in which migration is tied to either a specific job offer or an area of skills shortage (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2018). Secondly, and probably more visibly, tertiary education policy has developed many of the characteristics of a *de facto* national skills policy in its growing emphasis on connections with industry, graduate employability, and contribution to Aotearoa New Zealand's economic wellbeing.

Tertiary system settings in Aotearoa New Zealand have undergone significant change over the past thirty years. Beginning with the 1989 *Learning for Life* reforms, policy through the 1990s emphasised increasing participation by students and promoting competition between education providers. This included significant changes allowing private providers access to public funding, removing caps on the total number of students who could receive publicly-subsidised education places, and removing restrictions on who could offer particular types of courses. An important element of this was also the removal of a formal distinction between 'higher' and 'further' or 'vocational' education. Instead, the country has a unified

³³ This was done so quietly that several international reports and papers continued to refer to Aotearoa New Zealand having a skills strategy long after it had been terminated.

tertiary education system that theoretically treats all forms of education equally and all qualifications are regulated through a single qualifications framework scheme rather than separate models being used 'academic', vocational, basic, and school qualifications.³⁴ At the same time, a system of Industry Training Organisations (ITOs) was established in 1992 to provide industries with greater autonomy and direct control over their qualifications and training arrangements (Green, Hipkins, Williams, & Murdoch, 2003).

However, this system resulted in significant problems, including a proliferation of low-quality courses, enrolments in expensive (both for individuals and the government) programmes with poor outcomes, and organisations directing large amounts of public funding towards competitive activities rather than education and research outcomes. This led to the appointment and recommendations of an independent Tertiary Education Advisory Commission (TEAC) in 2000, and a more strategic approach developing over the early 2000s. More attention was paid to aligning tertiary education with economic and social priorities, funding allocations became determined via investment plans negotiated with education providers (rather than tied directly to enrolments), and organisation-level caps on funded student places were reinstated. Alongside this was a stronger policy focus on 'good quality outcomes' over simple participation, with an emphasis on improving completion rates, progression to higher study, improved employment outcomes and the like.

A key theme of policy since this point has been the role of tertiary education as a factor in economic – and thus national – productivity. The creation of the portfolio of Tertiary Education, Skills, and Employment in 2010 under National Party 'big beast' Hon Steven Joyce can be seen as the high point of this connection, especially once Joyce was also appointed Minister of Economic Development in 2011.³⁵ Under his oversight, the 2014-2019 Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) – the document setting out the five-year strategic direction for the entire post-secondary education system – was prepared by a joint team comprising officials from both the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment (MBIE). Moreover, it defined the first priority of the tertiary

³⁴ For example, any type of provider can offer a degree or postgraduate qualification provided that they meet certain quality requirements. However, significant material constraints, policy settings, and status issues mean such theoretical equality is often not realised in practice.

³⁵ Although once Joyce was appointed Minister of Finance in 2016 those two portfolios went to two different ministers, severing the connection that had existed for the previous six years.

education system as being “Delivering Skills for Industry”, as well as more broadly stating that Joyce desired policy, regulation, and delivery to concentrate on

ensuring that the tertiary education system performs well, not just as its own system, but also as a part of the wider New Zealand economy. . . . addressing changing skill needs so that the skills gained in tertiary education link to employment opportunities in the labour market. (Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment, 2014, p. 6)

During this period the New Zealand Productivity Commission was also directed to undertake an inquiry into tertiary education, with part of its terms of reference referring to ensuring that the system was able to respond to skill demands (New Zealand Productivity Commission, n.d.). Its eventual report, however, largely focused on deregulating tertiary education in order to promote market responsiveness, and appears to have had little visible influence on policy work or thinking.³⁶

The Labour party had continued its focus on skills while in opposition, with its *Future of Work* programme and associated report including skills as a key focus area (Future of Work Commission, 2016) – though once again, this work primarily focused on issues of supply rather than demand or utilisation. The Party’s interest in skills continued following their accession to power from 2017 and the appointment of Hon Chris Hipkins as Minister of Education (re-integrating tertiary and compulsory education under a single minister). The new Tertiary Education Strategy released in 2020 continues the focus on connections with the world of work, although this is phrased more in the language of social mobility than the ‘serving industry’ framing common under National. Perhaps, more importantly, however, a new phase of structural reforms to sub-degree education has recently begun – the Reform of Vocational Education (RoVE) programme – with an explicit goal of making the system more responsive to the skill needs of learners, employers, and regions.³⁷

In policy terms, there are four key government agencies principally involved in Aotearoa New Zealand skills policy – although several of them have subsidiary entities that also play

³⁶ Notably, only one participant in this research made any reference to the inquiry and none made any reference to lasting effects that it had had on policy directions, actions, or thought.

³⁷ A short overview of the RoVE reforms is included in Appendix E.

a role in this space. The Ministry of Education, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), and the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) are the three agencies responsible for managing the tertiary education system and thus overseeing policy on skills supply. The Ministry of Education provides strategic policy advice to the Minister of Education and monitors the overall performance of the system, including its strategic goals and priorities. The TEC operates at arm's length from the Minister and manages funding of the tertiary system, as well as monitoring the performance of individual tertiary education organisations against the activities it contracts them to provide. It also incorporates the formerly independent Careers NZ service, which provides advice on career options. The NZQA is responsible for education quality, managing both organisational quality assurance and qualification approval for all parts of the system other than universities.³⁸ The Ministry and NZQA both also play roles in the primary, secondary, and early childhood education sectors, while the TEC is solely concerned with the tertiary sector.

Outside education, the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment is responsible for advising the Minister on issues related to the labour market, firm performance, industry regulation, and similar functions. It also incorporates Immigration New Zealand, which administers the immigration system and advises on migration policies. In these roles it undertakes workforce forecasting, manages skills shortage lists, and similar activities. Following the RoVE reforms mentioned above, it has also been responsible for establishing new Regional Skills Leadership Groups (RSLGs) and will provide ongoing administrative support to them. These are bodies, comprised of key stakeholders based in their corresponding region, who provide advice on that area's priority skill needs to national bodies and coordinate local actions and initiatives to address them.

In addition to these bodies, industry training organisations have had a varying mandate to work on strategic skills issues and policy development. Although recognised by the Government, they exist as private and independent, not-for-profit, industry-owned

³⁸ For universities, NZQA's role is filled by the Academic Quality Agency (AQA), and the Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP). CUAP is operated by Universities NZ (the collective body for universities) and approves individual qualifications, while the AQA was established by Universities NZ but is operationally independent and quality assures universities as a whole.

entities.³⁹ Their role in the skills system has been similar to the United Kingdom's Sector Skills Councils, Canada's Sector Councils, and Australia's Industry Skills Councils, but unlike most of their international counterparts ITOs also organise training at the level of individual trainees and firms.⁴⁰ The intent of this system was that industries – via their ITOs – could control the overall qualifications available and ensure that they accurately represent the skills needed to work in given roles, while providers could have significant flexibility in designing programmes to reflect meet local needs, allow for innovation etc.

In 2000, ITOs were provided with a skills leadership function under the Industry Training and Modern Apprenticeships Act 2000. This provided them with an explicit remit to engage in addressing strategic skills-related issues for their industry. As a result, their main representative organisation (the Industry Training Federation) became increasingly interested and active in policy-related areas such as enhancing productivity through skills, workforce planning, developing career pathways into and through their industries, and addressing under-representation of particular groups (such as Māori or women). However, possibly because ITOs remained part of the 'delivery' system for education, the actual influence of this role on skills policy is unclear. While they had some levers to influence their industry, it appears that many government officials had little regard for their role (Industry Training Federation, 2016). The role was formally removed by the National government in 2012 following a review of the industry training system. While the incoming Labour-led government promised in 2017 to restore the function, this commitment was superseded by the RoVE reforms and the establishment of new Workforce Development Councils.

5.2 *Collecting the Data*

Because of its interest in the day-to-day practices of policy practitioners, ideally, this research would have worked with organically generated texts: the language used in the workplace as practitioners went about their daily business. However, doing so would have been impractical. It would have involved being embedded in a workplace for an extended

³⁹ Prior to the RoVE reforms, an organisation would apply to the Minister of Education for recognition as an ITO with coverage over an industry or group of industries. The Industry Training and Apprenticeships Act 1992 set out key criteria for recognition until its repeal as part of the reforms.

⁴⁰ The extent to which ITOs were meant to directly manage training rather than purchase delivery from providers has been an ongoing point of contention between those two sectors.

period of time, which could not be balanced with my work commitments. Moreover, because of the political sensitivity of policy work it is likely that agencies would have been unwilling to allow me in to observe their practices; even if they were willing, they may have mandated measures such as reviewing recordings or transcripts and requiring changes to reflect broader organisational requirements or public commitments.

Instead, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from a sample of participants. This is a common method of qualitative data collection. It allows for the interview – and thus the text that is to be analysed – to flow organically and as the interviewee wishes, while providing the interviewer with more control than in a fully unstructured form, thus ensuring particular points are covered and allowing them to encourage clarification and elaboration (May, 2001). This balance allowed for the interviews to generate texts that were fundamentally authentic – in that the interviewee was given most control over the course that each took – while still ensuring that my key areas of interest were addressed. The interview schedule is included in Appendix C;⁴¹ this formed a consistent spine of core questions and standard prompts on particular issues for all interviews, while allowing for flexibility and variation (for example, in some interviews a given question might be asked earlier because it related to a particular conversation point). Importantly, I did not at any point – in the invitation to participate, introductory materials, or the interviews themselves – provide any details as to what I meant by the term ‘evidence’; interviewees were allowed to develop and use their own definition.

Some discourse scholars have challenged the use of interviews on the basis that they provide too great a level of control to the researcher and can only provide information relating to the specific context of the interview (Potter & Wiggins, 2007); indeed Wiggins (2017) proposes this as a key reason for the divergence between Potter and Wetherell’s approaches to Discursive Psychology noted in Chapter 4. Nevertheless, they constitute the most common vehicle data collection used in discursive approaches because of their ability to focus in on key points of interest – and within that, semi-structured interviews are the most popular form (Taylor, 2013). However, the topic of this research meant that textual authenticity was

⁴¹ Participants were not provided with a copy of this schedule, but they were aware that I was using one to structure the interview.

of greater concern than usual. As discussed in Chapter 2, the use of evidence is commonly equated with good policy work. This might lead to policy practitioners feeling constrained in a face-to-face situation by the official positions and messaging around evidence put forward by the State Services Commission, their agency, or authoritative publications such as those of the Chief Scientific Advisor. This could in turn direct them to use specific language around evidence, sanitising their responses to what they saw as the 'official line', and constrain the potential repertoires visible in the text. Three core strategies were adopted to mitigate this possibility.

The first of these was to use a snowball sampling method to recruit participants for the study. Snowball sampling is often presented as a particularly useful way of engaging with hard-to-reach populations, such as criminals, marginalised or stigmatised groups (such as people with alternative sexualities or refugees), or social elites (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Noy, 2008). Accessing people from these groups can be difficult for at least two reasons: firstly, people in such a population may simply be few in number or otherwise difficult to contact; snowball sampling enables a researcher to use the pre-existing networks of participants to identify and source additional participants on a mechanical level. For my research this was useful as there is no public central directory or contact database for 'skills policy' practitioners. Snowball sampling – in the context of qualitative work intended to involve a comparatively small group of interviews – provided an efficient way of accessing participants without needing to negotiate with specific agencies or professional associations for access to contacts.

Secondly and more significantly, however, snowball sampling is often used for research with members of the 'hidden' groups mentioned to address their potential reluctance to participate. Some may fear legal repercussions, others social judgement, and others may be distrustful of people who are not part of their community. In this context, snowball sampling provides the researcher with a way of enhancing trust; the initial informant acts as a trusted gatekeeper to the participants (in a positive sense) and provides the researcher access by explicitly or implicitly vouching for them.

Policy practitioners are clearly not a marginalised group within society, and are not generally characterised as engaging in social undesirable activities.⁴² However, their practices are often explicitly – and necessarily – hidden from public view.⁴³ The outcomes of their work might be observable (though sometimes only to a select specialist audience), and making policy processes transparent has become a major catch-cry of public sector reformers (Pollitt & Hupe 2011). But the actual detail of policy work remains obscured because it is often delicate, nuanced, and dealing with high-stakes issues; information about the specific actions and activities of practitioners might be used in judicial review or other court processes, affect how policy decisions are received, and potentially have electoral implications for ministers. In Aotearoa New Zealand this recognition that some information must remain confidential is supported through sections 6 to 9 of the Official Information Act 1982 and most notably s 9(2)(g)(1), which explicitly links effective policy practice with the ability of officials to confidentially render “free and frank expression of opinions” to ministers and each other. Similarly, the public sector’s ‘Dom Post Test’ mantra – before you do or write something, think how it would look as the main headline of the capital city’s daily newspaper – speaks to views of publicity as a dangerous thing of which practitioners should be wary. In this context, while the practice of policy practitioners might be socially sanctioned it is a sensitive activity; being able to use the name of trusted colleagues as an entry point acted in a similar way as it would with marginal communities, positioning me by proxy as part of the accepted community.

The second of these was to emphasise my personal experience within the community of policy workers. Given my background in the area of education and skills policy I had pre-existing professional contact with some participants,⁴⁴ while with others our professional networks overlapped. Emphasising these points positioned me as, while not a full peer, a member of the same broad community who would appreciate the informal expected behaviours that operate in policy settings and be able to exercise appropriate judgement around potentially sensitive issues. I became not so much a ‘researcher’ as a ‘fellow

⁴² Notwithstanding representations in popular culture and media.

⁴³ The very existence of transparency-related legislation and associated regimes implies that without such requirements officials will tend towards secrecy. Moreover, provisions in relevant legislation include grounds on which information can justifiably be withheld.

⁴⁴ I did, however, explicitly exclude participants that I had worked directly with in the past or knew well.

practitioner who is doing research'. Such 'insider status' is often associated with more acceptance of the researcher by participants, a feeling of greater comfort, and a willingness to be more open about more sensitive topics (Adler & Adler, 1987; Kanuha, 2000). As noted earlier, this was another reason for confining the focus of this research to skills policy.

Thirdly, the interview itself was structured to create an easy feeling. Participants were given the choice of meeting at any time in whatever space they felt comfortable. For most this was in a meeting room at their workplace, but one asked to meet at the university, and four met at cafes. Each interview also began with a period of general discussion about their professional background; this was a formal and recorded part of the interview and included in the text for analysis, but was also intended to help put the interviewee at ease.

I originally also intended to include a focus group as part of the design. In this group, participants from all three agencies would discuss a particular policy in which all had collaborated – specifically, the development of the 2014-2019 Tertiary Education Strategy. This would have potentially allowed for the generation of 'typical' language about evidence use similar to that used in a practice environment, and also been a way to illustrate the adoption and use of repertoires as part of an interactive process. However, it was eventually decided to remove this for three main reasons. Firstly, on a practical level the teams involved in the Strategy had partially dispersed, with some people moving to other units within their agency or to other agencies (or even outside the public sector). This was aggravated by the point that, as senior officials, these participants had significant work commitments (in addition to any personal commitments). It became clear through the process of sourcing participants for initial interviewees that it would likely be difficult to find a suitable time and date that would work for a sufficient number of participants.

Secondly, while theoretically this would have allowed language that was more typical of day-to-day contexts to emerge from interactions and conversations, participants may conversely have been more guarded in this setting. Notably, as a cross-agency gathering participants may have felt more under pressure to hew to the aforementioned 'party line' to preserve the status or reputation of their agency. As discussed earlier, good evidence use is now heavily equated with good practice in the policy process. A semi-public setting might

therefore constrain the repertoires that were genuinely available to practitioners and confuse the analysis.

Participants were drawn from three government agencies with a strong focus on skills development (noted simply as Agency A, B, and C in this research), and as noted above sourced through a snowball sampling method. I identified a starting contact at each agency – in the case of agencies A and B this was someone with whom I had a passing professional acquaintance, while at Agency C this was a person who I knew solely by reputation. At the end of their interview, that practitioner was then asked to suggest additional participants that I could contact. These participants were then asked to suggest further contacts, and so on. The process ended when I had largely reached a point of participant saturation, at which the same names were being repeated, and the only significant new names were out of scope for this project (such as being ministers or researchers rather than policy practitioners, or not working in the skills policy area). A total of 23 people were identified and approached in this way, with five of them not responding to repeated invitations. All others who responded agreed to participate; the final sample thus consists of 18 participants: nine from Agency A, five from Agency B, and four from Agency C.

Procedurally, each interviewee was contacted by email with an invitation to participate, provided with the information sheet included in Appendix A, and encouraged to respond with any questions they might have. Those that did not respond to the invitation were sent one follow-up invitation approximately a fortnight later, and if they still did not reply then another invitation was sent after another fortnight. The five non-participants noted above did not respond to any of these three invitations. As noted earlier, participants nominated a venue and time with which they were comfortable, and before the interview were provided with a copy of the Consent Form in Appendix B to read and sign. Interviews were digitally recorded, and before beginning the interview proper (but while the recorder was running) I emphasised to practitioners that at any point they could ask for the recording to be paused.⁴⁵ This process – along with the snowball sampling approach referenced earlier – was approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee.

⁴⁵ Two interviewees took advantage of this to make confidential comments they did not want ‘on the record’.

The participants were all senior practitioners with at least 15 to 20 years of experience in the public sector (and in some cases significantly more). This research was not designed to compare the repertoires of different groups of practitioners, and the analysis does not attempt to do so, but the participants can nevertheless be broadly divided into three groups. The first of these is the 10 participants who were primarily involved in developing policy – advisors and analysts in Aotearoa New Zealand’s public sector terminology. All were working at Senior, Principal, or Chief Analyst/Advisor levels, and were involved in ‘strategic’ rather than ‘operational’ policy levels (in that their main focus was on broad system-level issues rather than, for example, the detail of funding processes or performance analysis). The second group consisted of four participants who managed teams of these officials. These were all at ‘Tier 3’ or ‘4’ managers;⁴⁶ they did not manage a full division of the agency concerned, but were responsible for either a group of teams working on a specific issue within in a division, or a large team. These people were responsible for planning and approving work programmes within their team, managing ‘up the chain’ of reporting, and directly approving outputs from Analysts and Advisors. The third group consisted of four participants who had a particular focus on developing and generating evidence. While this type of practitioner might not always be classed as a policy worker, these participants were involved with policy development in their relevant agency and worked closely with analysts and advisors (and in two cases shared a management structure with a policy team).

The focus of this research is on participants as practitioners, rather than the effects of gender, ethnicity, or generational identities. Participants were therefore not specifically asked to provide demographic data such as ethnic identity, age, or nationality. For context, however, the group consisted of 10 men and eight women and in keeping with their career experience most were early middle-aged (late thirties to late forties) with two participants in older age groups. During the initial stages of the interview participants were asked to briefly describe their career backgrounds; all had worked in multiple agencies across the Aotearoa New Zealand public sector, and just over half (10) referred to having worked in policy roles overseas. Eleven had only worked in the public sector (including ministers’ offices, parliamentary services etc.); of the remaining seven, five mentioned also having worked in

⁴⁶ Where ‘Tier 1’ is the agency’s Chief Executive.

Non-Government Organisations, four had worked in academia or research centres, and two specifically referred to experience working in the private sector.

Table 1 below provides the name used for each participant in this thesis, their gender, and their distribution across agencies. The names listed here are pseudonyms that were assigned randomly to each participant; the gender of the name corresponds with the participant, but there has been no attempt to match any other demographic element or other possible characteristics.⁴⁷ The specific pseudonyms used here were consciously chosen to ensure they did not match the names of prominent officials and employees of the agencies in which participants were located.

Table 1: Research Participants

Participant	Agency	Gender	Participant	Agency	Gender
Aaron	A	Male	Mark	A	Male
Anna	A	Female	Matthew	B	Male
Catherine	C	Female	Michelle	A	Female
Diana	B	Female	Peter	A	Male
Henry	B	Male	Rebecca	B	Female
James	A	Male	Sam	C	Male
Jason	C	Male	Susan	C	Female
Kiri	A	Female	Tama	B	Male
Lisa	A	Female	William	A	Male

5.3 Analysing the Data

Discursive data analysis is an iterative process, in which texts are read and re-read to identify patterns – both patterns of consistency and patterns of inconsistency (Taylor, 2013; Wood & Kroger, 2000). It does not do so through a straightforward counting of repeated words, phrases, or the like, but rather through exploring texts in depth to understand the significance of word choice in the context of both that individual text and in broader context. In Potter and Wetherell's (1987) words "There is a basic lesson that is inescapable: analysis involves a lot of careful reading and rereading" (p. 168). For this research, the data analysis involved coding transcripts of each interview to reveal clusters of language that reflected particular apparent constructions of practice (what does it mean to work as a policy official),

⁴⁷ Specifically, a list of names was written up, printed, cut up, and placed in either a 'male' or 'female' bowl. Each participant was randomly assigned a name from the corresponding list by drawing from the bowl until all had been named.

context (the nature of the environment within which officials work), and evidence (what is evidence within policy work).

Each interview was transcribed to produce a written text for analysis. As discursive approaches treat language as not simply a matter of transmitting content but an action in its own right, such transcription needed to be highly comprehensive in order to preserve the integrity of the speakers' language, patterns of speech, interactions with me the interviewer, and other features may shape the overall meaning of the text (Wood & Kroger, 2000). This transcription process therefore began with an orthographic or 'strict verbatim' phase; each interview being written as 'verbatim' speech without punctuation, and each line of text in the interview being numbered to aid in coding of key points and reference during analysis. Given that producing a transcript in this way is heavily time-consuming and requires a very high level of accuracy, a specialist transcribing service was hired for this purpose.⁴⁸

In some discursive approaches – specifically those that draw inspiration from Conversation Analysis – this initial phase would be followed by identifying passages of particular interest which would be subjected to an in-depth process of notation (Wiggins, 2017). Formats such as Jeffersonian notation provide detail on the precise length of pauses, falling and rising intonation, intakes and exhalations of breath and the like. However, the level of notation within the transcript itself involves a pragmatic trade-off note between the possible insights gained on one hand, and on the other the sacrifice of time and effort required. As Potter and Wetherell (1987) note, "for many sorts of research questions, the fine details of timing and intonation are not crucial, and indeed they can interfere with the readability of the transcript" (p. 166). This research was focused on identifying interpretive repertoires, and as Taylor (2001) notes in her discussion of transcription within discursive approaches, transcripts intended for repertoire-based work often contain relatively little detail beyond the words themselves. This is because such analysis is more interested in the 'content' of the interviews – the words and phrases used by participants and how these are connected and deployed – rather than the specific conversational tools and techniques deployed by interviewee and interviewer.

⁴⁸ Recordings were provided to this service via a secure online server, and their copies were destroyed two weeks after completion of the transcript.

As a result, I decided to only lightly annotate the orthographic transcript. My recording of each interview was listened through once while reading along with the physical transcription, and additional notation marks were added as necessary. Very short pauses were indicated by the notation (.), as in the original transcript; these indicate breath-taking as part of normal speech, or represented the verbal end of a passage that would be written as a sentence. Longer pauses – up to a second – were indicated by the notation (...) while pauses over a second were not timed but noted by (*long pause*). Emphasis on specific words was indicated through underlining the relevant word(s), while reported speech – both direct and hypothetical – was placed within single quotation marks.⁴⁹ Crosstalk and overtalking, laughter, sighs, and similar notable features were indicated in italic text within double brackets – for example (*laughs*) – as were non-textual comments such as (*unclear*) or (*break in interview requested*). Other conversational features included in many transcription systems, such as rising or falling intonation, audible breaths, and the like were not included as a matter of course; if they appeared notable within the context of that portion of the interview they were noted through italicised text as above. This process also involved correcting errors or misinterpretations in the transcript (for example, acronyms and initialisms that had been spelt out phonetically), as well as replacing ‘unclear’ speech where I could distinguish what was being said. At this point I also reviewed the notes I had made during the interview to check if they provided any additional context for particular sections of the interview and noted these on the transcript. An excerpt from a transcript at this point is shown in Figure 5 overleaf.

To aid in readability, when excerpts from interviews are reported in this thesis they have been edited into normal sentences, with most very minor pauses replaced with commas and full stops. However, other notation (such as indicating longer pauses, noting emphasis, or researcher comments) has been left intact. As part of this process I have also replaced identifying information with square brackets; for example [Chief Executive], [Agency], or [Minister].

⁴⁹ This included the verbal use of scare/air quotes; using intonation associated with quotation speech to emphasise the distinctive or constructed nature of a concept.

Figure 5: Example of first-stage transcription

79	Aaron:	Yeah um and I mean I think my view would be well my observation is that
80		every government comes in wanting an evidenced approach to policy you
81		know however they describe it (.) um they start to sink political capital into
82		(...) well for a <u>start</u> they bring in their cut of the evidence straight away
83		through the manifesto they've already sunk political capital into that (.) um
84		even if when they're in opposition they don't have as much access to the
85		information as they do in government (.) um so you you start to accumulate
86		um sunk capital costs of various sorts as you go along (.) so there are some
87		areas where government remains completely open to new ideas and other
88		areas that start to get closed off as um as the government progresses
89		through the two or three terms they get
90	Interviewer:	Yeah
91	Aaron:	And then um and this is not quite a research answer I realise but
92	Interviewer:	((crosstalk)) No no
93	Aaron:	I think er um the sort of political entropy that sets in is partly a result of that
94		(.) it's really difficult for the political part of the system to simply follow the
95		evidence because otherwise you know they've got they've got other
96		considerations too (.) it's sort of a path dependency
97	Interviewer:	Yeah yeah
98	Aaron:	But also um sometimes the evidence leads you to <u>uncomfortable</u> places and
99		as a minister you might feel that ah the the country isn't ready for a sort of
100		radical change or the sector isn't ready for a radical change (.) it would
101		require too much <u>disruption</u> (.) it would be (...) you know there's always
102		those trade-offs and you end up with second or third-best solutions um
103		even though you've got a reasonably clear ((long pause)) or you just need to
104		play along in the game (.) and of course the political cycle doesn't really
105		favour long long games very well although clever politicians play them
106		anyway (.) um I hope that makes sense but that's the kind of way I see it (...)
107		um but there's always there's always ways you can refresh the system (.)
108		changes in portfolios (.) some ministers are able to back out of old ideas and
109		implement new ideas better than others they just kind of have that knack (.)
110		um it's not just ministers it's also (.) um you know the the sort of the
111		cultures of the organisations themselves (...) ah you know you get sunk costs
112		of different sorts everywhere um especially if new ideas will create
113		disruption um um or they're just expensive or um there's other trade-offs (.)
114		it's it's you know it's never a pretty intersection

Once the finalised transcript had been prepared, I began the process of analysis. As discussed in Chapter 4, discursive approaches are distinguished by their interest in language as a form of action. A text – such as each of my interviews – is seen as a rich source of information rather than simply a collection of statements, and how and in what context a person says something is just as important as the surface-level information they communicate. Moreover, words and phrases impart meaning beyond what is directly and immediately apparent. For example, in the extract below *Jason* responds to a question about why he chose a policy career.

Nicholas: So, um, why did you end up working here at [agency] then?

Jason: Well, um, I thought to myself that I wanted to become a lawyer and I wanted to make some money and um, to do that I had to have a good degree. So, went on to do my Masters and because I couldn't find a job, a permanent job then I um started, I was applying for jobs and I got a, I saw this job that was a um policy advisor in a business law team. And I thought, alright, this will give me a platform to become a business lawyer and I can make money that way ((*laughs*)). Not the noblest of motivations I know... ((*laughs*)) So, I kind of thought about it as a stepping-stone to um, to becoming a lawyer. But then I found that, well, it's a lot like academic work but it's kind of grounded in real things that make a difference. So I guess I'd say why I'm working here is because I enjoy it and I'm doing good I suppose.

On one level, *Jason's* answer to the question I posed is that he is working at this agency because he enjoys the work and is making a contribution to society. However, he also presents additional information in his answer. On the most straightforward level, he provides additional reasons as to why he initially joined the agency – using it as a stepping stone to another job, a way to make money, and simply because he couldn't find a job elsewhere. His employment narrative thus provides a more complex set of motivations, and notably distinguishes between why he first joined and why continues to work at the agency. On a deeper level, he also laughs after referring to his motivation of becoming a lawyer and making money, and states this isn't a “noble” motivation. This suggests that he sees material gain and career advancement as things that are socially undesirable reasons for pursuing a career pathway. This extract can even illustrate points unrelated to the initial question. *Jason* refers to his work as similar to academia, but “grounded in real things that make a difference” – thus positioning academic work as not relating to real things and not making a difference to the world.

It is this focus on depth of meaning that provides the key point of difference between discursive approaches and more surface-level analytical forms such as thematic analysis (TA). In both cases, the researcher is looking to identify patterns of meaning within a text and to that extent the procedures used are very similar. The difference comes in how that data is treated. In TA approaches text is generally treated as authoritative – what is said or written in a text directly represents what the author of that text intended. This does not

mean that such analysis is unsophisticated; the interpretation of the themes that emerge from the text can be highly nuanced and complex. But the focus is on what Braun and Clarke (2006) define as a focus on the 'semantic' layer of meaning. As discussed in Chapter 4, discursive approaches instead see the literal text on the page or in conversation as expressions of a deeper level of meaning – the 'latent' layer that sits behind and influences semantic expressions. It is these patterns that discursive approaches focus on identifying in the relevant texts and the corpus as a whole.⁵⁰

As Taylor (2013) notes, the richness that discursive approaches ascribe to texts can make them difficult to analyse. Their meanings are never fully exhausted as there are always further elements that could be explored or identified, and even beginning the process of analysis can be overwhelming. To provide some structure to this process, I had previously identified three domains or types of repertoires that I was interested in: practice, context, and evidence. As discussed in Chapter 2 (specifically sections 2.3.2 to 2.3.4) these represent notable points of discussion (or gaps) within EBP literature. Moreover, when taken together these represented three major dimensions of how policy practitioners might engage with EBP: the first related to how they constructed their own practice, the second related to how they constructed the environment in which they worked, and the third related specifically to their construction of evidence within the context of policy work. These formed 'meta-codes' for my analysis that allowed me to begin analysis with an interpretive structure; they also provide the structure for framing my findings in later chapters.

I began analysing each transcript by reading it over and identifying sections where a practitioner was discussing a given repertoire area (including points where they discussed more than one). Following this, I made a separate copy of each interview containing only the material relevant to that repertoire, and read through each excerpted section noting particular turns of phrase, metaphors, word choices, and similar features, repeating the process until I was confident I was not identifying new information. These were noted not only as representations of the specific topic (like 'policy practice'), but also considered in terms of alternatives that could have been used but were not, contradictions within

⁵⁰ Braun and Clarke (2006) note that not all thematic analysis focuses on the semantic layer, but acknowledge that the greater the focus on latent themes in a piece of TA the more it will overlap with discursive approaches.

passages, and the like. This included examining the positioning of subjects and concepts, such as example, how describing a given piece of work characterised the roles of the interviewee themselves, other participants such as the minister or other officials, broad categories (such as 'politicians', 'academics', or 'policy analysts'), and agencies. All these elements were used to identify both surface and underlying elements present in the texts.

For example, *Henry's* phrase "Look, I just think that the process of decision making or, um, evaluation is that you draw upon information from a range of sources so you get a comprehensive view" provides a literal description of using multiple sources of information to obtain a broad view of an option; this connects to repertoires of evidence. However, he also implicitly includes a framing of policy practice here by characterising policy work as about "decision making" and "evaluation" – terms that, especially in the broader context of this and other texts, are associated with the exercise of judgement. His use of these terms, especially when alternative terms such as 'analysis' or 'problem-solving' are available, positions policy workers as people with agency in the process of policy work and their work as emphasising professional appraisal rather than technical process.

The notes made at this point were then associated with a meaning or theme; for example 'cynicism', 'science', 'problem-solving', 'reluctance', or 'managers'. I then considered these, looked for commonalities and differences between them, and where appropriate merged or divided themes; for example, in one repertoire the theme of 'happiness' was subsumed into the category of 'professional pride'. For personal and professional reasons, there was a significant temporal gap between my first three interviews and later ones; this space allowed me to reflect on the results of the initial analysis, develop initial sets of related terms and connections, and consider their meanings or themes. Analysis past this point then used those sets as a starting point; terms were allocated to such sets or noted as outside them. Once all interviews had been analysed in this way, I examined the collection of themes noted under each broad area (practice, context, and evidence) and considered how they related to each other; the close relationships between themes constituted the repertoires I was focused on identifying.

Finally, I returned to each full transcript and re-read it in light of my draft repertoires, re-coding it to identify where a given repertoire was present. This led to identifying some

repertoires as present in a text where I had not initially note them as there (as well as some minor revisions to these repertoires). Most importantly, however, I also identified apparent connections, where repertoires seemed to commonly appear close to each other both within a transcript and across them. For example, the 'Interpretive' practice repertoire often appeared in the text at similar points as the 'Interactive' repertoire, and the 'Source of Context' repertoire of evidence. I noted these connections and identified similarities between the relevant repertoires. Once I had identified a coherent set of clusters I returned to the transcripts for a final time, and noted where they appeared in text. These clusters or repertoires formed the basis of the interpretive stances I have used to identify how policy practitioners engage with the concept of evidence-based policy.

PART TWO

In this section of the thesis, I present my research findings. As discussed in Chapter 5 I analysed the interview texts in relation to three different aspects of practitioner-focused evidence-based policy (EBP); each of the first three chapters approaches one of these in turn. Chapter 6 explores repertoires of practice – what it is that policy work involves – and identifies three major repertoires. Chapter 7 explores repertoires of context – what characterises the context for policy work – and also identifies three major repertoires. Chapter 8 explores repertoires of evidence – what is the role and value of evidence in policy work – and identifies five major repertoires.

The focus of chapters 6 through 8 is on presenting material that emerges from the text, rather than considering how this might relate to literature, and largely considers each aspect of EBP separately from the other. In Chapter 9 I bring together and discuss these findings through a framework of interpretive stances. These represent relational patterns between repertoires that were present across the individual interview texts; these relationships each provide a framework for practitioners to make sense of and engage with the various aspects of EBP in a coherent way. As well as presenting these stances in their own right, I relate them to elements of literature on EBP and policy work. Finally, in Chapter 10 I conclude the thesis, discussing implications of my findings, limitations, and areas for future work.

To assist readers with understanding specialist and context-specific terminology used in this section of the thesis, a short glossary of abbreviations and terms has been provided in Appendix D.

6 Repertoires of Practice

In this Chapter I outline the prominent repertoires related to the practice of policy workers that were presented in the interviews. These represent how the interviewees interpreted their own roles as practitioners, and the functions involved in their work. I identified three major repertoires here: the Analytical, the Interpretive, and the Interactive.

6.1 The Analytical Repertoire

My role is basically to make sure that we have the right knowledge at the right time for people to make the right decisions.

(Diana)

The Analytical repertoire represents what might be termed a classical framing of policy practice, in that it situates such work as fundamentally about identifying the correct ‘solutions’ for a given policy issue. Policy work in this context is framed as primarily an intellectual activity involving the application of mental reason to policy issues, which are in turn framed as problems requiring analysis and resolution. This does not mean that policy work is a straightforward process. As *Lisa* remarked at one point, “We’re kind of by definition dealing with difficult problems to solve, because if they were easy they’d have been solved already”. But it does mean that policy work is amenable to structured investigation, and that the purpose of officials’ work is to develop the answer to discrete policy questions (such as which of a group of possible education system settings will lead to the best outcomes for students).

The Analytical repertoire associates the capabilities required for good policy practice with technical skills. Policy work is constructed as systematic, structured action, a somewhat mechanistic – though still highly skilled – process that requires the same types of formalised abilities as scientific or engineering work. Participants referred positively to “getting better at being able to use administrative datasets” (*Matthew*) or negatively to the public service having “not many economists or people with good scientific backgrounds, you know, people with strong skills in data and all that stuff” (*Anna*). For *Sam*, this was a particular weakness.

Nicholas: So okay, um, just going back to um your comments about bad policy, what do you think is at the heart of that bad policy you see around the place? Like do you think, what's the cause?

Sam: Oh it's the lack of good quant skills and good rigorous thinking, no doubt(...) I mean, we're pretty good at talking to people. We probably do too much of that sometimes. And we usually have a good handle on what the situation is. But well like I mean I can probably count on one hand the number of people around the place who can do a proper cost-benefit or who really understand things like incentives and demand curves and stuff. Or even read an actual graph (*frustrated laugh*) And half the time, well, more than half the time if I'm being honest (*laughs*) that's not even on our radar (*long pause*) so I have to admit if I'm being honest that a lot of what we do is just muddling along with best guesses. And that's not what makes for good policy. And I guess I can get a bit pissed off about that if I'm honest (*long pause*) Sorry about that rant by the way.

Nicholas: No no, it's good.

Sam: (*overtalking*) It's just frustrating.

In this excerpt, *Sam* responds to my question about why bad policy emerges by focusing specifically on the poor technical capability of many of the people he has been working with. Being able to do good policy work is equated with understanding concepts like "incentives" and "demand curves", being able to "read an actual graph", and capability in conducting cost-benefit analysis. Notably, *Sam's* emphasis on the term "proper" in relation to cost-benefit analysis implies that much of the analysis which is performed does not meet his quality standards. His emotional response to this situation – including his apology to me signifies the strength of his belief that such technical skill is required for good policy work.

A key element of this repertoire is that policy work involves choosing between more or less 'right' and 'wrong' policy options. When officials adopt this repertoire they frame their work as being about identifying the best possible solution to a given topic and, importantly, define 'best' not in a context-dependent way but rather in reference to a relatively objective standard. The best policy outcome might not always be implemented in practice, but it is the official's role to clearly identify that outcome. For example, in the excerpt below *Matthew* has been discussing his views on the value of evidence for policy work.

Nicholas: So, kind of following up on that, you said your point was that everybody would agree that evidence-based, using evidence is a good thing?

Matthew: You ought to be going down that road, yeah. Otherwise it's just opinion.

Nicholas: In what way?

Matthew: Opinion. Um, whether that be ministerial opinion, policy analyst opinions, managers', group managers', with all its biases and fishhooks and all the rest of it that comes with it. Actually you should be able to take the opinion out of, out of the advice. You know, if it's truly good advice. It should be this, this is what the evidence tells us. Or at least, this is our best understanding of the world. It may not be one hundred percent accurate, it may not be completely perfect. But it's our best understanding of the world. It's as close as to we know about an accurate representation of the world. And so, um, and so we should base our judgments on that. Not on, um, because we have a particular opinion or a particular experience. An individual policy guy's experience or opinion and stuff like that. If that's what going on that's not good advice or policy or whatever.

In this excerpt, *Matthew* refers to opinions (characterised as both viewpoints and experiences) as objects with "biases and fishhooks and all the rest of it" that should be taken out of the policy advice that officials provide. Importantly, this is the case no matter who expresses them; no special weight is accorded to the opinions of an analyst, their manager, or a minister by virtue of their position or background. Instead, the value of advice is determined by its relationship to an underlying reality; *Matthew's* emphasis on words like 'best' and 'accurate' understandings and representations of the world imply that the official should be attempting to identify an essential truth that their advice represents. While he acknowledges difficulties in achieving this ideal ("It may not be one hundred percent accurate, it may not be completely perfect") this is still positioned as something that policy workers should be striving to achieve. Moreover, following on from this *Matthew* constructs taking into account the views of ministers, stakeholders, and the like as representing a failure in practice.

Nicholas: Mm. So, what do you think is the role of the policy analyst in that context if they're being told to do something that the evidence conflicts with?

Matthew: Um, the role in an ideal world is that they say what(...) it should be what the evidence tells them and they should take all the biases and opinions out of it, and irrespective of(...) they should provide the best advice that they possibly can, the best evidence-

based advice that they can to the people that are going to be making decisions. Even when they don't want to hear that, they need to acknowledge that 'our advice is this' and that should happen no matter what the agenda or what vice-chancellors want to hear, or sometimes what even the public wants and is going to accept. But I think that, um, sadly what you do see a lot of is that policy advice is tailored to what they think ministers want.

Providing advice that goes against the views of ministers is presented in positive terms, while taking account of ministerial stance is referred to as "tailoring" advice and depicted as a common but unfortunate failure in standards. In addition, such views are given less legitimacy by referring to them as what a given stakeholder "wants" from policy work; the positions being expressed can only represent a false reality that the stakeholder desires to be the case, as otherwise they would have been uncovered through the officials' own work (which represents reality – or at least the best possible approximation of it).

In this context, officials are positioned as identifiers of truth. Their role is to apply intellectual rigour and robust techniques to identify a correct answer. Officials may draw on a variety of tools and systems, although it is important for these to be standardised and generalisable as that is a key way for truth to be determined.⁵¹ Importantly, however, in this repertoire practitioners do not frame themselves as decision-makers or makers of policy. In the quotation which opens this section, *Diana* describes her work as being about making sure that "the right knowledge" is available at suitable points in the policy process.

Importantly, however, she does not position herself as being the one that uses this knowledge to take action; instead it is abstract "people" – implicitly not including herself – that actually use it to make decisions. Similarly, *Matthew* refers to providing advice to "the people that are going to be making decisions". Policy workers are constructed as experts in understanding reality and developing advice for purposes of decision-making, but it is someone else who actually decides what occurs.

In this way, the Analytical repertoire allows policy workers to set themselves apart from the actual results of the policy process; their role is simply to provide the best possible advice to others based on what the truth says about the nature of and possible resolutions to a given

⁵¹ Unsurprisingly, this repertoire was often linked to the Objective repertoire of evidence described in chapter 8.

problem. How that advice is actually implemented – in other words, how that is reconciled with the desires of stakeholders, the support necessary to enact it, or the like – is the realm not of policy but of ‘politics’. Importantly, this is sometimes framed positively as in *Susan*’s reference below.

Susan: And I think that happens quite a bit, um, but that's the reality of democracy right? It's that they've voted on a particular platform and so then you get that platform will often conflict with, with what the evidence is. But that's when a Minister has to make the call. And you just hope that they're taking it seriously

Here, *Susan* presents the conflict between the advice of officials and the Minister's agenda as an inevitable part of democratic processes; that this occurs at times is “the reality of democracy”. She then frames dealing with this lack of alignment as appropriately the job of the relevant minister; it is their “call” as to whether in a given situation it is the evidence or the political platform that should take precedence. This implies that choosing to ignore the advice of officials is at least sometimes an acceptable or justifiable decision – although her final words imply that this is a decision requiring significant deliberation (and her use of the word “hope” implies that she believes ministers often do not recognise this). Similarly, after a section of the interview in which he claims that all policies should ideally be based on evidence, *Peter* provides a counterpoint to his own statement.

Peter: But I really do strongly believe that policy advice(...) um that is all the things ministries do and should do, is offer advice to ministers(...) They don't make policies ((long pause)) It's the Minister or whoever that has to set the policy and does the legislative kind of stuff.

This statement might initially seem to be undercutting his previous claim that evidence was a key component of policy work. But what *Peter* appears to be doing here is distancing the work that officials do – “offer advice to ministers” (with “all the things” in this context meaning ‘the only thing’) – from actually enacting policy decisions. Through such division of responsibility, officials use this repertoire to resolve the tension between their definitions of good practice and the pragmatic requirements of policy work. Officials are free to prepare advice based on what is ‘really’ the case, without reference to wider considerations, as it is the responsibility of others to choose what policies are enacted. Moreover, it is not the policy worker's fault when such advice is not followed; it is not their role to think about broader

contextual factors such as whether a given policy will get public support or is in keeping with the overall tenor of a government's programme. Taking such factors into account will only mask and distort the 'real' situation, which policy workers are meant to be uncovering and addressing through their practice.

Summary: The Analytical Repertoire

This repertoire positions policy workers as **technical specialists** who use **robust and tested tools** to **identify the correct actions for others to take**. The world in which they work has an **underlying truth** that can be uncovered through **intellectual inquiry and reason**. Good practitioners are therefore **technically skilled** in **formal techniques**, and are **not influenced by others' agendas or desires**.

6.2 ***The Interpretive Repertoire***

One of the challenges in policy work is that there is often no right answer, and so you are trying to solve a problem in the best way for now. And also acknowledging that there are important uncertainties that aren't amenable to a technical solution. They're just not answerable. So you're in a kind of an adaptive world rather than in a technical solution world.

(Mark)

The Interpretive repertoire emphasises the notion that policy practice is a specialised form of practice, but one that is not a purely technical process. Specifically, it is a form of work that sits across multiple domains requiring multiple different types and forms of skill. In contrast to the Analytical repertoire's focus on applying standardised formal policy analysis techniques – such as cost-benefit analysis, formal evaluation, or the classical 'policy wheel' approach to policy development – to ensure quality work, this repertoire emphasises the need for practitioners to modify their approaches to reflect the context in which they operate. Where the Analytical repertoire involves words and metaphors associated with strength and consistency (such as "robust" policy or "rigorous" analysis), this repertoire involves terms denoting flexibility and adjustment; "Sometimes you just need to bend with

the way the world is, rather than ways all your formal stuff tells you it should operate.”
(*Catherine*).

For example, in the excerpt that opens this section – which occurred during initial discussion of what working with evidence means – *Mark* describes policy work in ways that emphasise uncertainty, change, and a lack of clarity. He refers to there being “often no right answer” in policy work, and claims that a practitioner can only try to produce outcomes that are contingent on the specific situation in which they are working. A policy worker might develop a solution to a policy problem, but it will be a solution that can only be “the best way for now” – with emphasis on the words ‘for now’ highlighting the point that what constitutes the best way will be different at other times. This suggests that successful practice as a policy worker requires flexibility and being able to change one’s practice. The “adaptive world” of policy is contrasted with the “technical solution” world that *Mark* believes the EBP approach is designed for. In *Mark’s* view “uncertainties aren’t amenable to a technical solution” and technical solutions are designed to find “answers”; features that don’t exist in the policy world being constructed in his narrative of the policy world.

At the corresponding point in her interview *Michelle* also used the same repertoire, but whereas *Mark* used the repertoire to criticise EBP for not recognising the uncertainty of the policy world, she saw no contradiction between evidence and ambiguity. When asked for her understanding of the term evidence-based policy *Michelle’s* initial response was to state that “Things are generally more evidence-informed than they are evidence-based” because “policy is messy and complicated”. However, when asked to expand (as outlined in the excerpt below) she does not depict uncertainty and evidence use as irreconcilable. She backtracks from her original strong distinction between ‘informed’ and ‘based’, criticising what she sees as a tendency to frame working in an evidence-based way as requiring or leading to absolute certainty (in later questioning, *Michelle* clarified that she was referring to both critics and advocates of EBP at this point). Instead, “data and research and all that” is a way to establish “proper solid ground” within an environment that will always lack certainty. But she finishes by re-emphasising the point that it is the practitioner’s “own sense and experience” that ultimately allows them to make sense of the policy world in which they work.

Nicholas: So um what do you do um do you mean by that ‘evidence-informed’ instead of um ‘evidence-based’?

Michelle: Well there’s both the art and the science there I guess. But I guess I think that people sometimes get a bit hung up with evidence-based in thinking it’s the notion that if you don’t have perfect certainty about what would happen, or the likely impact that it means you can’t provide the policy. I think in a policy context that is almost inevitably the environment we are working in, and we’re never going to be able to say with absolute certainty that this will impact in exactly these ways, et cetera. We won’t be able to tell the real cost of something, or estimate demand, or whatever it is. That’s just a reality we have to work with.

Nicholas: Okay, that’s interesting, so ((cut off))

Michelle: But just, sorry, but that’s no reason not to use evidence to help with the decisions you make. It’s like data and research and all that inform you and make sure you’re on proper solid ground when you’re navigating all that lack of clarity. But your own sense and experience are hugely important because that’s what you use to make sense of what you’re dealing with.

In these excerpts, both *Mark* and *Michelle* are adopting this repertoire to emphasise that following a structured process or applying standardised rules will not lead to good quality policy work. And to both participants, EBP is treated as problematic when it involves working in a rigid and inflexible way – when it is being used to try and find ‘answers’. On the other hand, *Michelle* presents evidence in a positive light by using a guidance metaphor; it helps with “navigating all that lack of clarity”. This links back to her earlier preference for evidence-informed terminology; evidence is an aid to the judgement of the practitioner, but it is that judgement which drives decision-making.

Because of this element, the Interpretive repertoire also involves a greater claim to ‘ownership’ of policy outcomes than in the Analytical repertoire. Whereas the Analytical repertoire separates an official’s practice from what is implemented as a result of their work, the Interpretive repertoire involves referring to the outcomes of policy work through terms such as making “decisions” or “providing policy”. Similarly, rather than simply presenting advice – with it being a minister’s or manager’s decision prerogative as to whether that is followed – they are commonly framed as “advocating” or “arguing” for a particular outcome. Rather than being something which is identified by the practitioner, policy outputs

are in the Interpretive repertoire produced by the practitioner. In this repertoire policy workers are more strongly positioned to identify what should be implemented because their work involves taking account of the issues involved in implementing a decision. These are not simply the domain of 'politics' but part of the policy process.

At the core of this repertoire are concepts of complexity and uncertainty. The Interpretive repertoire presents policy work as a thing that is not amenable to relatively straightforward understanding or the diagnosis of problems, and so on. This is not unique to this repertoire, but whereas the Analytical repertoire positions policy workers' role as being to isolate and remove distractions and work with the 'real' world that exists below this surface complexity, the Interpretive repertoire involves embracing and working with it. To return to *Michelle's* excerpt above, she closes her comments by referring to how practitioners "make sense" of the issues and environment they're dealing with. In this repertoire their skills and capabilities are not directed toward uncovering the objectively 'real' nature of a problem or identifying its solution, but rather about making the world intelligible. Similarly, *Jason* referred to others having an incorrect view of officials as being tasked with answering problems when their role was "dealing with the complexity of, um, being able to capture lots of different ideas in a way that can actually organise those different dynamics into manageable sort of chunks to think about. That's, um, that's the policy craft".

As a result, the Interpretive repertoire positions policy workers as professionals within their field, but one whose expertise is not based on mastery of specific skills *per se* but rather on deeper knowledge of the field in which they are working. This knowledge represents an understanding of the underlying, often unspoken, and difficult to articulate rules and forms of knowledge that govern a particular setting; what *Michelle* refers to in the extract above as the "sense" that practitioners combine with experience to understand the nature of the world of practice. A further example of this can be seen in interviewees' characterisation of unsuccessful policy work. In the extract below, *Peter* refers to one colleague's problems dealing with the contextual nature of policy.

Peter: I mean there's one guy that I have to work with mainly and he sees himself as an economist and he's really not able to grasp a lot of evidence type(...) well the kind of concepts that we work with. You're trying to explain something to him and he flies into

a rage and all that kind of stuff, because it doesn't kind of fit his world view of, 'This is the market and there needs to be all this regulation and all that kind of stuff for it to work'. And it seems some people like him kind of latch onto these ideologies because they kind of have a bunch of fear around the chaos of how it all operates. But that(...) It doesn't enable them to have a well-rounded view of things.

Similarly, the excerpt below occurs in the context of discussing the homogenous nature of people hired by the public sector (specifically, that most officials have very similar social, cultural, and academic backgrounds).

Rebecca: Well like the new grads that run around the public service, man they're terrifying and intimidating. They're also incredibly fragile. It's quite interesting seeing it. They're kids who have been incredibly high performers and understood the rules of the game and like won at all the things they've done, all the way through.

Nicholas: Head boy, head girl type?

Rebecca: Yeah exactly, and head of the debating team, head of this, head of that, and they get thrown into this environment and they don't know what the real and the unspoken rules are(...) They don't get when they're breaking them and they don't understand why stuff gets knocked back when it fits all the formal stuff they've been taught.

While the first excerpt refers to a specific person and the second to a broad class of policy worker, in both cases the participant is referring to problems created by people who can't adapt to the specific environment in which they're working. In the first case, *Peter* frames his co-worker as someone who has latched on to a particular economic framework as a way of providing structure that lets him cope with his underlying discomfort around the indeterminate nature of policy work. However, precisely because this structure is what lets him deal with "fear around the chaos of how it all operates", he has become too rigidly attached to it. He is therefore not able to deal with the different types of evidence and constructions of issues that working in the policy field requires.

Similarly, *Rebecca* describes the recent graduates entering the public service as being superficially highly competent and capable ("terrifying and intimidating"; "incredibly high performers"), affirming the "Head boy, head girl type" metaphor I suggested and extending it to "head of this, head of that" to imply formal capability and success across a whole range of areas. However, she undercuts this characterisation by referring to them as "incredibly

fragile” and likening their success to winning at a game – and specifically a game where they understand the rules. But, within the context of the Interpretive repertoire, *Rebecca* emphasises that policy work instead involves adhering to “real and unspoken” rules. In particular, her emphasis on the word “real” implies that what these new graduates are taught about policy work is not an accurate representation of the actual ‘lived’ experience of policy practice. Similarly, policy recruitment processes select for people who have been highly successful at working in environments that operate according to explicit and formalised processes; visible structures where the markers of success are clear and can be planned for (such as education assessments or sports). However, these same people can find it difficult to cope with ‘real’ policy work, which involves behavioural codes and markers of success that are more intuitive and implicit.

Summary: The Interpretive Repertoire

This repertoire positions policy workers as **knowledgeable professionals** who **exercise informed judgement** to **make decisions** about possible courses of action. The world in which they work is defined by its **complexity**, **messiness** and operates according to **unwritten rules**. Good practitioners are therefore **adaptive** and use **tacit knowledge** in their work, **informed** by the results of formal techniques.

6.3 ***The Interactive Repertoire***

Policy is never one person’s thing; it’s always something that you throw out there and other people throw things back. That’s one of the ways that you kind of test ‘is the way that I’ve weighted this stuff the right way, or am I valuing the right things, or have I forgotten to value something else?’ And that’s where, I guess that’s where you’d say good policy really happens. When someone here is talking to someone here is talking to someone here. Good policy requires us, um, to not work in isolation.

(Michelle)

Both the Interpretive and the Analytical repertoires articulate a view of policy work as an individualised, discrete activity. While the former emphasises the importance of applying professional judgement and the latter focuses on technical capability, both frame policy

work as produced by individual practitioners making decisions and providing advice. Policy workers do, of course, work in teams and would almost never be responsible for developing policies on their own. But the central image that characterises policy work is that of an individual person applying their knowledge and skills to a specific issue or context. The Interactive repertoire, however, frames policy work as a primarily relational activity. Within this framework, policy practitioners are not working to solve problems or acting as a source of professional expertise *per se*; rather they are acting part of a community of people and a system, and it is through that community or system that policy emerges.

Practice, in this sense, is not the province of an individual policy worker. She or he will have specific tasks, undertake particular activities, and provide particular judgements. But these have no meaning when isolated from the tasks, activities, and judgements performed by others in the policy system. Instead, policy practice consists of all these elements being performed in connection with those being undertaken by others. In this sense the Interactive repertoire presents policy as the product of a network, rather than discrete actions. The role of officials within this repertoire is to facilitate the various elements of that network, enabling the different parts of the policy world to interact and work with each other effectively. While the Interpretive and even Analytical repertoires might acknowledge these elements, they are seen as something external that needs to be accounted for by the practitioner; in contrast, the Interactive repertoire positions them as something the practitioner (and their work) is embedded within.

Part of this involves characterising the work of policy practitioners as making sure that structures and systems are established and made to operate effectively. In *Aaron's* words: "I mean, we have to make sure we've got things in place that are going to make policy work. Like [advisory group]. You know, you establish a whole group of things that hopefully work together and you get things that are coherent and effective out of that". This often involved superficially mechanical imagery such as "keeping the engine running" (*Peter* – the engine being the agency concerned) or "oiling the policy wheels" (*Lisa*). But rather than the common association of machinery with determinism and automation, these metaphors used mechanisms as analogies for complex systems that needed active expert maintenance to keep going; these were not 'production' machines but 'relational' machines.

This is part of a general focus in this repertoire not on the outcomes of policy work, but on the processes through which policy work takes place and whereby policies are produced. The actions needed to do this were framed not as discrete, but rather in terms of interactions between differing models and groups. The networks out of which policies arise, however, were defined not in terms of the formal structures themselves, but rather in terms of relationships between groups; the structures and systems referred to earlier were ways for these groups to contribute to the policy process. *Catherine* provides an example of this in the excerpt below, which occurs just after she's been talking about how her work required working with a range of groups.

Nicholas: So you're working to bring all that together?

Catherine: Yeah. Like, most people in education only ever see half the picture. I mean if we're working on student success the Minister or [Chief Executive] isn't interested in a thesis on the theories of education, and your university VCs are pretty much just interested in bottom lines for their funding, and, um, your person out teaching in class is just interested in what they see on the ground. Or at least should be ((short laugh)). But we're interested in aspects of all of that. We kind of sit up above a bit(...) But that makes for problems when other people see what you're saying, because you think that thing A is important, but other people go 'I don't care about A, I just want to talk about this other thing'. And that's fine, and there are reasons for that, why they'd say that and just be interested in that one bit. You can't ignore that because those are important view, um, points of view. But yeah, our job is to say 'what about A, and what about B, and what about X', and all that. So that none of those bits are missed out when we're all talking about, like, 'issue W'. And so I need to work with all those groups to get their voice in the mix and make them realise they are being listened to. Not that they always make that easy. ((short laugh))

In the first half of this excerpt, *Catherine* opens with the metaphor of "seeing half the picture" to illustrate that none of the groups that she works with have a grasp of the entire policy on which she's working. They have their own interests based on the positions that they hold; notably these are framed as groups being mainly interested in immediate and practical concerns, such as funding or what happens in a teaching situation. Policy workers, on the other hand, have a broader scope and are framed as sitting "up above" those day-to-day concerns (implying that this height allows them to see the 'whole' picture). Initially, this

would seem to privilege the perspective of practitioners in a similar way to the Interpretive and Analytical repertoires. However, in the next section *Catherine* undermines that by affirming the value of these partial views. Although they may cause problems for officials by making policy work more difficult, there are valid reasons for stakeholders to have them and they are “important viewpoints” in their own right that “you can’t ignore”. And critically, it is the role of the practitioner to “get their voice in the mix” – in other words, to ensure that they contribute to the creation of policy (and ensure that the stakeholders themselves realise that they are making a contribution). This repertoire thus provides significant validation for other stakeholders within the policy process.⁵² The Analytical repertoire frames these views as having less value because of their partiality and thus something that should largely be isolated and removed from policy work. The Interpretive repertoire ascribes more legitimacy to them, as these viewpoints are part of the ‘messiness’ that officials must deal with and understand, but they are still something that informs the practitioner’s own professional judgement – the official’s views remain the fulcrum of the policy process. However, the Interactive repertoire frames the views of stakeholders as important elements of policy development in their own right.

Both *Catherine’s* excerpt and that which opens this section also provide examples of the key role played by talk-related metaphors in this repertoire. More specifically, this repertoire rests on the value of reciprocal communication; the form of talk being described is not one-way (that is, simply providing information to an official) but is rather characterised as an interactive dialogue. *Catherine* refers to an ideal situation in which “we’re all talking about issue W” while *Michelle* frames good policy as being produced by multiple people “talking to” each other. The value of this conversational or discussion model stems from the perceived value of incorporating inputs from multiple viewpoints; for example, *Michelle* frames good policy as being produced “when someone here is talking to someone here is talking to someone here”, with her repeated emphasis on each use of the word ‘here’ equating how important it is that the relevant participants in a policy process occupy different positions. To that end, this repertoire also involves a significant concern with

⁵² While the ‘stakeholders’ concept seemed to usually be implicitly framed in non-government terms (such as the public, people in the sector, unions, and industry associations), interviewees also sometimes explicitly used the language of this repertoire to refer to other agencies (such as the New Zealand Treasury), ministers, and similar entities that would often be classified as part of the core policy world.

increasing the 'voice' of groups – especially those that have not traditionally had significant influence in policy processes – and framing part of the role of practitioners as being to enable them to participate in the dialogue for which officials are responsible for creating. Thus *Tama*, for example, referred enthusiastically to the growing use of design-based approaches to policy development, and how such 'design thinking' should be considered a form of evidence use.

Tama: It's(...) Take a tertiary education organisation, right? They see students in a way that we would never ever see them. They know how they run late for things. They know how they do stuff. So if government was to fund a program, um, they would have a different view from what us up on high may view about stuff. And it, ah, the good thing is that we're seeing very much more a move towards getting people's views from the ground up and getting proper service design in there. So they're actually, they're part it all, and that'll help us to design a program that could better meet their needs because they're there with us.

However, this repertoire does not require an idealised or utopian view of such interaction. Participants adopting this repertoire acknowledged that different perspectives were not always complementary and could be difficult to reconcile; indeed this was framed as one of the core difficulties involved in policy work. In this context, policy workers were framed as mediators between different perspectives. For example, in the excerpt below, I had just asked *Henry* about his experience of examples where evidence had been used well. In answering, he began reflecting on an experience in another policy field.

Henry: I mean a lot of it was around the process, to tell you the truth. It was quite an interesting piece of work that drew upon different sort of communities of interest, in a way such as the evidence that was out there wasn't forced by one particular group with a particular point of view but brought them all together(...)

Nicholas: So, um, that sounds like an interesting form of approaching it.

Henry: Yeah, what struck me is that depending on what particular discipline you come from there, you had different points of view in relation to the evidence that was available. So what we did, which was quite interesting, was mediate amongst people from different disciplines and different backgrounds in a way where we came to a common sort of ((long pause)) Well, we created a different framework of analysis that was kind of, oh I definitely won't say value free, but not just from the way of thinking that if you'd only

just talked to the doctors or the nurses or something. Involving lots of different points of view meant that we got somewhere much better in the end, and somewhere that everyone was pretty much okay with. And I think if we'd gone in there guns blazing and said 'right, we're doing it like this', like just what the doctors or just what the economists said, then we wouldn't have got that win.

Henry's point here is that the good policy outcome was the result of officials choosing not to force an outcome ("if we'd gone in there guns blazing") or picking one particular side ("just what the doctors or just what the economists said"). Instead, because there were multiple contrasting views of the topic (including the evidence around it), officials worked to develop an approach that combined these together. This negotiated model was depicted as a good outcome not because it represented a truer picture of the policy issue at hand (indeed, *Henry* explicitly says that it wasn't "value free") but because they came to a common point that "everyone was pretty much okay with".

This also points to a strong vein of pragmatism within the repertoire. Even less than the Interpretive repertoire, the Interactive repertoire has relatively little concern with identifying the 'right' solution for a policy issue. Instead, policy workers are focused on achieving a policy outcome that is acceptable to the different parties that are involved in a given policy network. The optimal resolution to a policy issue is not defined by being what technical analysis defines as most effective, or what the practitioner themselves thinks is the best outcome, but rather what can achieve buy-in and goodwill from key stakeholders.

Summary: The Interactive Repertoire

This repertoire positions policy workers as **facilitators** who make **processes operate effectively** through **discussion, collaboration, and mediation**. The world in which they work is defined as a **system** that relies on a **network of relationships** to function. Good practitioners are **pragmatic**, focused on **achieving sustainable goals**, and concerned with **promoting participation by multiple stakeholders**.

7 **Repertoires of Context**

In this chapter I present the core repertoires of policy context presented in the interviews. Where repertoires of practice relate to how interviewees engaged internally with their own practice, repertoires of context concern how interviewees engaged conceptually with the environment in which they work. I identified three repertoires here: the Political–Ministerial, the Managerial–Organisational, and the Community–Cultural.

These repertoires are primarily concerned with questions of power. These are not simply descriptions of the superficial characteristics of the environment in which policy workers operate. Rather they are about the key influences over how that practice manifests within the context of policy work; the main factors that drive practitioners to work in certain ways and achieve certain conclusions.

7.1 **Political–Ministerial Power**

Fundamentally it's ministerially–driven, the policy process, and so the Minister's appetite for evidence and openness to changing position based on evidence and all that is extremely important to how evidence will be used in that process. I'd probably say it's the most important part.

(Kiri)

The Political–Ministerial Power repertoire emphasises the role and influence of an external figure in the policy process. This was almost always the minister, although it occasionally incorporated reference to other entities.⁵³ It positions the minister, their agendas, and their representatives as central forces in how policy is practiced. This does not simply mean that the minister determines policy outcomes in an official or legal sense; it is true that in most situations the actual decisions as to what policies will be enacted are the formal responsibilities of ministers, but this is more a fact of public law and the mechanics of democratic government than an observation with any deeper meaning. Rather, this repertoire constructs the minister as an overriding presence whose desires, characteristics, and goals are what shapes not simply the output of policy work but the very way in which

⁵³ These references were largely to the current government as a whole, statutory regulatory bodies, or legislation such as the Public Finance Act 1989.

that work is carried out. Officials anticipate the direction of ministers, and customise their approaches appropriately.⁵⁴ In *Matthew's* words,

Matthew: Of course, working in government departments, you know that ministers and everything come in with a preferred policy option, okay. So there has to be a practical side to it too, because ultimately whoever you are and whatever you think, you're working for the minister and doing what they want and need.

This repertoire is grounded in the formal relationship established by the respective positions of minister and officials. *Aaron* provided an example of a principled or philosophical basis for this repertoire by phrasing this as one of "a set of givens, things that can't really be influenced outside the scope of what you're doing. We're there to serve the minister, and he, um, or she, is the representative of the people. And we have to respect and follow their way because that's what democracy is". The structure of the public sector gives the minister intrinsic authority that allows them to direct the actions of policy workers, and this is seen as the defining element of how policy work is conducted. For example, in the excerpt below *William* is discussing the emergence and development of EBP over his career.

William: So, in many respects one of the major things that's forced us to be more and more closely entwined in linking the evidence to the policy, or the policy to the evidence, has been that if we don't do that with [current Minister] it gets sent back. I mean it doesn't kind of get sent back, but(...) I'll tell you about one little thing. It was actually a machinery of government or organisational thing and he just asked for one little report. It was about some activity costing. Now, I sent up that report. And I ended up doing 12 reports on the same thing, because every report generated another question, and so you'd answer the question and that that would raise another question. Finally, at the end of 12 he changed legislation. Now this was in the early days. Nowadays we wouldn't start it until we'd anticipated his questions. Otherwise we'd have to do four reports, whereas we could get away with one just by doing the evidence stuff properly in the first place. So, in the end, it's not like we have a choice on this. In his universe the two things are inseparable.

⁵⁴ This is not to say that the minister's reach is limitless. Interviewees often referred to ministers being bound by manifesto commitments and the position of key interest groups and only sometimes being able to overcome these constraints. Similarly, officials used phrases and metaphors such as "using their political capital to characterise the minister's ability in this regard as a finite resource that could be depleted, in line with the 'physical' conception of power noted in Chapter 3.

Here, *William* strongly associates the inclusion of evidence by officials in his team with the ability of a minister who is enthusiastic about evidence to require rewrites and additional information within their reports. He emphasises the specific tools that the minister has at their disposal, and which allow them to enforce their will over practitioners. The team is therefore now “doing the evidence stuff properly” because otherwise they would be required to “do four reports, whereas we could get away with one” and “if we don’t do that it gets sent back”.

This represents an authoritative and coercive version of power. Ministers have the explicit ability to compel officials to act in certain ways, and thus causes certain policy outcomes to occur. However, the Political–Ministerial repertoire does not rest solely on this construct. Rather, it also frames ministers as having significant ‘soft’ power in that officials adapt their practices and approaches in anticipation of the minister’s tastes. The principle that practitioners “serve the minister of the day” was a common reference for interviewees adopting this repertoire, and was interpreted in a broad sense. It was taken to mean that officials have to carry out (in good faith) the instructions of the minister, but that the minister had a right to shape the action of the practitioner in a deeper sense and policy workers should respond to this. For example, in the excerpt below I have just asked *Michelle* what types of evidence have the most influence in policy.

Michelle: Well it kind of depends on the issue as to what’s most important. Depends on the minister as well, in terms of what they find convincing. I guess that what particular things might be given more or less emphasis, length, weight or whatever, ties to particular ministers depending on what they’re likely to take into account. I don’t mean that we’d change our advice or wouldn’t show particular types of evidence to the minister. Um, what I was meaning was that, you know, if you’ve got a minister who really hates numbers or hates detail, then that stuff will still be there, but it will be much less lengthy perhaps than if you’ve got a minister that loves that sort of thing. It’s about the way you construct your argument and your framing. And that feeds into, um, I don’t want to say effort, but you know, the extent to which we seek out specific(...) Say, if you’ve got a minister that really cares if something lands well with providers and will make them happy then we’ll make sure that there’s a lot of evidence about their views in what we provide.

This excerpt emphasises the position of the minister in determining the types of evidence used to inform policy work. *Michelle* initially frames the type of policy issue as the main determinant of evidence use, but this is done almost in passing and she immediately pivots to extensive discussion of how the approach taken by officials is actually shaped by the preferences and personality of the minister involved. She is at pains to note that does not mean that the actual content of reports will change (or what informs officials' own views and interpretations), but that certain types of information and evidence will be given greater or lesser prominence as the basis for action. In the same vein, in the excerpt below *Rebecca* describes her view of how ministerial influence had a negative effect on the policy work of officials.

Rebecca: In those situations, the willingness of ministers to listen to further advice after that point makes a big difference to the culture in the policy community. What I observed over the period, um at least under our minister, was that because he didn't really have much appetite for policy thinking there was this kind of learned helplessness in the policy community, where they stopped...Yeah, I mean there was kind of a tremendous frustration but also a knowledge that he wasn't terribly interested in what the evidence showed, if it wasn't going to fit in with a fairly narrow political agenda and a way of thinking about incremental changes and the basics of a right kind of view(...) So in my view people largely stopped engaging with that... I mean I'm sure some valiantly struggled on but most people seemed to say 'oh that's terrible' but never tried to change things. He's the minister after all and so they just shrugged and got on with things.

This repertoire positions policy workers as ultimately subservient agents of an external force that sits outside the practitioner group. Hence *Rebecca's* characterisation that "He's the minister after all and so they just shrugged and got on with things". The minister was not part of the policy community that she refers to, but his ability to shape the behaviour of that community was portrayed as something that could not be fought – doing so was "valiantly struggling on", with the clear implication that such struggles would ultimately be unsuccessful. Officials are framed as relatively weak subjects, with the minister occupying a position of clear dominance that establishes the terms of that relationship. The core determinant of practitioners' behaviour is framed as what the minister wants and expects; high expectations and standards on the part of ministers will lead to high quality policy,

while poor performance by ministers will encourage – or at least do little to prevent – practitioners developing poor quality policy. In *William's* words: “So, I think in the end policy people are always going to work to a minister’s standards, and if ministers lower their standards then that’s a pretty sure way that policy people are likely to as well”.

In a similar way to the Analytical repertoire of practice, this repertoire also allows officials to distance themselves from the actual outcomes of the policy process. Because the minister is positioned as the central power figure who shapes both formal policy outcomes and the practice of policy work, officials cannot ultimately be held responsible for what happens. As *Lisa* framed it “At the end of the day it’s the minister’s call, and if they want to ignore evidence A or evidence B then there’s nothing we can do about it”. This allows practitioners to retain their own sense of credibility and integrity, while acknowledging that the decisions being made or policies being implemented have unanticipated consequences or do not achieve the intended results. For example, in the excerpt below *Susan* links poor government policies to reduced prominence of official advice and increased prominence of the minister in Cabinet papers.

Susan: So now cabinet papers are written in a minister's voice. They are now, um, ‘I’, so therefore, the ministers often see them as their property and they can say whatever they like even when it's totally untrue. And they can rewrite their cabinet papers. It doesn't say ‘MBIE thinks this’ or ‘officials consider that X’, you know. Instead it's I want to do this and I think this will achieve this, even if none of the rest of us think so. And now, um, they're not that happy with independent um(...) You know, you would never get a briefing to an incoming minister like the famous, you know, um(...)

Nicholas: The ‘ideological burp’ one?⁵⁵

Susan: Right. Yeah, well you'd just, you wouldn't get them because departments now are so much more focused on ‘having a conversation’ with ministers than telling them what they actually think on a topic.

In this excerpt, however, *Susan* also places some blame for this state of affairs on practitioners themselves, or more specifically on the agencies that serve ministers. She

⁵⁵ This refers to a 2005 post-election Treasury briefing containing recommendations that contradicted much of the returning Labour-led government’s policy commitments, and which was dismissed by Minister of Finance Michael Cullen as a triennial “usual ideological burp from Treasury” (Taylor 2005).

positions them as being focused on “having a conversation” with ministers rather than “telling them what they actually think”. This resonates with *Rebecca*’s earlier characterisation of the skills policy community having developed a sense of “learned helplessness” – a phrase which implies that practitioners were at least partially complicit in their lack of power. This tension between the dominance of ministers over the policy process and the unwillingness of officials to challenge it is another common element of the repertoire. *Tama*, for example, referred to officials tailoring their advice to the minister as representing poor practice, but when asked why this occurs provided the following picture.

Tama: I think that, ah, unfortunately what you do see a lot of is that policy advice is tailored to what they think ministers want to hear.

Nicholas: And why do you think that happens?

Tama: I very much think because often when ministers don’t get what they want to hear, they are very grumpy and angry, and they ((*long pause*)) Um, it starts getting into muddy waters here. Because sure they’re the minister, but actually we should be brave and be able to provide our advice, you know. Because that’s the thing, right, is that, providing conflicting advice or contrary advice to what your minister wants, you have to be brave to do that. And not many people are brave. It’s difficult to do, to be, especially if you have a minister who likes to yell and stuff like that. And of course, they have the mandate to do what they want in the end.

Here, *Tama*’s speech is characterised by qualifiers and reversals of position. He begins by criticising officials who adapt their advice to fit the minister but then immediately provides justification in the form of ministerial anger. This frames officials not as servile (as would a phrase like ‘trying to get into the minister’s favour’) but rather as being unable to provide advice because of the reaction it will provoke. Practitioners tell the minister what she or he wants to hear not because of a lack of professionalism, but because of the coercive power that the minister is able to exercise. And yet, after consideration represented by the long pause, he challenges his own characterisation by stating officials “should be brave and be able to provide our advice” only to undercut that by emphasising that doing so requires a rare quality (bravery) that is difficult to express. Such internal disagreement represents a dilemma in which *Tama* is trying to reconcile the principle that practitioners should be able to provide ‘free and frank’ advice with the pragmatic point that doing so can provoke

negative reactions – and moreover, that the minister ultimately has the right to determine the results of policy processes (“they have the mandate”).

Summary: The Political–Ministerial Power Repertoire

This repertoire frames policy workers as primarily **agents of a government system**, whose actions are directed and motivated by **ministers and their agendas**. Policy workers are **servants to the minister**, and the activities they undertake are **constrained by ministerial preferences**.

7.2 Managerial–Organisational Power

Both good and bad, it really depends on who your policy manager is and what their agenda is and all those kinds of things.

(Anna)

The Managerial–Organisational Power repertoire emphasises the influence of organisational and agency structures, employment structures, and leadership on policy work. Where the Political–Ministerial repertoire focuses on a distinctive characteristic of the policy environment – the existence of the minister – this repertoire is instead founded on a more universal construct of the policy practitioner within a work setting. In this sense it emphasises the status of officials as ‘workers’; people who exist within an employment relationship and management structure. Given this, the repertoire places significant emphasis on how specific managers – especially senior managers – and other organisational leaders affect what practitioners are able and required to do. Such people are positioned as able to shape practice through the normal reporting structures of the employing agency. Thus, *Sam* states that “it’s the influence that your manager has over what or how you’re basically allowed to approach your work” that fundamentally establishes whether he can use the types of evidence he wishes to.

Sam: You’ve got to remember that, when you get past everything else, we’re employed to do a job. We’re just like everyone else, we’re not in a privileged position. And if someone further up the chain requires that something gets done in a particular way then you just grit your teeth and bear it(...) Or, you know, you smile because they’ve actually seen that what you’re doing has a point, and is valuable, and is going to lead to a better end

result. So that's why it's critical that you have a good manager, and that they have a good manager, because otherwise it all falls over.

Here, *Sam* presents himself as "just like everyone else"; he is positioning himself as no different from any other employed person, and bound by the same sorts of internal organisational arrangements and structures as people in other work settings. This is established as a challenge to an implied alternative view that practitioners have freedom to provide the types of advice and work in the types of ways that they personally deem best. Instead, their autonomy is constrained by needing to report to people "further up the chain". Because of this, he depicts the existence of good managers as being "critical" to the operation of the public sector; without an effective management structure "it all falls over". This repertoire was also often deployed in a nostalgic way, referring to a higher standard of leadership that existed in the past and led to better policy outcomes. For example, in the excerpt below *Henry* refers to the important role played by "key mandarins" of earlier in his career.

Henry: Yeah, look, when I was a young lad starting out, you would have the sort of key mandarins within the public sector who were basically, um, they gave challenges to everyone to actually go out and do your best, get the best possible advice you could. I think that's been getting gradually watered down, and, and now there's sort of a management ethos that you're there to place the best possible position on the agency that employs you, not on a wider sort of public sector ethos.

This repertoire presents EBP as largely a product of internal agency relationships. In theory, officials might be able to access all the types of information they need. However, their ability to actually make use of that information is constrained by the organisational structure in which they work. This repertoire thus places significant emphasis on the importance of organisational leaders. Notably though, such leadership was not framed in terms of inspiration, vision, or the like, but rather a practically enabling or facilitative form focused on enhancing the autonomy of policy practitioners. For example, a specific senior leader was mentioned several times as playing a critical role in enhancing the availability of evidence within skills policy, but descriptions of his actual actions used phrases such as "quietly beaver away on that point" (*Diana*) or "just supporting us to have that connection" (*Peter*). Such terminology does not portray this official as being highly prominent, but

instead frames his role as being one focused on working to achieve outcomes and support the work of the practitioners he managed.

As a result of this focus on leadership, the Managerial–Organisational repertoire placed significant emphasis on the type and abilities of officials in senior positions as determining the way in which evidence was incorporated into policy process. This was not simply framed as having a manager who ‘liked’ evidence or who promoted its use in a rhetorical sense. Rather, evidence was portrayed as a complex area requiring specialist skills to interpret, and it was possession of those capabilities which was valued. Managers who had sophisticated understanding of evidence were portrayed as critical for ensuring that evidence contributed to policy in an effective way.

James: I think it really helps actually having a manager who is competent in both areas, cos they can be advocates and explain in a way we can’t. You know, they can push back onto the CE or the minister or what have you about what the evidence actually shows, where we can’t do that. And they can stop stuff being misinterpreted, which I don’t know, might be even more important. And maybe they’ll lose, but they’ve made the case and argued for it. So that’s worth its weight in gold.

Conversely, managers and senior staff who had only a shallow appreciation of evidence were portrayed as a significant problem. A common symbolic figure used here was the manager who was enthusiastic about EBP, but who did not have the background or skills to understand the nuances involved in applying information to policy problems or the limitations of data. A recurrent example was that of senior leaders not comprehending caveats and assumptions associated with a given piece of evidence, as in the extract below.

Michelle: So one of the things we have to be wary of is differing levels of capacity to really understand what the evidence is telling you. There’s quite a lot around sort of ‘quantitative comfort’, you know, and just taking for granted that because there’s a number it’s the right number. But you know, generally speaking, if you talk to anyone that does modelling they’re probably the people that are most cynical about the results of the modelling.

Nicholas: ((laughs))

Michelle: And that’s because they know that they’ve had to make a whole bunch of compromises and know what the limitations of the data are and what it does and doesn’t tell you,

and all of that. But then you run up against people at the top who just want a number. They want a number now and because they think that that's what good policy looks like. Because it has numbers in it, or associated with it. So you get some really shonky numbers out there because some manager doesn't understand what it actually means... And so I guess in that way you actually end up with someone wanting evidence leading to stuff that isn't based on evidence. Or not what I'd say that is.

Michelle references here the production of analysis that is believed to be evidence-based by senior staff largely because it "looks like" their expectations of what constitutes evidence. Any weaknesses in its production are ignored by the practical considerations of the work environment such as timeliness ("They want a number now"), and it is the senior official who plays the largest role in determining the type of evidence that is used. *Peter* similarly noted with frustration "those situations where someone's been to a conference or read one report from one of the big consulting companies or got fixated on one number that's printed there, and suddenly that's what drives decisions for the next five years".

In addition to the influence of senior staff over practitioners, this repertoire also included reference to the structure of the agency itself, and how that shaped certain practices and approaches to policy development. Agency structure represents a more relational form of power than the agentic form exercised by managers; where the first element of the Managerial–Organisational repertoire focused on the direct actions of people in specific roles, this second element emphasised the effects of structural arrangements such as reporting lines, interaction between teams, and even physical locations. This dimension of the repertoire embodied a construct of evidence and policy relationships that resembled the 'two communities' model discussed in Chapter 2, which is remarkably similar to *Mark's* characterisation of the relationship in the excerpt below.

Mark: Um, and in that situation the cultures build up differently and apart. The research folks think, oh, engaging with those policy people with their goldfish minds is 'Oh, it's too hard'. And like, 'if I've built up and curated this body of knowledge, and if I share it with them they'll kind of just misuse it somehow'.

Nicholas: ((*Laughing*)) Yeah.

Mark: Right, 'they'll get it wrong. They'll miss the nuance, um, they'll pick a slogan out of it and misrepresent it'. And then policy folks are trying to solve a problem with a minister

and deliver the goods. And dealing with all those researchers with their fussy focus on accuracy and robustness, and every time you want to get 'so what does the research say about this', all the answers come back with kind of caveats and couches around them to the point where it's, um. ((sighs))

Nicholas: Yeah. 'There are a range of views in the literature on this topic'.

Mark: Yeah right exactly, you feel sorry you asked ((laughs))

In contrast to such a formulation, however, this element of the repertoire relates to the existence of two communities within the policy world. Specifically, it depicts a group of officials focused on evidence, research, and ('scientific') analysis, and a group focused on the development of policy. This was created by the establishment of different teams within the agency, which were constructed as different communities with different goals, standards, and forms of practice. For example, many interviewees referred to using evidence by "going to" the group responsible for information, reinforcing the notion that these were the people who held and controlled knowledge and analytic capability rather than those involved in policy work. And yet, examples of where this distinction was blurred or weakened were portrayed as positive.

A specific example that recurred often in this repertoire was that of two teams in one of the agencies involved in this research – one focused primarily on data analysis and research, and one on developing policy. These two teams were aligned closely both organisationally and physically, and this was portrayed as leading towards strong alignment and better understanding between the two. This is illustrated in another excerpt from *Mark*.

Mark: All right, so they, they see each other around the water cooler, the coffee machine, go to the same meetings, and the managers meet together. We plan our work programs together, our analysts are constantly back and forth to each other's desks. Since we've been sitting here I've seen five visits from, from data analyst people over to policy people, and I know that, that probably the ones that are heading the other way are probably doing the same ((laughs)).

Nicholas ((Laughs))

Mark: Where you see, other parts of the [agency] have seen the research and data teams kind of drift away from, from the policy shop. To the point that until the, um, at the end of last year, right, there were the [information section] people literally in one building, and

the policy people a block-and-a-half away in another building. And really the connections there were very, very weak. And I guess, I think, well that you could probably tell that... So I think having the researchers and data people and our policy folks working closely, um, physically co-located, um, and able to build a culture and personal connections is, um. It's important.

The positive picture *Mark* is portraying here is one in which the boundaries between the worlds of 'policy' and 'evidence' are not simply bridged but come close to being dissolved. He depicts a world in which teams focused on information and data analysis, and those involved in policy work, are highly integrated. Importantly, while this involves formal collaboration – attending meetings and planning work programmes – *Mark* also identifies informal and social aspects. The two teams “see each other around the water cooler, the coffee machine” and “are constantly back and forth to each other's desks”, representing a sharing of both communal and physical space and enabling them to collectively “build a culture and personal connections”. In contrast, other parts of the agency are seen to have distinct social and physical divisions, leading to weak connections and what *Mark* sees as poor links between their capability to interpret evidence and develop policy.

Summary: The Managerial–Organisational Power Repertoire

This repertoire frames policy workers as primarily **employees of an organisation**, whose actions are directed and motivated by **the agency structure and senior staff**. Different teams have **different goals** and this can cause **siloed practices**, so **inter-team connections are valued**. **Good managers** are important, as they facilitate **effective work environments**.

7.3 Community–Cultural Power

The culture here is very different in terms of the tolerance of different ideas and the contested ideas. Like we have some ding–dong arguments around here about the best way to do stuff. It's not that there weren't disagreements at [agency] but the culture wasn't as discursive there as well; like at [agency] the people tended to sit at their desks and write papers to each other, rather than having conversations with each other.

(Rebecca)

The Community–Cultural Power repertoire of policy context is based on the notion of officials as members of a policy community with particular shared ways of behaving and thinking. It shares some similarities with the organisational–managerial repertoire in that it focuses on the effect that structures have on practitioners. However, whereas that repertoire focuses on formal structural elements (such as managers and team divisions) this repertoire focuses on the underlying values or purposes of a particular agency, or of policy practitioners as a whole. In no case did this represent a full endorsement of, for example, the critical or interpretive policy paradigms discussed in Chapter 3. However, interviewees used it to describe policy work as influenced by more than simply the ‘obvious’ sources of power. Moreover, this repertoire involved extensive use of comparisons and contrasts between the actions, behaviours, and attitudes of different agencies.

In its most straightforward form, this reflects an acknowledgement that there are certain behaviours accepted as normal in an agency, and that these differ from place to place. *Rebecca’s* quote at the beginning of this section is an example of this point. She presents the existence and interaction of different ideas in her current agency not as the result of a specific measure or created by a particular leader, but rather as the product of underlying way of being. Moreover, *Rebecca’s* characterisation of these different approaches speaks to an essential point of difference in how the two operate. Having “ding–dong arguments” is part of the accepted way of working at her current employer, while at the second agency people instead “sit at their desks and write papers to each other”. While both agencies engage in internal disagreement, her language around argumentation at the former depicts it as involving energy and passion on the part of the officials involved. The second, by contrast, depicts a more cerebral and restrained mode. This form of the repertoire usually appeared in reference to EBP requiring organisations to develop cultures of evidence use rather than relying on structural fixes. As *Henry* phrased it, “having a culture of inquiry within the organisation that’s prepared, that actually values information, knowledge, and challenging people. And then acting on it. It’s not commissioning twelve reports on something or reading an article a month”.

A second element of the Community–Cultural repertoire emphasises the purpose of the organisation, and the role that this plays in shaping the work of practitioners who work within it. For example, in *Aaron's* words,

Aaron: I think, um, every agency has its own mission and way of looking at the world, so, um, it has its own cuts of the data, um, and its own, er, performance metrics and so forth that speak to what it sees as important, and sometimes those things aren't always completely aligned.

Nicholas: So what do you mean by that?

Aaron: Well every agency, I mean your own, others, are guilty of their own, um, favourite projects, um yeah. But, er, the main driver, I think, is, um, the the mission of the different agencies. And that means different ways of seeing things. So, um, although I've been in policy shops the whole time, two of those agencies have basically been operational, and one has been more pure, um, policy. And so that creates a different set of motivations to use data in different ways, and creates different ways or things that you're wanting to find.

Here *Aaron* is saying that the underlying mission of an agency has an impact on the types of information they seek and that operational agencies use information in different ways than strategic agencies. This is, on one level, a relatively banal observation. However, he frames this difference as not simply related to the surface-level functions of the agency, but rather as something that stems from “different ways of seeing things”. In other words, the mission of the organisation has an effect on its interpretation and understanding of the sector and issues it deals with. In a similar vein, *Anna* was one of several who used a comparison with the health sector to frame the difference between agencies' evidence use as a product of the sectors with which they dealt.

Anna: Yeah, I mean it's true that the, um, the disciplines that you deal with in Health have their own kind of rich culture and understanding about evidence that you need to become familiar with. You need to be able to speak to them in ways they understand. And so health policy deals with all that type of evidence as a matter of course. The other thing that that provokes for me is the um, the nature of the sectors that you're dealing with on a practical level. Um and in particular things like how litigious they are, um, just thinking of pharmaceutical policy(...) Where in education and in justice the sort of concerns those sectors tended to drive more of a focus on documenting processes

and defending yourself against judicial review more than anything. So there's also those sorts of things. Um, and ah, yeah, that's probably(...) Health's probably the best example of that really.

In this sense, the repertoire provides policy workers with an explanation as to why different organisations might reach different conclusions, that avoids the need to directly criticise an agency's capability or the quality of its work. Depictions of the New Zealand Treasury across the interviews, for example, provide an interesting illustration of this point in practice. This agency is often portrayed as an exemplar in the country's approach to EBP,⁵⁶ and many interviewees in this research made comments that backed this up. *Anna* used the agency as an example of an organisation "employing smart people" who could interpret evidence, *Jason* stated that Treasury was "probably the place with the most freedom" to use evidence, and *Kiri* referred to it as "probably the best straight policy shop" in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, such compliments were often quickly undercut by statements implying that their view of evidence was overly-narrow and constrained by ideology. For example, when asked to describe agencies that used evidence well, *Mark* (a participant who had previously worked at Treasury) replied

Mark: Well, I mean Treasury is the obvious(...) It's, um, an organisation that at least has a reputation for a very strong commitment to evidence, or certain forms of evidence(...) Well, they like data and numbers a lot which is one kind of evidence ((*short laugh*)) But they tend to maybe boil things down a little bit too far in it.

Mark places significant emphasis on the word "reputation" here, and by using the "at least" qualifier suggests that its commitment to evidence may not be as strong as it appears. He then immediately characterises their interest in evidence as confined to "liking data and numbers a lot". This not only characterises Treasury's interest in evidence as restrictive and omitting other forms of implicitly valid evidence, but it also implies that their approach as an issue of preference ("like") rather than factors such as the underlying quality of policy advice. In the excerpt below, *Susan* takes this even further, depicting the Treasury's interest in evidence as connected to ideological and cultural practices, and stemming (unconsciously) in part from its utility as a way to bar other agencies from action.

⁵⁶ See for example Head and di Francesco (2019).

Susan: Um, on the other hand, for example, I find that the Treasury in pushing back on us around evidence, for example in regulatory impact statements, takes a very narrow view of what evidence is.

Nicholas: Okay, that's interesting I mean because you're, um, obviously you're talking about an agency that you've got a background with.

Susan: Yeah, well, I think it's born off several things. One, there's, you know, economics in the DNA of, or it should be at least, of the Treasury, um even if not in each of the individuals. And and economics as a discipline I think tends to look for quantitative evidence. So that's part of it. Um, the second thing is that I think it's(...) Oh, this is controversial, um it's lazy and easy to say 'well there's no quantitative evidence for that, therefore you haven't got evidence for it, therefore it's a bad idea'. So if you are, if your framework is you want to make it really hard for people to make a good case for doing anything, especially to intervene, then saying it has to be really strongly evidenced before you're going to accept the likely costs of doing so is, well your sort of prior is to be sceptical of the evidence base. So I think both of those things play in particularly well or strongly for the Treasury.

Nicholas: So it sounds like ((cut off))

Susan: I don't think that's conscious, um, or deliberate. It's not a deliberate strategy. I just think it is built in to the DNA of Treasury to be very sceptical about claims of evidence.

Organisational cultures were not seen as necessarily fixed, however, with interviewees often referring to times at which cultures within an organisation (or the public service as a whole) had been different or were in the process of changing. Nor was culture seen as being purely internal to an agency. For example, in the excerpt below *William* is reflecting on why EBP became such a popular movement, which had been prompted by a discussion of the 'actuarial' social investment model promoted by former Prime Minister Bill English. His conclusions are bound in the notion of this model becoming a self-perpetuating trend amongst the policy community that may have been precipitated by Prime Minister English, but whose prominence owed more to social factors amongst policy leaders.

William: It varies. As we talked about, the IDI is tremendously powerful. But with say, that actuarial approach, I think being a sceptic is probably the right place to be. But when an idea takes hold, everybody thinks, 'Oh, I wonder if we could do that? I wonder if I just get one of my stats people to do something and let's see how it works?' and they

choose something which happens to be flavour of the month or whatever. I don't think anybody sets out necessarily just to thrill their minister, but when they have the number you see, suddenly you see people who would sit around the leadership table where they would say 'This is exciting, this is interesting, this is a breakthrough' and so on. So, they want to spread that around. I think it's as simple as that actually(...)

Nicholas: But you yourself are, um, I mean we've talked quite a lot about the value of evidence.

William: Oh yes. But(...) I keep wanting to use the word 'fashion'. Do people want to impress the Minister? Well, maybe, but they really want to do is join the club, because this is what the other people are doing. So I suppose I worry a little bit about the excess of enthusiasm. I've sat at meetings where because of the fascination of the fact that you can put a value to something, or that you can index risk or something, people get very, very enthusiastic about it. But then that's also got us to some very good places. So I suppose it's a mixed bag really(...) I just don't always know if it's as robust and rigorous as people would like. I don't think it's about pleasing the minister; I think it's about joining the club.

Summary: The Community–Cultural Power Repertoire

This repertoire frames policy workers as primarily **members of communities**, whose actions are directed and motivated by **shared values and culture**. Agencies and stakeholders have **traditions**, and these define **accepted processes** and determine **valid framing of issues**. Cultures are also subject to **trends and fashion** that shape behaviours.

8 **Repertoires of Evidence**

In this chapter I discuss the prominent repertoires of evidence that were present in the interviews. While chapters 6 and 7 explored policy practice and policy context respectively in relation to EBP, this chapter focuses in on how practitioners engaged with the central concept of evidence. These relate specifically to evidence within the policy setting – not other contexts such as academic, scientific, or legal settings. I identified five repertoires here: the Objective, the Holistic, the Democratic, the Transformative, and the Legitimation.

These repertoires were not focused on defining evidence – for example, whether participants definition of evidence included cost–benefit analysis, research articles, or opinion polls (although certain definitions and forms were associated with each repertoire). Rather, the focus of these repertoires was on the use, role, and value of evidence in the policy world: why a practitioner would use evidence, and what contribution using evidence made to the work of a practitioner. This represents the notion of evidence-in-practice referred to in Chapter 3: that evidence is not an abstract and unchanging object, but rather represents the transformation of information and knowledge (in this case through the policy process) so that it can be used for a specific purpose.

8.1 **The Objective Repertoire: Evidence as source of truth**

I guess it's about understanding what's really there. I see evidence as a very strong and distinct(...) it has the hallmark of strength and power. It stands alone, it's real, it's tangible, it's not diverted by sundry kind of power stuff, aspirations of people. It's kind of clean, and I guess that's why I'm attracted to it.

(Peter)

The Objective repertoire constructs evidence as a way of uncovering and communicating reality. It provides a way of clearly 'knowing the world' with which policy practitioners need to deal, including the nature of issues being discussed, the context in which they manifest, and the outcomes and effects of potential actions related to them. More than simply being information, however, evidence as a concept is distinguished by its ability to establish a single, definitive answer or position on those issues – the 'truth' that allows good policy work to be undertaken. The quote above from *Peter* emphasises this by positioning

evidence as “clean” and something that “stands alone”, unaffected by “power” and the “aspirations of people”. Evidence is thus implicitly something that is not distorted by other factors, allowing someone to see “what’s really there”. Similarly, in the excerpt below *Tama* is asked whether policy work might involve different ways of approaching evidence than other fields.

Nicholas: So, like, do you think that there's something special about the types of evidence that might get used for policy? Or that you need as a policy person?

Tama: Well no, cos it's information and data about the real world. And you'd expect it to be objective. An objective account of the world. Otherwise it wouldn't be what you could call evidence. And so that stands independently. If it's truths about the world, then, you know, well, it's truths about the world(...) I suppose the type of information we'll be looking for is that we have a basis for the direction for that we're travelling in, and in that sense policy evidence is, um, it's different to an extent from the use point of view. But it's no more special or anything other than any other information about the world, because it's meant to be factual. It's meant to be real. About the real world.

In this extract *Tama* emphatically associates the concept of evidence with “reality”, “the real world”, “objectivity”, and being “factual”. Indeed, if evidence cannot provide “an objective account of the world” then “it wouldn't be what you could call evidence”. Moreover, he incorporates a notion of universality and consistency into his framing; the types of evidence used in policy work are not meaningfully different from those used in other settings because all forms of evidence are about establishing an objective truth. While he allows for some variation in the specific evidence that might be used deriving from the purpose of policy work (“the use point of view”), this is depicted only a superficial difference. Because evidence is a way of presenting the real world it will be fundamentally the same regardless of different contexts.

A similar framing is present in the extract below, which occurred when *Matthew* was asked what evidence was useful for policy work. However, his framing also incorporates a second key feature of this repertoire: a focus on evidence as the product of structured processes. Specifically, he equates evidence with “research”; treating these two terms as synonymous – and contrasting them with “anecdotal” information – is a common feature in this repertoire.

Matthew: Well, so what I think evidence is, in the case of evidence-based policy, is research-based evidence okay. Now there's, there's all the value side of society and what we believe in and things like that. And I guess you could say that is another form of evidence, but when I talk about evidence-based policy I think that there's a requirement initially, I think, in its formulation about it being research based.

Nicholas: So it sounds as though you're saying that, um it's stuff from researchers that is the form of information that you would see as most important if we're talking about evidence-based policy as a((cut off))

Matthew: Ah yeah, yeah. The values side would just come into it anyway. Inevitably. So there needs to be, I think, um, in addition an active and disciplined approach to gathering the evidence and I think that's, um, that means research based. So for me there's only one form of evidence and that is research-based evidence. Anecdote's certainly out of the picture. And values and the public wants will and should come in at the end.

Matthew's comments here identify three possible bases for policy: evidence, anecdote, and values, with the difference between evidence and anecdote being linked to the manner of their production. Evidence is not simply found but "gathered" and produced by "an active and disciplined approach"; this process means that it is "research based". Anecdotal information, which is not produced in this way, appears to be dismissed out of hand as a source of valid information. Meanwhile, values (including the public will) are seen as valid inputs to policy but something that will "come in at the end" of policy work. Moreover, public values are contrasted against evidence. In response to my question, *Matthew* agrees with the proposition that research-based information is most important on the basis that "the values side would just come into it anyway", and frames evidence as something that "needs to be" incorporated into policy work to balance out the inevitable influence of values.

The distinction *Matthew* draws between evidence, values, and anecdote is based in the Objective repertoire's emphasis on evidence use as a way to remove elements that distort or obscure the 'real' things on which policies should be based. Given this emphasis, it is unsurprising that references to evidence in this repertoire tended to draw on language and metaphors associated with positivism and disciplines dominated by such epistemological heritage. Terms such as "testing" policies, "establishing hypotheses", "explanatory power", and "hard data" were commonly used to describe the role of evidence in policy work –

whether in terms of what did happen or what should happen. And there was a strong tendency to explicitly equate the use of evidence with acting in accordance with scientific principles; references to “using science”, “being scientific”, and “the scientific method” were all characteristic of this repertoire, as in the following response from *Sam* when asked about why EBP had become popular.

Sam: Well I think it's probably about wanting to make policy more scientific(...) You know, I guess, um, historically we've tended to(...) Well, we um ((unclear)) how making policy goes and just gone on guesses. And that's not terribly coherent and we've had some pretty shocking, some pretty loose thinking as a result. And now there's a realisation that has to be more disciplined. More scientific. So that we can get better results, um, better outcomes. You know, you're not going to get better things without more data and more rigour, and more testing, and all that. Using science, and grounding stuff in facts and what's actually happening rather than opinions(...) I mean, you look at some of the decision science literature, say, and there's, um, there's really powerful stuff there that we don't use nearly often enough. Yeah.

For *Sam*, becoming more scientific is directly equated with becoming more effective at policy work; it's equated with concepts such as “rigour” and being “disciplined” which will create “better results, better outcomes”. In contrast, non-scientific work is associated with “loose thinking”, “guesses”, and a lack of “coherent” policy work. Notably, *Sam* contrasts this with basing policy on opinion, with his emphasis on the word ‘actually’ implying that opinions cannot be relied upon to provide an accurate account of the state of affairs in a given area and are therefore not useful for policy work. Such characterisations recurred throughout examples of this repertoire – for example in *Anna's* metaphor of “policy by gossip” as the reverse of evidence-based policy. Similarly, in the dialogue below *Diana* portrays qualitative evidence as generally less useful for policy work not because of inherent qualities, but because of her perception that it usually involves simply reporting opinion.

Nicholas: Cool, so what do you reckon is needed? You'd be after, um, modelling or stuff about that? That, like, that issue you're working with I mean?

Diana: Yeah. Well, no, I mean it doesn't have to be that. Like I would love to have more good qualitative stuff to draw on. Like proper studies and projects and research. But most of that, I'm sorry to say, um, well, um, just isn't really good enough for us to use. Like it's

nice to hear what people say, but nine times out of ten there's actually no proper analysis there, you know, you no actual evidence. Just 'this focus group said this, isn't that interesting?', yeah?(...) And If we're looking to understand something and provide good advice, then we need confidence that we're doing the right thing. Um, so that's where evidence comes in and gives us that confidence. It's about being sure(...)

Nicholas: So you think that qual, um, qual work doesn't meet what you need then? what would be good there?

Diana: Well stuff that actually showed us things and made us confident that that was right, you know, like, um, like it was actually backed up(...) Like I know you don't need p-values and stuff, but most of the stuff we see is really just reporting opinion, you know. The qual stuff I mean. And that's helpful and useful in its own way... But it's not research though. And we can't rely on it.

In this extract *Diana* frames her issues with qualitative information as being linked to certainty. She positions evidence as being valuable for policy work because of its reliability and ability to provide confidence (though to whom is unclear) that the policy action being undertaken is correct – that they're "doing the right thing". Material that can't do that isn't "actual evidence" – though she admits it may have some other value – and isn't "proper studies and projects and research". Her reasons for sidelining qualitative work are associated with issues of trust in the issues it presents – to return to *Sam's* framing, because it resembles "just reporting opinion" it cannot contribute to policy work.

This stress on the linked concepts of trust, confidence, and reliability provides a rationale for the previously noted emphasis on evidence as the result of structured processes. Inherent in both the term 'research' and the concept of scientific practice is a sense of accepted processes and standards that allows policy practitioners to be certain that the information they are dealing with presents an accurate picture of the reality it is intended to describe. Data quality is a key concern within this repertoire, with quality being equated to a given piece of evidence's ability to represent the truth about a particular situation, phenomenon, or possible course of action. This is especially important given that 'real' information is framed as something complex and hidden that requires specific skills to access; opinion represents a superficial and likely distorted view of the world, compared to information produced by experts working in a structured way. *Anna* illustrates this in the excerpt below.

Anna: I mean that's probably the only thing I really learned from my two years in a forecasting team, that nobody else should be allowed to decide what the numbers mean because nobody else bloody understands it (*((laughs))*). You think you do, you look at a number, you go that's the average of blah blah, that seems fine. But actually what you don't know is that um, I don't know, like well if you're playing with the original data, that's actually dodgy as hell. You know?

Nicholas: Yeah, definitely.

Anna: And it's just all sorts of stuff like that, and the data(...) only the people who work with it on a day to day basis really know what it means. We used to have a rule that if somebody had to make up a spurious number for the Minister, well not a spurious number but, you know, we'd make sure we were making it up because we were better at it than anyone else. You know, um, we'd make sure it wasn't too shonky a number and nothing damaging'd be caused by using it. Because those numbers get everywhere (*((word stretched out for emphasis))*).

Summary: The Objective Repertoire

This repertoire positions evidence as **a way of knowing the world**. The **quality of evidence** is crucial, and this is determined with reference to **objective standards** and through using **standardised processes**. Evidence produced through **scientific research** or **quantitative data analysis** is valued most strongly. **Technical skills** are needed to work with evidence.

8.2 **The Holistic Repertoire: Evidence as source of context**

Well I probably would use evidence in a reasonably classic way, in terms of a broad mixture of qualitative and quantitative information about trends and evaluation and data and research and so on. But, um, it's not just that. There's a much broader range of things that also get taken into account, especially in terms of views of what's practical and what will work in relation to operational capabilities of the people we have, and what people are going to accept. Which(...) I'm not sure(...) we don't necessarily call that evidence, but I'd say that it is. I mean it's definitely all part of the information mix that informs the advice.

(Michelle)

The Holistic repertoire frames evidence as a way of developing an understanding of the environment in which policy work will take place. Where the Objective repertoire frames evidence as being the depiction of an underpinning reality, undistorted by opinion and similar factors, this repertoire positions evidence as first-and-foremost an input into a decision-making process. It facilitates the work of policy practitioners not by identifying truths or establishing correct courses of action, but rather by providing a richer and deeper picture of the policy issue under consideration.

This means that the repertoire involved an inherently broader acceptance of what constitutes valid and acceptable evidence than the Objective repertoire. For a start, its focus on evidence as a way to obtain rich depictions of the environment for policy work led to interviewees adopting it being much more positive about the contribution of qualitative work. For example, in the extract below *Lisa* lauds her team's quantitative work as "second to none" but identifies the lack of qualitative activity as a "hole" and their contribution to policy development as consequently "always a bit limited". While their work is high quality, it needs the addition of other contributors to provide the full picture needed for policy work.

Lisa: So for us, evidence is, well it has to be based on numbers. Because we have the whole data set, you know. We've got the nation at our feet in terms of data and we, we can cut it many ways, and we can put many things out, and tell you a massive amount about the system and all that. Pretty much second to none. But there's still holes in that.

Nicholas: Like, um, what do what mean?

Lisa: Well we can't, we can't do anything qualitative. It's all administrative data.

Nicholas: So um, what(...)

Lisa: Um, well so we can involve other people and say, 'here's a hole that needs filling, or here's a piece that would be really interesting to do'. But it's not what we can do, so our work's always a bit limited(...) Nothing qualitative, nothing too ambitious(...) So there's always extra stuff that's needed to give the richness needed for policy. Because the stuff we've got needs that extra bit to be really useful to inform new things, new interventions, all that sort of stuff.

Beyond this, however, the Holistic repertoire also places a stronger emphasis on what might be called 'informal' or 'unstructured' evidence. As described earlier, the Objective repertoire frames evidence as the result of disciplined investigation of an issue (often equating it with

science or research). Within this repertoire, however, evidence takes on a much broader character. This is because establishing context is seen to involve – and, indeed, require – a greater range of potential information sources. In the context of policy work, evidence is framed as inherently partial; a given piece of evidence contributes to understanding one particular element of a given issue, but none can provide the whole picture in isolation. The types of information that can reasonably be considered ‘evidence’ can thus take many forms.

Kiri: Well, I think when we hear evidence we think research evidence, we think data, we don’t think so much about administrative performance, complaints, stakeholder perceptions, experience and intuition. Um, we don’t necessarily recognise all of those ranges of evidence about performance, or evidence about results, or evidence about process as evidence in the same way(...) People in talking about evidence will often be silent about important sources of evidence that they’re actually using, processing or accessing, but perhaps not registering in the same way as your RCT level evidence, and your rigorous evaluative evidence, and your administrative data results out of the tax system(...) So, um, so those sorts of forms of silent evidence are actually important because they’re used to structure, understand, and, um, and interpret the, you know, what people might call the ‘real evidence’.

Notable both here and in *Michelle’s* quote that opens this section is a sense that such informal evidence is under-valued and unrecognised. In both cases, they characterise the types of information that are the focus of the Objective repertoire as being the mainstream definition of evidence – *Kiri* specifically refers to people calling this “real evidence”. And yet, both also position it as playing an important part despite this marginalisation. *Michelle* refers to this as an important part of the “information mix” that underpins policy work, while *Kiri* uses the metaphor of “silent evidence” to frame such information as hidden from external perception but still playing an important role in how people “structure, understand, and interpret” other forms of information. This common element of the repertoire led some to deploy this repertoire as a way of criticising the EBP movement as privileging certain types of information over other key sources. This would, in this repertoire, lead to both a less comprehensive understanding of policy issues and a narrowing down of what would be considered valid and desirable policy actions. For example, in the excerpt below *James* uses this repertoire to express resistance to the EBP movement.

Nicholas: So, before we wrap up, is there anything you'd like to add, or, um, ask me, or go back to, or anything?

James: Ah, um(...) Well I guess one of the reservations I have about evidence language is that, um I think there is a sense in which so called hard quantitative evidence is privileged. People are wanting, um, looking for things like ((unclear)) trial studies, to show effects and looking at the, very much the quantitative financial benefit to an end of things. And I think, personally, I think that's unfortunate because I think there's a much wider range and what that's kind of narrowing down on is a very much a hard sciences view of how to manage effectiveness(...) Whereas I think there's a much bigger discussion about evidence to be had. Some of that, I mean some of that is going to be very hard, very specific scientific evidence, but some of it is going to actually be quite circumstantial and subjective... But it all helps you understand the whole picture of what's going on... And it's dangerous when you take just one view because in my experience there's always something key you'll miss by only looking at it one way. And so we risk, um, we risk something that looks great on paper but just doesn't work in practice or is going to cause major problems in the future.

Here, *James* is not just expressing his concern that different types of evidence are not being used in an abstract sense, but that this will have real effects on the types of policies that are pursued. He alludes to his personal negative experience of neglecting viewpoints, and characterises policy produced in this way as looking "great on paper" but at least creating a risk of problems when implemented. Notably, this exchange occurred at the end of the interview, in the context of a question that invited the participant to emphasise points of importance or introduce new ideas, topics, and information that hadn't been covered. For *James*, this provided an opportunity for him to – unprompted – express his concerns about the types of information that he saw being promoted and neglected within the EBP discourse; that he did so points to this being a key concern for him.

This notion that multiple forms of information are required to provide a full picture of a policy topic was also framed as having implications for the types of capabilities needed to work with evidence. Rather than emphasising technical analytic skills, this repertoire emphasised the need for policy workers to have the ability to integrate and contextualise information from multiple sources, and thus ascribe meaning to the evidence. For example, in the extract below *Susan* is describing her positive experiences with a previous minister.

Susan: Well he also, and um, god, I don't want this to be about, you know, 'ra ra [Minister]', but, um, but he also knew that you needed both the sort of, the quantitative statistical type of evidence, and he also wanted to know about what, um, the people on the ground who are doing it could tell you about what worked and what didn't work. So he did have both of those kind of um interests in it.

Nicholas: Oh interesting.

Susan: And he always used to say, and I think this is kind of relevant, he used to say if you, um, 'I can get any bog-standard policy analysis off the internet. The only value you people have to me' (*aside*) which was frequently not much in his view (*aside ends*) but, um, 'the only value you people have for me is if you actually like know stuff on the ground here'. You know, because then you're able to inform your advice with something that I can't get off the internet. So he understood that the numbers don't mean anything without all that other stuff around them. You know, that's what, um, gives them meaning and lets you understand what they're telling you. And that's what separates an okay or a good policy analyst or advisor, um, from a really good one, you know? Appreciating and using all that together to produce something you can't just get off the internet.

In this narrative, *Susan* frames one of the minister's virtues as being his desire to ensure that officials in his ministry took account of multiple sources of information. The technical side of policy work is framed as something that he could get "off the internet" – something of little value to him – while the value that policy practitioners bring is framed as lying in their ability to provide context for that type of information through their knowledge of 'on the ground' practice. And *Susan* emphasises this by characterising the integration of such different forms of evidence as a mark of practitioner capability – something that separates an "okay or good" official from a "really good" one. A skilled (or, in her characterisation of the minister's perspective, a useful) practitioner is not in her view an expert in producing results from a single type of data but rather someone who uses multiple forms of evidence to understand and communicate the important or meaningful elements of a policy area.

Summary: The Holistic Repertoire

This repertoire positions evidence as **an input into understanding an issue**. Evidence is always **partial**, and there are **many valid forms** of evidence, so **value is subjective**.

Working with evidence requires the ability to **situate evidence** within all elements of a policy issue, so that it can be **weighted according to context**.

8.3 *The Democratic Repertoire: Evidence as enabler of voice*

We live in a liberal democratic kind of society that works most efficiently and equitably when policy is made on the basis of evidence(...) I mean, without that you're letting the loudest dictate what happens, and that's not exactly good or fair.

(Aaron)

In the Democratic repertoire, evidence is presented not as a representation of reality or as a way of developing a comprehensive understanding of an area, but rather as a method of challenging the power structures that exist around a policy issue. Implicit in this repertoire is the idea that the world of policy is a contested space, in which different interests vie for influence. Within this environment, the use of evidence is framed as a way to ensure that the development of policy is not dominated by the interests of a small number of people.

Evidence "evens the playing field" (*James*) between different interests and allows them to fairly compete with each other; this allows decisions and advice to reflect what will be good for the country (framed using metaphors and terms such as "the national interest", "the public", or "New Zealand inc.") as a whole.⁵⁷

The policy context that underpins this repertoire was sometimes framed in terms of specific individuals exerting unwarranted influence, and evidence being described as a way in which that was resisted. More commonly, however, it was deployed in reference to groups that are seen to enjoy some sort of inherent privilege; the phrases "middle class white kids" and "lawyers and doctors" were both used recurrently across interviews to symbolise groups that intrinsically benefitted from the design of the education system. This repertoire

⁵⁷ Implicit in this repertoire is a liberal democratic vision in which the state works actively to promote equity between groups and support the best possible outcomes for all its citizens.

therefore positions evidence as useful at both direct and structural levels. It can be deployed directly in opposition to a specific argument or position, as in *Henry's* example below.

Henry: And so [Name] had got into [Minister's] ear and was pushing for that to happen, but, um, because I got, because we could show him the stats, we could show how that was all about their own self-interest(...) It wasn't about what was best for New Zealand at all.

This presents a straightforward case of evidence being used to challenge a particular policy advocated for by an influential figure. The implication of *Henry's* framing is that without evidence this policy would likely have been enacted – not because of its benefits, but because of that person's connection to the minister. Evidence, however, enabled officials to demonstrate that this policy was not in the interests of the country as a whole. Notably, this process is not framed as the officials concerned dispassionately evaluating the relevant policy and making a recommendation to the minister on that basis. Rather, *Henry's* narrative presents the policy as something that practitioners had already decided was not beneficial – he leaves the basis on which they formed this view unstated – and evidence as a resource they mobilised to challenge it (“because we could show him the stats”). Officials are depicted as active participants with an agenda that they use evidence to pursue.

However, this repertoire also incorporates being used to address the way in which systems can privilege particular sections of society and marginalise others. For example, in this excerpt *Mark* is describing evidence's value for schooling policy.

Mark: I mean, um, it's not as if policy is brimming with diversity is it? Like, ninety percent of us are white, university-educated, probably middle-class, um, there's probably other stuff there. And so are most of the teachers, and most of the principals, and all that. And, of course, most of ministers have been too(...) So, like, on one bit it's not surprising that the education system does a pretty shit job for Māori and for Pacific kids(...) I mean you know this. If you're a Pākehā kid from over in Thorndon it works brilliantly. Or if you're a Chinese kid in Remuera I guess(...) But if you're brown in South Auckland there's a, a high likelihood that it doesn't, it won't work(...) So what having evidence, and indicators, and all that ((*unclear*)), it brings it out(...) And it stops everyone just falling back into their comfortable middle-class way of things. The system that works for those kids, and works very well for them often, but leaves others behind. You know, the long tail we talk

about(...) And that's, that's the product of these cosy assumptions we share cos of where we've all come from. It challenges them and shows what you can do differently.

Here, *Mark* characteristics evidence as challenging not a specific policy option or setting, but rather as the assumptions that underpin whole systems. He presents the educational marginalisation of Māori and Pacific peoples as something produced by the cultural, class, and educational backgrounds of policy practitioners, educators, and politicians – the system derives from “their comfortable middle-class way of doing things” and “cosy assumptions we share”. This leads to education being structured in a way that benefits those who share backgrounds with the key influence figures *Mark* identifies, and that does not respond to what someone who is “brown in South Auckland” needs. Evidence is positioned as a counterpoint to such assumptions and approaches because it both highlights contrasting perspectives (“It challenges them”) and identifies alternatives (“show what you can differently”).

As well as positioning evidence as a tool to be deployed, this repertoire also commonly involves depicting it as a resource to be contested. Because evidence is framed as a source of power in its own right, stakeholders are seen as seeking control over it. For example, in the extract below *Peter* refers to problems involved in producing evidence that contradicts the views of influential and high-status stakeholders.

Peter: Yeah well, I mean, I've had organisational chief executives writing to the Secretary of Education demanding my head on a platter at various stages of my career(...) And it's still going on, it's still happening(...) But that's just the job (*long pause*) So in the university sector for example, and um, I guess it happens everywhere but universities are probably the big, um, the classic example, there are some very powerful and very strong people who just go great guns at attacking any kind of(...) Um, even though they're purportedly academics first, but sort of secondly they have some sort of institutional or administrative kind of function. And generally they're very senior people, and their first instinct is to take any kind of evidence that comes from government and perhaps doesn't reflect so great on them(...) They try and use their dark arts to cast doubt on it. They use any means that they can to diminish their opponent.

Nicholas: Do you mean like pointing out all of the possible issues that could exist?

Peter: Yeah, some of them which may or may not have substance. But also taking advantage of the fact that we don't always have the right to reply to those sorts of things. We can't engage in that kind of a long academic kind of discussion with them around the evidence that we've produced because there just isn't the arena for that. I mean we can't publish something rebutting something that Professor X at university X has said, because we're not part of that system(...) And I, um, can't get involved in those arguments myself. You know, it'd be against the code of conduct even if I did have the time. So that passes unchallenged or maybe there's like one sentence from [Chief Executive] in a news story that's all about how we're wrong and terrible and all that.

Peter acknowledges here that evidence is not perfect and that there can be justifiable criticism of flaws or gaps in the information on which policy work is based. However, he is presenting a situation in which those flaws are not presented in what might be referred to as a 'spirit of collegiality' – a way to improve the knowledge base for policy. Instead, stakeholder's ability to work with and critique evidence is framed as "dark arts" employed "to diminish their opponent". The connection made between these figures being "purportedly academics first" but also having a management function similarly suggests a perception that stakeholders take advantage of their status with regard to knowledge to purpose self-interested goals. Similarly, in the final excerpted paragraph he refers to these stakeholders taking advantage of the norms of policy practice compared to the norms of academic debate. Policy workers cannot participate in a "long academic kind of discussion" and "have no right of reply" to critiques of the evidence they use or generate. Such criticisms are therefore allowed to stand unchallenged.

The Democratic repertoire overlaps to some extent with the Objective repertoire, in that both frame evidence's primary value in relation to removing distortions in the policy process. Where they differ, however, is in the type of distortions they are most focused on addressing. The Objective repertoire can be thought of as concerned with epistemic distortions – ensuring that biases and misperceptions are removed so that a policy worker can understand the 'true' reality beneath. Disciplined investigation allows those elements to be removed, with evidence being the knowledge left once those impurities have been removed. In the Democratic repertoire, however, it is primarily social and power distortions that policy workers are trying to remove. Rather than an end-state to be achieved, evidence

is a tool that enables policy work to be a fairer, more equitable process. This difference can be seen in a comparison of *Sam*'s earlier explanation (in section 8.1) of why evidence-based policy had become popular, with that given by *Catherine* in response to the same question.

Nicholas: So, um, why do think that it's ended up with that popularity? Evidence I mean?

Catherine: Um ((long pause)) Well, I think it's probably about what, if I go back to first principles, um, what we're trying to do here(...) Like, the thing I guess that's important to me is that we're public servants, and so we're meant to be serving the public interest. Um, and I know that there's people who're cynical about that, and you'd certainly be right in saying that's not always the case in practice, but it's still the idea, right? And I think that really most people, well, at least the ones I've worked with, right, hold right to that idea(...) Well, I think that evidence can be seen as part of that. An important part of that. Because it means, if we're using evidence, that we're not, um, beholden to anyone. It means we're not doing just what business wants because it's powerful, or just what the unions want because they have swing with the government at the moment, or just what a particular lobby wants because they've got good PR(...) We're doing what's in the public interest... So, like, well, that's the ideal at least. I guess. I mean I know that probably sounds horribly idealistic. ((laughs))

Using the Objective repertoire, *Sam* framed the appeal of EBP as being linked to scientific processes that produce better outcomes – with outcomes being better because they're linked to “facts” and “what's actually happening”. For *Catherine*, though, the appeal of EBP is linked with what she sees as the core mission of officials: to serve the interests of the public as a whole rather than what any one particular group wants. Although she hedges her position – mocking herself for saying something that “sounds horribly idealistic” and acknowledging deviations from that ideal both in personal views and practical cases – *Catherine* frames this mission as being a consensus position amongst officials (at least those with whom she associates herself). Evidence is therefore appealing to officials because it allows them to fulfil that mission by not being “beholden to anyone”; in other words, it provides them with something that can counteract the power of particular interest groups, whether said power is inherent, linked to government connections, or effective publicity and communications work. *Catherine*'s language doesn't characterise policies developed through the use of evidence being more accurate or factual; that could be taken as an implication of

what happens when power imbalances are removed, but for her it is clearly not the most important element of using evidence. Instead, the key appeal of evidence is that it allows officials to act in the public interest – which most want to do.

Given this, the Democratic repertoire is also open to a broader range of evidence types than that common in the Objective repertoire. In particular, participants using this repertoire commonly referred to evidence being a way to enable the perspectives of groups without power to be incorporated into the policy process. For example, in the extract below *James* constructs stakeholder views as an important source of policy evidence.

James: And I, um, I think one of the, one of the risks of this is actually, is a silencing of consumer views. It's a risk. Because we just get going and crunching the data and the data must be right(...) And so we kind of swung away from the consultation evidence. Yeah, away from the people that are actually affected by the policy(...) All that disappears in the favour of what the hard data says(...) When we need to let people, kind um, I don't know, I guess 'speak' is the term you'd use(...) We need to let them have a voice in what's going to happen to them. And that should, that should be seen as evidence. It needs to be(...) Because people have a right to be heard.

James portrays a situation in which a restrictive view of evidence – “crunching the data and the data must be right” – is leading to reduced opportunities for people to influence policy processes, when good practice requires input from those affected by policies. Importantly, this is not framed in terms of stakeholder views versus evidence, but rather as a conflict between two evidentiary forms: “hard data” evidence and “consultation evidence”. Both are valid types of information for policy, but they have different sources and may lead to different conclusions. Also notably, *James* frames the problem here not in technical terms of losing important information useful for a policy process (as would be the case in, for example, the Holistic repertoire). Instead he presents it as a moral issue. He depicts consultation evidence as providing people with “a voice in what's going to happen to them”, being an imperative “because people have the right to be heard”, and the dominance of hard data “silencing” them. Such language emphasises the role of power in this repertoire.

Summary: The Democratic Repertoire

This repertoire positions evidence as **a way of challenging power**. Evidence allows practitioners to **serve the public** more effectively by **contesting entrenched interests** and **ensuring more perspectives are heard**. This leads to policies to be **fairer and more equitable** process. However, evidence can itself be a **site for power** and so different types of evidence **need to be balanced** with each other.

8.4 ***The Transformative Repertoire: Evidence as enabler of change***

So information is one of our most powerful levers, one of the most powerful agents of change in the system. If you look at the PBRF people say, 'Oh yeah, it's a funding allocation mechanism'. But really, it is an information mechanism more than anything else. And that's what changed the culture and the behaviour of universities. And it was the power of reputation captured by the information and what it meant to people at their desks. That really changed things(...) And almost entirely for the better I'd say.

(William)

The Transformative repertoire focuses on the role of evidence as a vehicle for changing patterns of behaviour and government structures. This is most commonly positioned around using information to create changes that lead to an improved system, and it therefore has a close association with concepts of performance and effectiveness. Within this repertoire, evidence is framed in almost entirely utilitarian or instrumental terms; the value of information lies in the outcome which results from it and what an official can actually achieve with it, rather than its inherent qualities. Evidence is described not as something which informs policy work by depicting the truth or establishing context, but rather as something that directly causes change in its own right. Implicit in this is a notion that the status quo in a given policy area is deficient in some way; policies, structures, or practices are seen as ineffective or inefficient, and they will be remedied through the application of evidence. For example, in the below quote *William* is discussing his own philosophy and history of working with evidence.

William: Well, partly because from a personal point of view it's because I came from the sector, and I thought that it was always very frustrating not knowing how the system was performing when you were in the sector. You could never benchmark yourself and all that(...) And I think that that also led to this terrible kind of inertia in the sector and in the culture. Here in [Agency] as well(...) Just very few incentives to do anything differently. So, that was my own personal motivation, but I'm sure that(...) Well, I know that there were several others who felt that way.

This repertoire commonly incorporated a notion that the process of defining, collecting, and communicating information would intrinsically lead to changes in the systems that practitioners were involved with. Rather than sitting 'outside' policy work and being used to identify, develop, and evaluate policy options, evidence was often framed as a type of policy intervention in its own right. The quote from *William* that opens this section provides an example of this, referring to people's reactions and behaviours as a result of the introduction of the Performance Based Research Fund. Similarly, in the following excerpt *Anna* discusses the role of evidence in understanding youth transitions and attachment to the labour market.

Anna: Um the other thing that happened around that period, at that point, well, worrying about youth transitions wasn't a thing. We didn't really, we went, 'well it's a labour market and young people take a while to attach to the labour market, they're just trying out different jobs, that's fine', you know. But I got the data people who look after the HLFS and went, 'well how many young people aren't attached?' And they went, 'oh well quite a few, but you know, they're in education'. And I said, 'well how many aren't in education or employment?'(...) And, um, and I got them to put that NEET number together, which was the first time that had been put together in New Zealand.

Nicholas: Oh really? I didn't realise that.

Anna: Yeah, and it was bit sketchy, but it was like everybody, um, suddenly everybody looked and went, 'shit, that's quite a lot higher than we thought'. And so the other thing evidence can do is you go, 'we've unpacked this thing and we know what it looks like, and it's immediate and obvious and we now have to do something about it', you know... So it can be a surprisingly motivating thing(...) Of course then you do have to do something about it. ((Laughs)) But the point is that because we put that time into collecting data it started an, um, an impetus for trying to do something in that whole area. And people started behaving differently because it was an important issue(...) So, yeah, I guess I'm actually quite proud of that.

Anna here presents a narrative in which simply collecting information on a given issue caused positive policy change. Evidence did not need to be used within the context of formally defined policy process, and nor did specific policies need to be enacted to create change. Instead, she identifies the act of constructing a measure as leading to a major shift in how people understood a given situation, with positive actions and behaviours stemming from that.

As part of this, the Transformative repertoire commonly depicted evidence use as an ongoing practice. When working in other repertoires, interviewees usually described evidence use within the context of discrete policy activities: practitioners were ‘developing a policy’ or ‘evaluating policy options’, and evidence would be used at particular points within that work. This repertoire, however, positioned the contribution of evidence in terms of a continuous and ongoing process. *Diana* provides a particularly clear example of this in the exchange below.

Nicholas: So, um, so why do you see evidence as useful for policy?

Diana Well, the most important thing is that we can use it to change things(...) If we know what’s working, and why, and we encourage the good and get rid of the bad, well that’s what we’re here for(...) But for that to work you can’t, well, it’s not just ‘here’s what you do’ and you implement that and everything’s grand(...) So, I guess, you’re interested in evidence-based policy? Well, that’s not just about hitting the stage in the policy cycle where you stick in the evidence(...) You should be using evidence before that cycle even starts up, to um, to know and inform what’s happening in education and how well the system’s going. And once you’ve done something you keep going and keep looking at how well things are functioning, so you know when to change it again.

Perhaps because of this, the role of ‘formal’ research and academic literature was less prominent than in other repertoires. Participants instead tended to emphasise the value of monitoring processes, administrative and matched datasets, and evaluations, pilots, and trials. For example, in the excerpt below I ask *Jason* about the prominence of evidentiary language in the public sector.

Nicholas: So, um, do you think(...) that there’s um much discussion about evidence in the policy sphere at the moment? Or, I mean, is there as much as there used to be, or do you think it’s a time, um, a phrase whose sort of time is over or(...)

Jason: Um, ooh that's a tricky question(...) But I think there's lots of conversations about how we think about data and insights in policy. I think that happens very regularly(...) We talk a lot about our new sort of data sort of systems, the collection systems we need to sort of put in place(...) Like, we're committed to making processes and all that work better. I think most people recognise that we need to do things better(...) And so I mean for example one of the things that we've been thinking about for a while is how we can better use IDI data and how to match that to some of the um admin data that we have, you know(...) And how we can make sure that's helping to make things work better(...) So, within our area we have, we have, so we have lots of conversations about how do we ensure that we're still getting that information so we can make the changes we need.

Jason affirms that evidence plays a large part in policy thinking – in keeping with this repertoire, because “most people recognise that we need to do things better” – and presents examples to back up his claim. However, he does not refer to practitioners accessing academic literature, conducting projects, or obtaining information from external experts. Rather, the evidence he sees as relevant to improving the performance of the skills system is the “admin data” that his agency collects, or using centralised datasets such as the Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI).

A similar interpretation is evident in the excerpt below from *Matthew*. Here he presents an opposite viewpoint to *Jason*, arguing that policy work is only “on the way” to incorporating evidence. But the starting point for this evaluation is the same: the extent to which agencies and/or officials make use of the data they collect. He situates evidence use as relating to the “massive sea” or “rich vein” of government-collected information, while what stops him classifying policy work as evidence-based is that government doesn't yet know how to analyse or “use it effectively”. In both examples, the constructions of evidence that they are drawing on are not those produced by an external world of researchers and academics, but rather types of information that government generates itself.

Nicholas: So how well would you say that policy people use evidence? Or, um, that's probably a loaded question(...) um, I guess, what would you, um, do you think that how evidence is used could be improved?

Matthew: Well I think that we're a long way off from good evidence-based policy that we can reliably hand on heart say that the vast majority of everything we do is evidence-based,

um, but we're moving in that(...) We have the opportunity to move in that direction, because we've tapped into this rich vein of information that we collect(...) You know, we've got more information than we know how to deal with(...) So there's a big thing about, and again, how we know how to deal with it and how to use it is one of the key things that we need to know(...) How to analyse it to be able to make the decisions about how we can invest or how we can make policy, or whatever(...) So the government has this massive sea of information at its fingertips that it, well, um, doesn't know how to use fully effectively... But we are getting much better at that. Much better. So, well, I guess I'd say we're on the way to being evidence-based. Um, we're not quite there yet, but we're 'on the journey' to use that horrible phrase. ((laughs))

This is not to say, however, that this repertoire only showed interested in what could be gleaned from quantitative datasets. *Tama*, for example, referred extensively to using 'design approaches' as a form of "ground-up evidence and experience that conflicts with how policy is often done, which is very much in a vacuum, and, you know, research reports and stuff like that.... That design thinking has, like, massive potential for us to change things I think". In a more traditional sense, as noted earlier, policy-specific evidence sources such as evaluations were also highlighted as valuable sources of information. It was, however, common for these to be depicted as worthwhile in practice, but often implemented poorly. As *Susan* stated,

Susan So I'm a big fan of the create, um, find ways to create evidence on a small scale if you can before you go big. You can learn lots that way, and actually show people 'look, it genuinely would be better if we did this. I've got the evidence to show you'(...) Trouble is that becomes translated into a pilot or a trial which two things happen to... Either number one, no evidence is ever collated or analysed, and two it never goes away ((laughs)) I mean, you'd know this. We do a hell of a lot of pilots in New Zealand, but we're rubbish at actually doing anything with the results(...) Or they live on as zombie pilots forever.

Summary: The Transformative Repertoire

This repertoire positions evidence as **a way of changing behaviour and improving performance**. Evidence **prevents stagnation** and allows for **better service and systems**. The **collection and monitoring of empirical organisational data** is seen as an important intervention, as is **evaluation**. Using evidence is seen as an **ongoing, iterative process**, rather than a discrete activity.

8.5 **The Legitimation Repertoire: Evidence as tool for justification**

Basically, everyone in Wellington thinks they're doing evidence-based policy unless they disagree with what it is they're doing. ((Laughs)) The overall thing I mean. I mean, um, it's like evidence is something we use to justify what we're doing. No one wants to think that there aren't good reasons for their positions, and people obviously think that what they're arguing for is the best thing to do, so they say that it's supported by evidence.

(Rebecca)

The Legitimation repertoire adopts a notably different position from other repertoires outlined in this chapter. The repertoires discussed so far approach 'evidence' as a fundamentally positive thing; while they frame the value of different ways and have different views on what constitutes evidence, all of them positioned policy as something which benefitted from evidence use. This repertoire takes a more pragmatic – and occasionally cynical – view, focusing on practical utility for officials, ministries, and agencies. Rather than being a way of reaching truth, challenging power, or deepening understanding, evidence is primarily a way of justifying policy decisions and actions.

Within this repertoire, evidence was framed as more important for its symbolic or rhetorical role than its actual contribution to policy. It often involved a level of scepticism about the term 'evidence-based policy' as having a clear meaning or describing a specific concept, and characterising the term as "redundant" or "a meaningless catchphrase" within the context of actual lived practice. For example, *Peter* stated that "It's disappointing but realistically I think that it's a nice-to-have, and it sort of happens, um, and evidence gets used in a window dressing type way a lot of the time. It looks good.". Similarly, in the excerpt below *Kiri*

describes the term ‘evidence-based policy’ as at least partly “empty sloganeering”, and characterises its original emergence as “jargon”. In these cases, the value of evidence lies not in what it reveals or in its contribution to policy work *per se*, but rather in its role as symbolising to non-policy audiences that good decisions or advice had been produced (irrespective to actual quality of those decisions).

Kiri: Well, evidence-based became jargon in the mid–2000s and I’m not sure it’s emerged much from that point(...) There’s definitely an element of empty sloganeering in the term evidence-based policy. I mean, you know, it’s very helpful for ministers.

Nicholas: What do you mean?

Kiri: Well, I think for ministers that element is important, because it enables them to be clear about why they’re doing what they’re doing, and, um, not to be dragged into a discussion about whether what they’re doing is a valid response to the situation they find themselves in(...) Or, at least when they enter that discussion they’d enter it from a position of objectives, not whether the response they’re making to that objective is a valid attempt to solve the problem(...) So it’s useful because something that you can say is evidence-based avoids those arguments. You know, it avoids wasting time haggling over detail.

This repertoire was often characterised by cynical overtones, in which evidence was framed as commonly having very little impact in practice beyond this rhetorical dimension. As a result, it was commonly deployed negatively, as a way to criticise the use of evidence by officials or agencies. *Peter’s* quote above is an example of this, with “window dressing” being a metaphor that implies simply making something appear pleasant to an observer. *Sam* used the similar metaphor of “dressing up” government policies in the following extract, and refers to evidence use as often being something an agency will “stick in your annual report and your vision statement and BIM” to “show you’re good and virtuous”.

Sam: I mean, for lots of agencies, um, a fair chunk of the time, working in an evidence-based way really means taking what the minister wants, getting some references that you can use to dress them up and make them look like sensible policies, and that’s that(...) Not all the time, definitely(...) But, look, I’ve worked in a lot of places and teams that proudly call themselves evidence-based, say they’re taking an evidence-based approach to things, and they don’t(...) They work in the same way as they used to, but they say that they’re evidence-based because that’s what you do(...) It’s just ((unclear))(...) You stick it

in your annual report and your vision statement and BIM and show you're good and virtuous(...) I mean, that's why I have to say it's better here in [agency], because my experience here is that there's a genuine commitment to this by most people.

Importantly, however, this repertoire was not inherently based around evidence being used to deceive, or claims that politicians and agencies sometimes misrepresented their evidence use. All interviewees described situations – both real and hypothetical – in which evidence was consciously misused or even suppressed, and these examples were present regardless of the repertoire being adopted. The core of this repertoire, as shown in the excerpts above, is its emphasis on evidence as having symbolic value, and on this value being more important than its material influence on policy work. It makes policies look better, it is something that can be brandished to shield a policy maker from arguments, and it is a shibboleth that signals an agency is a good and upstanding part of the policy community. In this repertoire, it is the appearance of being evidence-based that has value for policy work (rather than the content of specific forms of evidence). The second part of *Kiri's* excerpt illustrates this by implying that the arguments avoided through the use of evidence are not reasonable or worthwhile, using phrases such as being “dragged into” them and characterising them as “haggling over detail”. *Catherine* also provided a clear example of this at the end of describing an example where evidence had been used well.

Catherine: So, yeah, that was a really great experience. But evidence often isn't, isn't really used that way(...) Like, realistically you're often ending up dealing with a lot of foregone conclusion policy work that isn't really policy work in that classic sense, and what your evidence is doing in that case is it's shoring up that base, um, showing people, or the public, or whoever, why it is that you're doing this(...) And that, well, I think is often just as important as the idea that you're starting from a blank state, um, slate, and using evidence to do first principles(...) Well maybe not important, maybe that's the wrong word. But it's definitely useful.

Here *Catherine* is presenting the experience she had just described (the development of a new policy that incorporated a wide range of evidence from the very beginning) as an unusual situation, and framing evidence as usually being used to justify “foregone conclusion” policy work. However, she also describes that role of evidence as “important”, and although she retracts this characterisation almost immediately, she replaces it with

“useful” – another positive descriptor. In her version of this repertoire evidence performs an important communicative function by demonstrating to people the rationale for a given action or decision. This demonstrates how the repertoire can be deployed in two ways: a negative form that depicts agencies (often driven by senior managers or ministers) using the language of evidence superficially to push ‘bad’ policies, and a positive form that frames evidence as a way of convincing relevant groups (communities, organisations, or the population as a whole) of the value of ‘good’ policies.

Given that this repertoire focuses on the symbolic nature of evidence, it is unsurprising that this repertoire was not associated with any specific definitions or forms. The value of evidence is established not through methodological purity or who produced it, but rather by the extent to which it could command the confidence of its intended audience. A community survey, a meta-analysis of academic literature, and a detailed focus group report can all be highly valuable or largely worthless depending on whether or not they would convince people that a course of action was correct. However, interviewees adopting it did emphasise the importance of communication as an (often-neglected) key capability for using evidence effectively.

It is also worth noting this Legitimation repertoire did not only face ‘outwards’ from the world of policy officials towards stakeholders and the public. In both the quote that opens this section and the extract below, *Rebecca* points to how the language of evidence is used by practitioners to internally legitimise the work that they do.

Nicholas: You said before, well, it sounds to me at least as though you’re a little bit sceptical about the term evidence-based policy as a term. Would that be fair enough?

Rebecca: Sceptical about it [*Pause*] I’m not sceptical about the term per se, but when people talk about it, I always stop and think about what they might mean by that. It’s easy to chuck it around. I guess they’re just a whole bunch of words that I think we use all the time without thinking about it. I mean(...) Well, I have a bit of an allergic reaction to the phrase, because I think it’s something that everyone agrees is a good idea, because it’s an apple pie phrase that you can interpret to kind of fit to the stuff that you happen to be doing. Like, there isn’t anyone out there (*long pause*). Well, actually that’s not true. I was going to say there isn’t one out there who says they’re not doing evidence-based policy, but there are and those are the people who are working at departments where

the minister has had an idea, or have come in with a manifesto commitment that they don't think is evidence-based, and they're having to implement. So, they're the exception, but anytime officials are generating advice, kind of off their own bat, they're going to think it's evidence-based.

In both excerpts, *Rebecca* takes the position alluded to earlier that the phrase 'evidence-based' has little meaning beyond providing reassurance to the user that they are doing something worthwhile. Trying to work in an evidence-based way is constructed as largely meaningless because "everyone in Wellington thinks they're doing evidence-based policy" and the only reason why someone wouldn't claim an evidential basis for their policy work is as a form of resistance to the work that they are being required to produce. It is important to note, however, that she does not frame this as a conscious action; Policy workers are not presented as using the term evidence-based in a deceitful way to create support for or undermine policies. Rather, she positions this as providing an internal justification that policy workers use to legitimise or de-legitimise the work they are doing: "this work is evidence-based because 'good' work is evidence-based and I am doing good work", or conversely, "I am being asked to do 'bad' work, if it was evidence-based it would be good, so it must not be evidence-based".

Summary: The Legitimation Repertoire

This repertoire positions evidence as **a way of justifying decisions**. It supports officials to effectively **communicate rationale** and **defend policy choices**. Valuable evidence can **command the confidence** of an audience rather than necessarily meeting external quality standards. Being able to demonstrate an evidence base has important **symbolic value** in policy work, although this can sometimes degenerate into **cynical window dressing**.

9 Practitioner's Stances Towards Evidence and Policy: Integrating the repertoires

The repertoires described in chapters 6 to 8 present the core discursive tools used by interviewees in this research to make sense of a given dimension of evidence-based policy: their concepts of policy practice, their concepts of policy work contexts, and their concepts of evidence for policy work. Table 2 overleaf summarises these repertoires. However, these repertoires do not exist in isolation from each other. For example, using the Analytical repertoire to construct policy practice as a process of problem-solving and truth-seeking connects well with the Objective repertoire, which positions evidence as source of truth. While the two repertoires relate to different aspects of EBP – the meaning of evidence and the meaning of policy work – they are connected by a shared focus on identifying ‘truth’.

In this chapter I outline and discuss these connections, using as a structure what I have termed interpretive stances.⁵⁸ Connections are found across aspects of EBP – such as the Analytical–Objective link noted above – but also as associations between different repertoires on the same aspect. For example, the Interpretive and Interactive repertoires of practice tended to appear in proximity to each other; this represented talking about policy practice in one way flowing through into talking about policy practice in another way. These connections revealed a greater sense of meaning within the texts beyond those revealed through the repertoires themselves. The patterns represented practitioners’ use of the various repertoires to both construct EBP in particular ways and position themselves and their practice in relation to it. This provided them with a coherent framework for engaging with evidence-based policy.

⁵⁸ Please note that elements of this chapter have previously been published in Huntington (2021).

Table 2: Summary of EBP Repertoires

Aspect of EBP	Repertoire	Key Features
Policy Practice	Analytical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners solve problems and identify correct policy actions. Practitioners deal with a world that has underlying truths, which can be uncovered through disciplined reason and inquiry.
	Interpretive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners exercise informed judgment to evaluate possible policy decisions. Practitioners work in a world defined by complexity and messiness, requiring them to be adaptive and use tacit knowledge.
	Interactive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners facilitate processes to achieve sustainable policy outcomes. Practitioners work in a system based on relationships, which requires pragmatism and participation by a range of stakeholders to function effectively.
Policy Context	Political–Ministerial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners are passive agents of government and servants to the minister. Power flows from the minister, and the minister determines how policy work occurs.
	Managerial–Organisational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners are employees of an organisation. Power flows from agency structure and senior staff, and the organisation determines how policy work occurs.
	Community–Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practitioners are members of communities. Power flows from shared values and tradition, and dominant cultures determine how policy work occurs.
Policy Evidence	Objective: source of truth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence allows us to know the ‘real’ world. Evidence quality is critical, as determined through objective measures and standardised processes.
	Holistic: source of context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence provides an input into understanding an issue. The value of evidence is subjective and must be weighted to context.
	Democratic: enabler of voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence is a way to challenge power and contest entrenched interests. Evidence can be a site for power relationships, so different evidence must be balanced against each other.
	Transformative: enabler of change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence supports changing behaviour and improve performance. Using evidence is not a ‘one-off’ activity, but rather an ongoing, iterative process.
	Legitimation: tool for justification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence enables us to communicate rationales and defend policy choices. The value of evidence relates to its ability to command the confidence of an audience.

I use the term 'stance' to represent these connections because of its connotations of both physical and attitudinal posture, and to interpretation and action. Taking an aggressive stance, for example, not only implies that one will hold oneself in a particular way (materially or metaphorically) but also that one is more likely to pursue offensive, attacking actions, and is likely to interpret others' behaviour in a similar light. A stance shapes both the self and how one engages with others. There is a body of literature that uses the concept of stance and stance-taking as a specific theoretical tool to construct and explore social phenomena; this has generated a large body of associated interpretive models and techniques (Englebretson, 2007). My use of the term does intersect with this literature, in that I use it to imply an assessment of something, a positioning of the speaker (or another object) in relation to that, and the alignment of other things to that relationship: "stance is an act of evaluation owned by a social actor" (Du Bois, 2007, p. 173). In this case, the relevant social actor is the policy practitioner while the relevant object is evidence-based policy. However, I am not formally using stance as an analytic concept; I have not explored the specific process of stance-taking amongst interviewees, deploying frameworks such as the Stance Triangle (Du Bois, 2007) or the like. Rather, I am using stance in its common language form; it is a term that refers to a particular recurring combination of interpretive repertoires, covering different aspects of EBP, which practitioners use to engage with the concept as a whole.

In this sense, it is worth noting that stances are not an underlying force that leads people to adopt certain repertoires of practice, evidence, or context. Treating them as such effectively equate them with discourse as types of abstracted 'tectonic force' that are "potent causal agents in their own right ... producing objects and subjects" (Wetherell and Potter, 1992, p. 90). In this approach, the repertoires identified in this research would be treated as the result of these deeper, pre-existing forms of meaning; a practitioner describes their practice in a certain way, for example, because underneath they have adopted a particular stance. My model of stance, however, represents stances as emergent links constructed by those who are using repertoires in a given context (in this case the context of evidence-based policy). The stances I am describing have not produced the repertoires I have identified, but rather signify connections between them. Stances are produced by people who need to engage with a phenomenon in a particular context – in this case, policy practitioners working with evidence in government agencies – and are constructed out of the repertoires that they have

available to create a relatively coherent framework of meaning which can guide that engagement.

Because they are drawn from relatively 'natural' characteristics of the texts these stances are not regular; they differ in the number and strength of repertoires associated with each aspect of EBP, and some repertoires were associated with more than one stance. Similarly, just as participants took up different repertoires at different points in their interviews, so too did participants shift between stances. Some interviewees tended to more frequently adopt one than another, but in almost every interview all three were present at some point or another. This supports the perspective that people do not consistently adopt and maintain one interpretation of situations and phenomena; rather, meaning is in flux, with different ways of approaching the world being adopted and discarded at different times (as discussed in Chapter 4). At the same time, however, it is reasonable to note that an interview setting is a somewhat artificial environment; given that practitioners' daily practice does not involve the same concentration with reflecting and discussing evidence-based policy as an abstract concept it seems reasonable to assume that there would be more consistency in the stances adopted during their work.

The first interpretive stance I discuss is the *Evaluative stance*. When adopting this stance, practitioners place emphasis on including a wide range of evidence within policy processes, and take an expansive view of what constitutes 'relevant' knowledge and information. It also involves a strong focus on interpersonal debate and engagement within the policy world. And finally, it includes emphasis on the importance of the professional judgement and expertise of the practitioner – not in terms of the technical analytic skill of the analyst or advisor, but their experience and 'situated knowledge' of the policy realm.

The second is the *Scientific stance*. In many ways this stance resembles the 'classic' picture of EBP and rationalist analysis. Adopted primarily when practitioners describe policy practice as a type of truth-seeking behaviour, this stance focuses on ensuring that evidence has rigour. Within this stance, practitioners are not seen as simply passive knowledge-handlers or naïve technocrats. However, the ability to 'do what the evidence says' is valorised as an ideal. This stance also involves and emphasis on the need for consistency in how evidence is approached, and thus valorises evidence standards, hierarchies, and similar elements.

The third and final is the *Pragmatic stance*. In contrast to the previous two stances, which centre primarily on repertoires of practice and evidence, the Pragmatic stance draws much more strongly on repertoires of context. Practitioners adopting this stance emphasised the point that they are employees engaged in a day-to-day job. For this reason, the stance is associated with a concentration not on the intrinsic value of evidence sources, but rather a concern with their utility on a day-to-day basis. This leads into a focus on the need to compromise, and a concern with ensuring policy stability. It also involves a tendency towards cynicism around EBP as a concept, based on the rhetorical use of such language.

9.1 The Evaluative Stance: Diversity, debate, and judgement

Well, there's um, size, scale, who these are problems for, what's worked in the past for interventions for solving them(...) Evidence-based policy is policy which is informed by an understanding, an in-depth understanding, of all those things(...) But there're always gaps in the evidence base(...) So policy is not a matter of one plus one equals two in terms of that evidence-based thing(...) There is always judgement involved, there are always things that we don't know and guesses that we have to make in terms of our advice and decisions. And there'll always be arguments about your evidence(...) So evidence-based policy is less about rules than it is about working with all that and bringing it all together.

(Susan)

The Evaluative stance involves practitioners engaging with evidence-based policy as a way to support informed, professional judgements about policy issues. On the positive side, it frames EBP's contribution to policy work in terms of challenging the influence of embedded interests, a way to improve accountability, and its emphasis on an informed basis for actions and decisions. On the negative side, it positions EBP as potentially leading to a shallower approach toward policy work, and silencing important voices and sources of information. The stance incorporates connections between the Interpretive and Interactive repertoires of practice, and the Holistic, Democratic, and Legitimation repertoires of evidence. It did not have an especially strong link to any particular repertoires of context; practitioners adopting this stance would deploy their evidentiary and practice repertoires in conjunction with a

minister-centred, organisation-centred, or culturally-centred understanding of the policy environment, with no one repertoire appearing especially more commonly than another.

There are three common threads underpinning this stance: the centrality of the practitioner, the need for diversity, and an emphasis on debate. When adopting this stance, participants positioned the policy practitioner (by themselves or in the context of a small groups and teams) at the centre of policy work. Drawing on the Interpretive repertoire of practice, it involves framing policy work primarily as a specialised activity, involving context-specific assessments made on the basis of professional expertise. Where the Scientific stance (as discussed below) addressed complexity by attempting to remove it through distillation, the Evaluative stance saw it as inherent to the work of practitioners. And while this stance still often focused on 'solutions' to 'problems' (distinguishing it from the Pragmatic stance), these were seen as needing more than technical capabilities to resolve. Drawing on the Interactive repertoire, it emphasised the notion of policies being connected, and the need for communication and engagement with a variety of interested parties. The work of practitioners is framed as highly relational, and as involving making sure that systems work to achieve overarching goals.

This stance thus constructed high-quality practice as involving the exercise of autonomous judgement and decision-making rather than being a form of (intellectual) process work. This bears strong similarities to Coles' (2002) characterisation of professional practice as "finding not so much the 'right answer' . . . but rather in deciding what is 'best' in the situation in which they find themselves" (p. 4), which is required because of the uncertainty that defines the practice context for a professional compared to a technician. It is through the exercise of officials' professional judgement – involving a combination of analytic, experiential, relational, and cultural capabilities – that 'good' policy work occurs. Thus, a practitioner is defined not by their mastery of specific skills *per se*, but rather through their possession of qualities that resemble tacit and situated knowledge – the unspoken knowledge of not simply what 'should work' in an abstract and hypothetical sense, but what is feasible and 'can work' in a specific situation (Eraut, 2000; Haraway, 1988). Indeed, this stance often led participants to criticise those who possessed only technical skills.

Within this, evidence is positioned as a supplemental input to policy work; it can have significant potential value, but it is the role of the practitioner to determine what that value is, and how it should be realised. Similarly, evidence is a tool that can suggest or provide a starting point for the practitioners' work, an external check or reference benchmark that allows an official to 'test' ideas or arguments. But it is not a directive as to what should or must be done, as coming to those conclusions requires evidence to be 'processed' through the work of officials: "the data or the research can't give you the answers, but it can definitely point you in a good direction or show some dangers or flaws you might not have thought of" (James). The excerpt from Henry below, after being asked about whether he had encountered situations of conflicting evidence, exemplifies this.

Henry: Well again, I think that's why I always draw that distinction between evidence-based and evidence-informed. You're, um, you're always going to face situations where there's a whole array of evidence there, it tells you various things, you're going to have to make some choices, and you're going to have to opt for this rather than that(...) Now the choice of this rather than that may well relate to the context, the constraints, the particular circumstance that you're facing, that otherwise you might have opted for an alternative(...) So really, what we have to face is that evidence is an important input but it can't, um, it can't be a substitute ((long pause))

Nicholas: So you're saying you mean that there's still an element of judgment?

Henry: Absolutely, I'm absolutely saying that. It can never take the place of your own judgement, that's the words(...) Thanks for that ((laughs))

In this sense, the framing of evidence use within this stance can be seen as linked to the *Research Based Practitioner* form of EBP in Nutley et al.'s (2009) typology. Like the Evaluative stance, that form emphasises the position of the specific practitioner as a user of evidence. However, where that model focuses on the practitioner as the point at which evidence is accessed and use occurs in a formal sense, this stance emphasises the position of the practitioner as the point at which evidence is created for the purposes of policy work. Making sense of evidence was depicted as not simply a technical process but a process of professional translation requiring active engagement by an official.

Nutley et al. (2009) point out that such models have been criticised for assuming too much autonomy on the part of policy workers. However, practitioners adopting the Evaluative

stance recognise that there are multiple constraints on autonomous practice that determine what evidence will get used. These constraints, though, are framed more as influences or boundaries that the practitioner must take into account when working on policy issues. Within those parameters though, the practitioner themselves *should* have the ability to determine the relative value and relevance of particular forms and sources of evidence. In this respect, the Evaluative stance is very similar to the original construction of evidence-based medicine, with its emphasis on integrating professional expertise, characteristics of the specific case, and information from literature (Sackett et al., 1996).

This links to the second major strand of the Evaluative stance: an emphasis on diversity of evidence. Participants who adopted it referred not only to official data or research evidence, but also the results of consultation, the outputs of co-design processes, and expert opinion (especially reflections on prior experience) as strong and valuable forms of evidence within the context of policy work. Similarly, there was a strong emphasis on needing multiple forms of evidence to develop good policy. Although there was an element here of simple triangulation of evidence, it did not end at simply using multiple sources of information to develop a single policy truth. Rather, this strand within the stance related to uncovering the different ways in a policy could be or was being constructed: “one type of evidence will only give you one part of the picture, and to be honest when you look at multiple sources it’s like there are usually multiple pictures there too” (*Lisa*). In this respect, the excerpt below from *Aaron* links the Interpretive repertoire of practice and the Holistic repertoire of evidence.

Aaron: The thing that I, I think we rely too much on, is that when people talk about evidence-based policy they try to go back to, ‘well where’s the data?’. And I think, I, I think data has got to be deficient quite regularly, um, and all of that(...) I think even if you sort of, if you sort of take randomised control trials kind of thing, and you take the experimental stuff and the data, um you probably don’t get a good sense of what something is. Like really is. They can only tell you so much. And then people’s insights, the qualitative stuff, you take them um, and the sort of you know, um, they’re just as important but they still probably won’t tell you a full, complete story about cause and effect or what’ll happen in the future(...) Um, and so there is still the space that you know, even if you had totally one hundred percent evidence-based policy, there is still argumentation, and frameworks and, and logic that needs to play a part in it(...) So you have to have a lot of

different bits of evidence from all over, but um, crucially at the end you then need to have someone come in and make sense of that and make a call about what it all means.

The clearest point to make about this embrace of diversity is that it rejects more ‘positivist’ or rationalist conceptions of what EBP means. The Evaluative stance does not automatically privilege evidence from RCTs or experimental data, and recognises the value of information generated by other sources. While a given information source might be given more weight than another by a practitioner in the context of a particular policy issue, there is little interest in the sort of evidence hierarchies or primacy of specific techniques advocated for by those who promote using the ‘medical model’ (see Parkhurst (2017)) to guide policy development.

Particularly noteworthy in this stance is an emphasis on where evidence comes from. As noted in Chapter 2, much of the dialogue and literature on evidence use in policy is framed – explicitly or implicitly – in the ‘two communities’ model, in which evidence is framed as generated in one world (composed of ‘scientists’, and ‘researchers’ and the like) to be used in another world of ‘practitioners’. In this classic and influential formulation, Caplan (1979) presents a picture of “social scientists concerned with ‘pure’ science and esoteric issues [while] government policy makers are action-oriented, practical persons concerned with obvious and immediate issues.” (p. 459). Works such as Talbot and Talbot (2014) implicitly frame EBP or the like as being about the connection between these two worlds; looking at how the ‘research community’ – or even more explicitly, the worlds of academia – and the material it produces links to the ‘policy community’ and the world it undertakes.

The Evaluative stance, however, challenges this division. Evidence can certainly come from Caplan’s research community, but this is not the only source of such information. Agency-managed projects can be seen as one example of cases that can be seen as straddling or blurring the divide. But more than this, this stance treats the agency itself a source of evidence – the data it might capture, the consultation it conducts, and the ‘on the ground’ knowledge generated through experience in the area. In tune with Gibbons et al.’s (1994) distinction between modes of knowledge production, the Evaluative stance involves a strong emphasis on ‘Mode 2’: the creation of evidence from a diverse range of sources in applied settings, and especially the generation of knowledge from within the context in which it is to be used. The Evaluative stance thus does not privilege a notional research

community as the source of legitimate evidence; EBP can occur without the involvement of researchers, academics, or scientists. *Rebecca* provides an illustration of this in the context of her own development as a practitioner.

Rebecca: I think that maybe a naïve interpretation is that it means stuff that's like published studies, academic literature. I don't know, that seems overly simplistic. I don't think most policy folk would really endorse that naïve view. But I guess, probably when I was starting out, if I saw evidenced based policy I would assume that the evidence referred to like lists of citations, or stuff that said, 'Yes, that's the way to go'.

Nicholas: That's interesting. So you said that 'when you started out' it was, um, like that(...) Do you think that your understanding of what evidence might be has changed over time?

Rebecca: I think probably my understanding of what the policy craft is has changed. Like, when I started out I didn't really know what policy work involved, as you don't coming from a university setting. I came as a shiny Masters grad full of hope and promise. ((*laughs*)) Yeah, I mean, and so now I'd say that the evidence has got to be, to do with the building a rationale for believing a particular thing is likely to be true, I guess. But, in policy making that usually means we're judging, um, making a prediction about why this is the best, and what will happen in the future if you do x. We're not really saying that something's true. Or at least not like most, um, like it's true in a scientific sense(...) So that, um, that opens up what we need to be comfortable dealing with. Like, yeah, what academics say might be useful, but so is, actually, what Jen in Temuka thinks if this policy is going to affect her. And what our own data returns say, like, that's really pretty rich stuff(...) The more experienced you get and the better you understand what policy is, I think, the greater appreciation you have for how that's equally valid, if not more so.

Clearly tied to the foregrounding of practitioners was the Evaluative stance's positioning of policy workers as not simply interpreters or users of evidence, but as generators of evidence and expert knowledge in their own right. The Evaluative stance emphasises that specialist expertise exists within the agencies themselves and that the divide between these two communities is often illusory. For example, in one of the few times that departmental science advisors (DSAs) were mentioned in the interviews, *James* noted that the one associated with their agency was of little value to the area in which his team worked.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ This response occurred when *James* was asked how EBP had affected practices at his agency.

James: I mean, um, we have the science advisor, [name], but he isn't really relevant to what we do(...) Um, I mean he's very smart and, um, I guess that he's probably, might be, um, useful in other areas. But he doesn't really cover much around us at all ((long pause)) I mean, to be blunt his expertise isn't in our area, whereas a lot of the um, the policy people here have research backgrounds, data backgrounds, who've spent years working on these issues. And they're very plugged into everything you have to know(...) So, um, we collectively would have a much better handle on all the evidence than he does. We're much better placed to understand everything and we know how to do research, and know the literature and all that(...) Other parts of [agency] might benefit from him, I don't know. But he'd probably just cause problems for us if we caught his eye.

The DSAs were implemented following the Gluckman reports on science and policy work in Aotearoa New Zealand, specifically to improve the quality and use of evidence within government agencies (Gluckman 2013, 2017); to this end they are drawn not from the 'policy' but the 'research' community and usually retain connections to universities or Crown Research Institutes. And yet *James* points to the team in which he works as having much deeper and broader knowledge in their particular area than the relevant DSA; indeed, he notes that the involvement of the DSA would likely cause problems (presumably due to their organisational power but comparative lack of subject-specific expertise).

Notably, however, the Evaluative stance was also often accompanied by a level of self-doubt or questioning as to whether what the practitioner was describing 'really' constituted using evidence. A common pattern was to initially position types of information not produced through research as important – as in the earlier excerpted exchange with *Rebecca* – but then to follow that with hedging language, such as stating or wondering if that would not be considered evidence. Notably, this hedging was usually present within the specific context of talking about 'evidence-based policy' as a noun – a specific concept or way of working – rather than in the more generic sense of evidence use. This suggests a view of EBP as restrictive rather than expansive, discouraging the use of information which practitioners felt was highly policy-relevant but that didn't meet specific criteria.

In line with this, a recurrent theme within this stance was concern that the language of evidence was – inadvertently or not – narrowing down the acceptable basis for policy advice. A strong component of this was a belief that many policy stakeholders, particularly

leaders and key decision-makers, did not fully appreciate the nuances and caveats involved in establishing the meaning of evidence. As described earlier, the Evaluative stance positioned evidence as gaining a distinct 'policy' meaning through the engagement or intervention of the practitioner. This process might involve specific technical analysis or applying the contextual understanding possessed by the policy worker, but the important point is that evidence did not stand on its own – it required interpretation. And yet, often organisational rhetoric – such as several references to growing use of the term 'single source of truth' – did not recognise that evidence was inherently contestable and challengeable. A recurrent example of this was the 'magic number' metaphor, used to refer to examples of quantitative findings – such as return on investment figures or estimates of job loss due to automation – taking on a life of their own and being used out of context or without appropriate discussion of the figures' background, strength, or weaknesses. This was seen as a particular issue when such figures had not been produced by particularly robust means in the first place. As *Michelle* phrases it in the excerpt below,

Michelle: Well, um, at the moment there's kind of a vogue for give us the one number, you know, the sort of social investment stuff(...) People always like numbers, they tend to believe numbers, even if the way that you got to the number was total twaddle ((laughs)) I guess people that understand numbers tend to be much more dubious about the final result, cos if you understand all of the assumptions that were made behind a model, then you know that(...) Well I've had a lot of involvement in designing and analysing surveys and stuff and anyone who's been involved in that sort of thing knows how the way that you ask questions and so on influences the result that you get.

This concern about the skill of managers was also present to some extent in the Scientific stance (as discussed below). What distinguishes it in the Evaluative stance, however, was a concern that this represented not simply a technical failing – for example, that the wrong number was being used – but a broader issue of whose evidence was and was not present within policy development.

Connected to this, diversity and dialogue between perspectives was the third key strand in the Evaluative stance. Drawing on its connection to the Democratic and Legitimation repertoires of evidence, this stance embodied a particular concern with power relationships, and consciousness of the role that evidence can play in supporting or challenging these.

Good quality evidence use was associated with incorporating diversity into the policy process, and in particular with promoting debate between different points of view rather than adopting a single perspective. The excerpt below from *Rebecca*, in which she is asked about her experiences on a historical secondment at another agency exemplified this.

Nicholas: So, um, do you think there were differences in how they each approached evidence?

Rebecca: Oh, um, night and day(...) Completely different. I mean, it made me realise how institutionalised I'd become at [employer], because we would have conversations at [seconding agency] that I felt naughty about even having, like even just in an enclosed room. At [seconding agency] the emphasis is on the quality of argument and analysis(...) Like, it was more diverse than I'd expected. I expected a bunch of neoliberal economists. They've got their fair share, but they also have non-economist people with strong left-wing socialist beliefs. A whole bunch of variety and that again made for better conversations I think(...) It was excellent.

In this extract *Rebecca* refers to the organisation that she believes has a stronger evidence-based approach as being characterised by discussion, argument rather than consensus, and the inclusion of a range of perspectives in policy work. Evidence-based work is not couched in terms of reaching truth or adopting the 'right' approach – indeed, she refers to concern that the seconding organisation might be dominated by one way of thinking. Instead, she positions the agency's quality as characterised by “a whole bunch of variety” and “better conversations” between contrasting perspectives (“neoliberal economists [and] non-economist people with strong left-wing socialist beliefs”), and contrasts it with becoming “institutionalised” at her main employer of the time.

Similarly, at a later point (included as the introductory quotation to the Community-Cultural repertoire) *Rebecca* referred positively to staff at her current agency as having “ding-dong arguments”, while at her previous employer “the people tended to sit at their desks and write papers to each other, rather than having conversations.”. This highlights the point that it is not the difference in views themselves that she saw as characterising good evidence-based policy, but rather active dialogue between those views. In this section (and others) she frames passionate and active debate positively in contrast to dispassionate modes of engagement, and leading to better policy outcomes.

In this sense, the Evaluative stance can be seen as representing an approach to EBP grounded more strongly in the notion of policy work as argumentation and debate – as in the work of Fischer and Forester (1993b), Majone (1989), and others discussed in Chapter 3. It frames policy work as dealing with an indeterminate world in which many potential actions are possible and plausible, and the policy practitioner is someone who establishes order on that world (or, rather, that part of it embodied within a given section of policy work) through exercising their professional judgement. However, this requires a deep understanding of the issues at hand; it is not simply enough to argue for a position, as that position must be grounded on something solid. The Evaluative stance thus largely positions evidence as an input into these debates; by providing additional information and context the policy practitioner is not flying blind but has a coherent basis for deciding on actions and making recommendations. However, it remains only an input.

9.2 The Scientific Stance: Truth, rigour, and consistency

Well we need to get closer to the truth, so that we can know what we, um, we really are doing and think about what we should do in the future.

(Matthew)

The Scientific stance is directly linked to the Analytical repertoire of practice, although some characteristics of the Interpreter repertoire occasionally appeared (as discussed below). It was very strongly linked with the Objective and Transformative repertoires, with the Democratic repertoire also being present. The key repertoire of context involved was that of Managerial–Organisational Power.

The Scientific stance positions evidence-based policy as a method of removing distortions, biases, and inertia in the policy process, in order to reveal the correct decision or course of action for a practitioner to recommend – or at least the ‘most correct’ path forward. Where the Evaluative stance positions the professional expertise of the official as remaining the central determinant of good policy, this stance foregrounds evidence itself as ideally driving the outcomes of policy work. Within this stance, the role of the official is to ensure that decisions, actions, and policy settings reflect as far as possible the authoritative messages that can be derived from the body of available evidence. In many ways it represents a classical construction of EBP, the viewpoint represented in Gluckman (2013) that

Without objective evidence, the options and the implications of various policy initiatives cannot be measured. When this happens, judgement can only be on the basis of dogma, belief or opinion. (p. 8)

Drawing strongly on the Analytical repertoire, policy work within this stance was framed as primarily an intellectual activity involving the application of technical skills and processes to solve problems. Contrasting with Majone's (1989) characterisation discussed at other points in this thesis, the skills of a good policy practitioner are seen as analogous to those of an engineer or scientist – albeit a highly skilled one. The essence of policy work was the application of rigorous, disciplined thinking to identify 'right' and 'wrong' answers; in this respect it strongly reflects Mayer et al.'s (2004) rational style of policy work. In this context, greater use of evidence use allows an analyst to avoid distortions created by personal bias, the influence of vested interests, and external political considerations. The core mark of good policy work is the extent to which these elements are removed or set off from the policy process.

This does not mean that the Scientific stance does not accept uncertainty. *Matthew*, for example, complained about people who "come back and say 'remove the uncertainty'" likening them to people who think "if you have a high definition TV and you think, "oh that's a very clear picture, if I walk right up to it, it'll be even clearer". But dealing effectively with such uncertainty was seen as the key reason why rigorous, consistently-applied standards for evidence were seen as so important,

Matthew: So, so what we can get is people who have, who really don't have that much background in analytics and things like that, but what they do is just pick up on uncertainties in the data, and I think this is really the, um, the biggest problem I've faced, is that people's, um, well if you come from a research background, uncertainties in the data are just, well that's what you expect(...) You're certain to have uncertainties and that's the whole purpose of the research method and statistical analysis, is to try and narrow those uncertainties as far as you can take.

The Transformative repertoire, in which evidence was positioned as a vehicle for improving processes and preventing stagnation, was also a prominent component of this stance. This was part of a strong association between evidence use and quality in the Scientific stance; not only was using evidence seen as an important marker of quality policy in its own right,

but instrumentally evidence was seen as particularly critical for enhancing service delivery. To this end it had an especially strong focus on the value of collecting and reporting system data – especially quantitative data – and constructed useful evidence as agency-generated information that could be directly used to understand and improve performance (with less emphasis on academic research than the similar Objective repertoire).

It is important to recognise that this stance does not represent a technocratic caricature of policy-making; participants adopting it did not see EBP as involving rigid policy-by-recipe, uncritically accepting what literature might say, or ignoring the views of those affected. Indeed, participants acknowledged the point that they would often be faced with conflicting pieces of evidence, complex situations without easy answers, and imperfect knowledge about a situation. But these were regularly presented with a tone of regret; an ‘ideal’ policy situation was one that would reflect what the evidence said, and the point that other factors have to be taken into account is a disappointment. “Things have to go through the policy sausage grinder I know, but a big part of me wishes it didn’t always have to and sometimes we could be straight with people”, in *Diana’s* words.

It was in this context that the Scientific stance incorporated some elements from the Interpretive repertoire of practice; it involves acknowledging the imperfect nature of the world in which policy workers act, and sees the judgement of expert practitioners as important for understanding and developing policy that can account for that. However, this stance positioned that as subordinate to the Analytic repertoire. Rather than the relative embrace of indeterminacy that characterised the Interpretive repertoire in its own right, the Scientific stance focused on officials’ judgement being needed to define appropriate problems and parameters that would then be amenable to technical solutions, and effective ways to implement those solutions. The expertise of the practitioner lay in understanding how the ‘truth’ around a policy issue could be preserved in the light of the somewhat chaotic world that policy workers had to deal with.

The position of stakeholder views provides a useful illustration of this point. References to these did not disappear when participants adopted the Scientific stance; interviewees still incorporated them into their descriptions of policy work and noted that those were important elements of whether a given policy was worth pursuing or could be enacted.

However, they were framed as a separate and distinct set of considerations from what the evidence pointed to; at times they were described as coming after the ‘real’ work of policy had been done. The Scientific stance can therefore be seen as involving the construction of two layers to the work of policy practitioners. The first of these lay in identifying what should be done if all else was equal. This is where evidence was positioned as fitting into the policy process. There was then a different layer of work that involved in determining what would be done, given stakeholder perspectives, contextual factors such as budgetary or managerial constraints, and similar factors. In contrast, the Evaluative stance saw these elements as constituent parts of a single activity; because policy work was framed as an inherently contextualised practice, it was not possible to identify a preferred course of action separately from the factors that shaped implementation.

While acknowledging this division, however, the Scientific stance also privileged the first layer over the second. This was presented as the core focus of ‘good’ policy work, while the second layer consisted of factors that interfered with the process. For example, stakeholder perspectives were described in a generally negative light when participants adopted the Scientific stance, presenting them as obstacles to be overcome, rather than the Evaluative stance’s positive description of them as contributing to understanding a policy issue. The two layers were not presented as complementary, but rather as conflicting worlds or approaches. *Mark* provided a particularly stark illustration of this when describing the position of evidence in a major project.

Mark: And things got quite sensitive and so, um, ultimately the policy side of things took over and in the end it was really a very policy driven process, which I guess was inevitable.
But in a perfect world, in my perfect world, it wouldn’t have worked anywhere like that.

This represents the framing of ‘pure’ EBP as an ideal rather than a realistic scenario. But it is also worth noting that in this excerpt he does not contrast evidence use against political interests, stakeholder demands, management pressures, or the like. Rather, he uses the term “policy-driven” and “policy side of things” to describe the alternative to basing decisions on evidence. In other words, the work of policy practitioners by its very nature involves compromises, balancing interests, and an overall movement away from the best possible option. While *Mark*’s language is particularly clear, this framing of large parts of policy work

not as something that can benefit from evidence being included but rather as an antagonistic factor or impulse to evidence use was a recurrent theme within the Scientific stance.

This creates difficulties for the notion that EBP simply involves incorporating evidence into the policy process. 'Policy' in this sense is something that resists evidence because it represents the things that evidence is not; it represents the realm of opinion, compromise, and what *Sam* referred to as "all that policy cruff that gets in the way a lot, but you know you have to pay attention to". Indeed, this could be taken as far as implying a kind of dialectic relationship, with 'policy work' and 'evidence work' as thesis and antithesis and the outcome of practitioners' work being a synthesis that incorporates elements of both. Evidence-based policy is a rebalancing of that relationship away from the concerns of policy work and towards the conclusions of evidence.

On this note, a strong theme within the Scientific stance was emphasis on the practical barriers and problems that constrained evidence use. This did not involve issues of access; in keeping with the findings of Lofgren and Cavagnoli (2015), when practitioners described what evidence they were able to engage with they used terms such as "heaps of information", "rich data", "pretty much any article I want", and the like. There was little sense that policy practitioners needed more access to information, although there was a recurrent theme that agencies should prioritise the generation of their own knowledge so that policy practitioners did not have to rely on other sources (such as academia) independently producing evidence. This was, however, framed largely in the context of a 'nice to have' than a meaningful issue with evidence use.

Instead, the barriers highlighted within this stance were largely social and organisational. Practitioners were in some ways presented as passive agents, with their ability to use evidence constrained by the environment within which they worked. The priorities of ministers and managers were portrayed as key factors in evidence use, but so too were external stakeholders. For example, in the extended below *Peter* made extensive reference to the problems involved in producing evidence that contradicted influential stakeholders' views – especially given the constraints on officials' public behaviour.

Peter: In education I think there is very much a suspicion of government, and a suspicion of any evidence that comes out of government, and a belief that it's used to attack the

sector(...) It, there's um, an intrinsic belief that what the sector is doing is right, and that anybody who casts doubt on that is a pariah, and doesn't understand, and is trying to destroy it and all those kinds of things. Which is not the case at all. And so I have spent a lot of my time kind of absorbing hate from various places.

Peter's comments here highlight the point that even in the Scientific stance, which portrays evidence use as a technical process, policy work and EBP are seen to have power dimensions. His further comments on this area (outlined under the Democratic repertoire of evidence) emphasise that using evidence can be seen as a threat, and that people or groups can deploy the language of evidence as a weapon against 'good' policy work. Because evidence is the basis for good policy action, casting doubt on that evidence (in a convincing way) can be a powerful method of resisting undesirable policies.

Key to the Scientific stance, however, is a relatively tight definition of what counts as evidence, grounded firmly in the Objective repertoire. The linked concepts of rigour and consistency were vital elements of the Scientific stance in this respect; EBP involved using evidence that had been generated through well-tested methods and whose meaning was perceived to be relatively fixed rather than subject to interpretation. Given its focus on removing distortions and subjectivity, the Scientific stance emphasised disciplined knowledge generation – Gibbons et al.'s (1994) Mode 1 of production – that followed standardised processes. As the stance's title suggests, information produced through positivist methods or obtained from scientific sources (such as natural sciences, data analysis, or large-scale quantitative social research) were seen as providing clearly the most powerful forms of evidence. None of the participants made reference to using evidence hierarchies or assessment tools. However, there was clearly an informal methodological hierarchy in which information that could be characterised as 'scientific' by the standards of the user was portrayed as more valuable than other forms. In particular – and in keeping with the critiques of EBP's epistemological homogeneity offered by authors such as Head (2008) – practitioners adopting this stance clearly saw evidence from direct experience or professional judgement as of low quality, dismissing it as "anecdote" when it was referred to at all. These might have their own form of value, but only as a supplement to 'real' evidence. For example, *William's* comment that "stories from the front lines might not be terribly good as data, but people do respond well to them" positions information from the

sector as useful for the second layer of policy work noted above – they can be deployed to gain support for pursuing the course of action that the evidence points toward.

Importantly, this concept of rigour was not just present in relation to the types of evidence that contributed to policy, but also to how that evidence was used. There was a strong focus on evidence being a technical process that required technical abilities, and drawing on the Analytical repertoire of practice, these were phrased in terms of the types of knowledge and skill that could provide clear answers or ‘definitive’ descriptions. This did not mean complete certainty, but represented the closest approximation to a form of Truth that could be obtained in the particular circumstances. This often involved complaints about the skills and resources that many practitioners possessed, and criticism that the public sector did not prioritise recruiting for or cultivating appropriate capabilities amongst their policy staff. Decrying a lack of quantitative ability was a particularly prominent theme here. A recurrent thread was drawing a distinction between ‘genuine’ and ‘superficial’ approaches to evidence-based policy, as in the excerpt below from *Sam*.

Sam: So I think, in my experience overall, I guess that I’ve encountered a lot of people who talk a lot about evidence but don’t actually understand it(...) Or maybe sort of understand it, but have a really shallow meaning of what it is(...) I mean, it’s not just reading an article or two and sticking in a reference to a paper or something. Or lots of people seem like they think that if you do a CBA then you’ve ‘done evidence’. But that’s just a technique, you know? If that’s it you’re just being a monkey pulling a lever(...) You have to think deeper than that and, and be able to think critically about all that... And you know, like, I’m a quant guy at heart. I reckon that’s what’s our best ticket into knowing what’s really going on. But I’ve seen some really good use of qual stuff that people dismissed just cos it doesn’t have numbers in it, didn’t have numbers in it. And that’s pretty stupid really(...)

Here, *Sam* characterises good evidence use as not only about specific sources or techniques, but also the way in which they are utilised. Characteristics of policy work that might be seen as representing evidence use – such as accessing articles, referring to research, or using specific analysis techniques – are framed as potentially being nothing more than a “shallow” approach to evidence in which the policy practitioner is “a monkey pulling a lever”. These are contrasted to a genuine EBP approach that involves critical and deep consideration of

the evidence that's been obtained, as well as being open to evidence that might not fit a pre-determined notion of what it 'should' look like. Similarly, *William* – within the context of describing how important evidence use was for improving practice and facilitating change – noted concerns with the Social Investment model that had recently been in vogue.

William But then also this wave has come up, which kind of attributes sort of magical mystical powers to numbers that come out of actuary models(...) I think that that causes me anxiety(...) I've seen it work well, but I've also seen some terrible infamies committed in the name of it too as well. So, I worry a little bit about the excess of enthusiasm(...) I've sat at meetings where because of the fascination of the fact that you can put a value to something, or that you can index risk or something, people get very, very enthusiastic about it. I just don't always know if it's as robust and rigorous as people would like. I think that sceptics like Simon Chapple⁶⁰ are probably people who are worth listening to.

Both *Sam* and *William* are echoing here the concern of authors such as (Fairclough 2000) with the rhetorical aspect of EBP. However, where those criticisms are often presented as problematising of EBP from a critical or post-positivist perspective, in this context they are being presented as a critique of EBP from the positivist perspective. Often, a contrast was drawn here between practitioners and managers, with practitioners having a 'real' understanding of and commitment to evidence use, while managers were portrayed as being attracted by the superficial language of EBP but having little appreciation of what using evidence would mean, require, or imply.

9.3 The Pragmatic Stance: Utility, compromise, and sustainability

We're really on a quest for things that will last. I mean, they won't last for ever, but we want something that's got buy-in, that there's a good case for(...) That keep going and don't fall over as soon as one little bit changes, or one person leaves. So sometimes that means paying lots of attention to this bit of evidence over here, and sometimes it means paying lots of attention to the politics, and basically you have to negotiate your way through all that.

(*Aaron*)

⁶⁰ This refers specifically to the critique outlined in (Chapple 2013).

The Pragmatic stance is characterised primarily by a strong focus on the functional purpose of policy work – specifically that, on a day-to-day basis, practitioners are being asked to develop justifications for policy decisions that will be implemented by agencies, ministers, and other officials. This focus on the practical goal of policy work distinguishes the Pragmatic stance from the previous two, in that it is concerned with evidence not as the basis for policy *per se* but rather on how evidence practically supports an official to present their advice and conclusions. It also often represented a descriptive rather than normative position; participants adopted it to explain how evidence *is* used, rather than how it *should be*. This meant that repertoires of Context were emphasised by participants adopting the Pragmatic stance as the core determinants of evidence use within policy work.

The Community–Cultural Power repertoire was commonly deployed in this regard to explain how different policy fields required the use of different forms of evidence. For example, independently many participants drew parallels between skills policy and health policy, noting that while both were complex areas, the types of issues and stakeholders involved meant that different forms of evidence were relevant to generating solutions.

Henry: Like, I don't think there's a hard-wired sort of approach to things, if you know what I mean. I don't, um, I am less convinced that there is a basic, a one single general basis for everything you do... I mean if you look at Health, for example, there's a quite, I was going to say quite well-regarded view about what evidence is. I mean they take it really seriously and I guess most people live and die by what you do, and it takes on an importance that maybe it doesn't in other sectors(...) So there you're dealing with people who are being sort of socialised in the scientific method and therefore have an expectation of the consideration that that's the sort of evidence that they'll be seeing at least(...) And yeah, prior to that, again, my time at ACC is the same kind of thing. But here when we're talking about education and skills and stuff, that's not the sort of language that, um, that resonates with people. I mean, like equity, and rights, and values about what we want to do are probably more important to the final equation, like what we want as a society. It's kind of like what's right is better than what's correct, if you know what I mean.

The most prominent repertoires, however, were the Political–Ministerial Power and Managerial–Organisational Power repertoires. Within the Pragmatic stance, policy work is

approached in a relatively prosaic manner: rather than attempting to realise an ideal, practitioners are attempting to achieve practical goals in a structured work environment. There was therefore a strong emphasis on how the nature of that environment shaped the work and actions of officials. These two repertoires presented ministers and senior management respectively as the core environmental influences on policy development, and were key drivers in how evidence gets used, or the weight given to particular forms, in a given situation. In *Michelle's* words: "It kind of depends on the issue as to what's most important. Depends on the minister as well, in terms of what they find convincing".

Given this focus on the practical work of practitioners, participants adopting this stance approached evidence primarily in terms of its utility for a practitioner on the ground. The Pragmatic stance draws primarily around the Legitimation repertoire of evidence and frames EBP as not a distinctive approach to policy work *per se*, but rather a distinctive way of developing a policy rationale; it is a way of being able to explain why a given decision is being implemented or a given piece of advice has been produced. This does not mean that interviewees were promoting the caricature of 'policy-based evidence'. Rather, and even more so than the Evaluative stance, this stance stressed the partial nature of most evidence and that the value of a given piece of data or research depended on how it could be used. Evidence that met rigorous formal quality standards might be of little practical value given a sector's pace of change or country-specific details of Aotearoa New Zealand. Conversely, flaws or questionable assumptions might have to be overlooked in the greater interests of the policy agenda. For example, in the excerpt below *Jason* describes how the context of evidence production and policy implementation affects how evidence can be used.

Jason: Evidence doesn't create rigour by itself, that's my point. So that, yeah, yeah, evidence is a step in providing rigour so it's um, a necessary but not sufficient part of robust policy(...) For me critical policy making is much more important than evidence-based policy making, right?

Nicholas: Yeah, um, so what ((cut off))

Jason: Um, now an evidence base might be important as part of that, but it's not, it's not the end of the story ((laughs)). Like, um, if I come up with a whole bunch of facts and figures, um, a bunch'll be of what is what worked overseas. So, for example I mean, I'll give you a really good example(...) There's lots of conversations around things like

tripartism and um, ah social structures, you know, social dialogue in New Zealand and why we don't quite have the same levels for labour productivity that people have, and the same level of wages that people have, in Northern Europe. Right, so there's lots of conversations that are happening about evidence around that, completely missing the sort of cultural context, the fact that they've had 150 years of embedding this sort of social processing. And actually, we have a really different history, like also we have a treaty history that can't be replicated quite easily in a sort of(...) tripartite sort of way, right? So you can bring whatever the evidence you want about how well those jurisdictions are doing and the things that they're doing there, but they can't be replicated in New Zealand because we have, um, the dynamics that you can't pick up are the cultural dynamics, right? And, like you'll know that people talk about the German model of vocational education, right?

Nicholas: Oh yeah, it's the same sort of thing. It's like 'oh the German model is fantastic'(...) It's also predicated on, you know, about 300, 400 years of really strong engagement building out of the crafts and guild system et cetera, et cetera.

Jason: ((*Laughing*)) That's right, exactly right(...) Yeah, so because of all that I mean I much prefer that term, 'critical thinking' policy rather than evidence-based policy(...) Information and data are as I said, sort of, you know, important dynamics of creating that. But the big thing is getting all that context.

This stance does not, however, simply involve rejecting the notion of meaningful evidence use in policy; it is still a frame by which practitioners engaged with evidence in the policy process. However, in the Pragmatic stance evidence is portrayed in utilitarian terms – its value lies not in any inherent qualities, but rather in how a policy official can use it within a specific situation. This aligns well with Parkhurst's (2017) conception of 'appropriateness' as the key quality of evidence that can contribute effectively to policy work: "evidence that addresses the political considerations at stake, that is constructed in ways that are useful to those considerations, and that is applicable to the local policy context" (p. 119). It also resembles Lofgren and Bickerton's (2019) finding that Aotearoa New Zealand's Housing policy community valued "contextual relevance, clarity and 'good narratives' of the research on par with rigour and independence" (p. 21) when evaluating the quality of academic research. To this end, as in the Evaluative stance, when participants adopted this position they emphasised the need for multiple forms of evidence and the need to understand the

meaning of a given form of evidence within a broader social and implementation context. A recurrent metaphor was “trading off” the practical requirements of policy development against the types of evidence available while *James* used a slightly different metaphor while also highlighting the partial nature of evidence.

Nicholas So do you think evidence gets used a lot at [agency]?

James: Well it's, it's I guess a kind of dance between politics and evidence(...) Realistically you have to say 'well, this is our space and these are the things we can and can't change'. This is what we want to achieve(...) We're going to build on what we know from our data and our research nationally, but also overseas international experience in this area that can be drawn from, and then, um, then our advice has to actually be useful for someone(...) And then there's a lot of heat around some issues, and you have to decide how to respond to that heat(...) And then of course, um, we often talk about evidence as being about, or evidence-based policies being about, doing what the evidence says. But we're not good at acknowledging that actually most evidence is unclear(...) Like, a classic one is, um, do you teach reading by whole language or by phonics? Now, you can spend a lot of time getting caught up in the debate but the quality evidence says that, well actually it's all about what works for the child. There is no single way of teaching reading strategies that work different situations. So then there's a question of how that feeds into your advice(...) So, um, yeah, it's like all these factors whirling around together like, um, like people in a big ballroom. ((laughs))

This is due largely to the role of the Interpretive and Interactive repertoires within the stance; these emphasise the notion of policy work – and the world in which it occurs – as a complex system of relationships and perspectives rather than a problem to be ‘solved’. The Interactive repertoire was especially prominent, with policy work commonly framed as involving partnerships and close relationships with those outside the policy world, as in the excerpt below from *Jason*.

Jason: So, um, we have regular conversations with social partners. Like, um, they're kind of embedded into how you think about labour markets(...) So our, the sort of the heads of the social partners, New Zealand CTU and that, they're very familiar with the policy process. They're really sort of embedded in how we think about doing policy, right? So you talk to them about um how to approach an issue, and you're often on the same wavelength because, um, well they're actually sort of part of the policy process. And so

we work with them really well(...) Whereas if I talk to some of our operational colleagues within regulators ((*laughs*)) They totally don't understand what they're doing(...) Like, we have to work with them, but even though they're sort of notionally part of the same thing as us they just see the world in this totally narrow box(...) And they're kind of not even that good at that box if I'm being really honest.

In its emphasis on uncertainty and the need for skilled practitioners capable of addressing this, the Pragmatic repertoire shares common ground with the Evaluative stance. It differs most significantly in two respects. Firstly, the Evaluative stance is still focused on developing some form of resolution to policy issues. Developing a good resolution might be seen as involving a wider range of valid considerations than in the Technical stance, and the decisions themselves as inevitably bound by the context within which they were generated, but the goal of practitioners is still focused on coming to an endpoint: a decision that concludes a discrete piece of policy work. In the Pragmatic stance, however, policy work is positioned as much more of an ongoing process; in *Henry's* words: "I mean, the policy process is never really over. I mean(...) Like it gets chunked up into these little bits called policies, but those're always only temporary(...) I guess really you're talking about maintaining relationships so that good policies can happen, really". Here, *Henry* positions individual policies as "little bits" of policy work within the context of a more holistic process of policy work built around maintaining relationships. Importantly, the ongoing existence of this process means that policy work doesn't end once a policy has been developed; policies themselves are framed as only temporary. The role of the policy worker is therefore not to develop a definitive solution, but a sustainable solution – one that will last for a longer time than other options. A theoretically sub-optimal policy that will stand for a decade is – within the boundaries of what is defined as an acceptable trade-off – preferable to a policy that is supported by the evidence but not by the people.

Where the Pragmatic stance most clearly differs, however, is in its de-centering of the authority possessed by policy practitioners. The strength of the Interactive repertoire in this stance leads to it centring on a view of policy work characterised by what Colebatch (2006a) terms Structured Interaction. In such a model, the development and enacting of policy is not simply the result of decisions made by government actors; policies are instead produced through engagement and negotiation between parties within an ordered social framework

involving shared norms, language, and legitimacy. This means that the ability of officials to create the policy outcome they desire is limited because policy is generated collectively out of this interaction. As Cairney, Heikkila, & Wood (2019) phrase it within their discussion of the similar concept of multi-centric governance,

political systems have too many actors, rules, networks and ideas to expect one core group of actors to control that system. Instead, we will find many centres, or many other arrangements in which key actors produce and reinforce rules to provide some degree of cooperation and stability around shared ideas, issues or problems. (p. 23)

From the Pragmatic perspective, this framing of the world creates significant problems for being able to use evidence in the way that 'hardline' EBP advocates argue for. If the point of EBP is that practitioners should identify and enact that policies that 'work', and yet practitioners do not actually have the authoritative power to implement policies, then they are faced with a paradox. The nature of the policy world means that evidence cannot determine outcomes, and yet the EBP message is that it must do so or else an official is doing 'bad' policy work. This contradiction seemed at least partly be the source of a level of cynicism about the language of evidence-based policy being commonly present within this stance. The discussion in Chapter 8 of the Legitimation repertoire highlights examples of this, as does the excerpt below from *Aaron* when he was asked what EBP meant to him.

Aaron: Um, so honestly, I really, really um dislike that term.

Nicholas: Oh, why?

Aaron: Um, well I've got, I've, um, I think the term evidence-based policy is used to sort of um, justify one of two positions(...) One, that um it's kind of an empty commitment to do policy in a good way. And if it's, the other way that it's regularly used is it's used as a critique of policy, you know 'well actually this isn't being driven by the evidence'(...) But really, you know, the effect, um, direct effect that evidence can have on policy is limited, because we're um working within all these constraints, like the stakeholders we have, and we don't have the power to just simply flip a switch and all of a sudden there's evidence(...) So yeah, I think often it's just a pretty glib statement or something that's used to try and beat us over the head with(...) But um, but I have lots of views

about like, how we can practically, um, like the, the role of data and policy and what that kind of means.

This stance does not, however, involve simply ignoring the results of evidence or that quality did not matter. Rather, it entailed recognising that certain forms would be more or less persuasive or relevant depending on the particular policy context. As discussed earlier, within the Pragmatic stance it is not the methodological credibility of evidence that matters, but rather its relevance to the matter at hand and ability to identify useful courses of action in that context. Tenbensel's (2006) framework, which draws on work by Flyvbjerg and ultimately Aristotle, provides a useful basis for considering this. In this construct, knowledge is broadly divided into *episteme* ('scientific' knowledge derived from rules), *techné* ('practical' knowledge that emerges from experience), and *phronesis* (ethico-moral ideas of what 'should' be done). The Pragmatic stance does not deny the value of *episteme*, but privileges *techné* and *phronetic* approaches to evidence. The value of evidence is not determined by factors or benchmarks external to the policy world – things such as evidence hierarchies – but instead determined within the specific context of the policy work.

10 Conclusion

In this thesis I have used the concept of interpretive repertoires as a framework for analysing how policy practitioners engage with evidence-based policy. My goal has not been to specify how officials should use evidence, or to identify the factors that govern whether evidence is used or not. Rather I have explored the meaning of evidence-based policy from the perspective of policy workers. By analysing texts generated from semi-structured interviews with practitioners in the area of skills policy, I have identified a series of repertoires within three dimensions of evidence-based policy: constructs of policy work (repertoires of practice), constructs of the environment in which policy work occurs (repertoires of context), and constructs of the purpose of evidence within policy work (repertoires of evidence). I further found that repertoires describing engagement with EBP cohere into what I have termed interpretive stances. These represent 'meta-repertoires' that bring together particular constructions of practice, evidence, and context, illustrating how practitioners use integrated sets of repertoires to make sense of the concept of evidence-based policy. In this chapter I summarise the contribution and implications of my findings, and identify both limitations and corresponding areas for further investigation.

10.1 Contributions and Implications

10.1.1 A practitioner-centred focus on EBP

The first contribution of this thesis lies in its focus on practitioner voice to analyse EBP as an aspect of practice. I began this research from the position that approaches to evidence-based policy – both in the literature and in government agencies – would benefit from a greater focus on what EBP means for policy workers. Taking a practitioner-based approach means approaching evidence use not as something that characterises the outputs of policy work, but rather as a way of working – a mode of professional practice. Much of the scholarship in this area, however, has focused on abstract systems and structures for 'injecting' evidence into policy processes. By contrast, there has been relatively little attention paid to officials' engagement with EBP. While there have been some investigations of policy practitioners' evidence use, these have largely been confined to process issues, exploring issues around frequency and ease of access to evidence (especially of academic research). What it means to

use evidence, the role(s) of evidence, and how evidence relates to policy work are all areas of scholarship that have largely been pursued from a reified, abstract, position rather than being grounded in the views and experiences of practitioners themselves.

When officials are involved in these discussions and debates it is often elites and leaders that are involved, rather than those working 'on the coal face' to develop policy positions and advice. And yet, the EBP movement is focused on affecting the practices of those below this level – the policy workers who engage in the practical activities of undertaking analysis, preparing advice, and recommending actions. As described in Chapter 2, EBP has been associated since its origin with notions of reform, professionalisation, and modernisation. An implicit part of the movement's claim to conceptual distinctiveness –which has at times become explicit given its association with New Public Management – is the idea that without the disciplining effects of the techniques and information advocated for by the champions of EBP, officials cannot be trusted produce good advice. The focus of the EBP movement is therefore on shaping and directing the work that practitioners do. Even in application models that focus on more systemic patterns of evidence use, such as embedded research or organisational excellence (Nutley et al., 2009), the broader patterns being described are intended to affect how these practitioners go about their work.

This need for a practitioner lens is particularly relevant if, as outlined in Chapter 3, policy work is seen as an inherently social process. Practitioners are not free-floating agents existing within a vacuum; rather they work as part of a system involving formal processes and relationships (such as reporting lines and legislative requirements), and also informal relationships of power, values, and behaviours. This means that policy work – like most types of practice – is inherently discursive; the form that it takes and the outputs it creates will vary depending on the strength and manifestation of those influences in the context of the practitioner. From an argumentation perspective, not only do policy practitioners participate in debates about the subject of their work but are also constantly participating in unconscious debates about the nature of their work. Examining EBP as a phenomenon of practice thus complements the dominant focus on institutions and systems in scholarship on evidence and policy.

10.1.2 The Value of Interpretive Repertoires

Although discourse analysis is a well-established approach to exploring policy issues, the specific use of interpretive repertoires as a way to understand aspects of practitioners' work is much rarer. I have demonstrated the insights that can be generated from the use of interpretive repertoires as an analytic framework, and this offers a second contribution from this thesis to literature on both policy practice and scholarship on EBP. As discussed in Chapter 4, repertoires conceptualise phenomena by recognising that people's views, values, and actions are shaped by socially-constructed structures, but that within these structures people also have autonomy and agency. Repertoires are not dominating discourses that determine behaviours and actions before a process or situation has even begun, but sense-making tools that people use when confronted with a concept. Repertoires are like different pairs of glasses that each provide a person with a slightly different picture of the scene before them, rather than a window that forces them into a single, pre-determined view onto a conceptual landscape.

This methodological approach therefore avoids the temptation of a developing an all-encompassing, 'unified theory' of practitioner attitudes towards EBP. Pursuing such a theory would essentially replicate the structural focus that dominates current approaches to EBP. 'Organisational process' would simply be replaced as the object of analysis by the abstract concept of 'discourse', and officials would remain framed as essentially passive subjects of systems outside their control. Both organisational and (classical) discourse approaches are structural in this respect, as they see practitioner behaviour as ultimately produced by an impersonal force – whether that be systems within organisations or underpinning discourses.

By using interpretive repertoires, however, I position practitioners as active agents in the use of evidence. It is my argument that the repertoires which officials choose to adopt shape the work they undertake, how they undertake it, and what is produced as a result. Rather than searching for an overarching and totalising picture of policy practice, interpretive repertoires allow for recognising that practitioner accounts will almost certainly contain variation and variability — that the way these are talked about will shift depending on context and the topic at hand. In exploring officials' engagement with EBP, the interpretive repertoire

concept thus allows the identification of a richer picture of practitioners' on-the-ground approach to evidence and the idea of evidence-based policy than do more structural concepts such as discourse.

10.1.3 Questions of Power

The findings in this thesis raise also highlight the importance of power in relation to evidence-based policy. This is clearest in the discussion of repertoires of context outlined in Chapter 7, which explicitly concern the power relationships operating within the world of policy. Here, the Political–Ministerial Power and Managerial–Organisational Power repertoires focus on relatively traditional forms of power – the first and second dimensions of power in Lukes' (2005) framework. These clearly emphasise power in its more coercive and direct forms, with participants discussing how managers and ministers shaped the nature of EBP both through explicit actions and through practitioners' anticipation and reaction to their desires. However, Lukes' third dimension – 'ideological' power – could also be detected in these repertoires; for example, in the Political–Ministerial repertoire participants accepted ministers' primacy over officials in a way that transcended the basic legal power of the office and associated it with concepts of democratic legitimacy.

It was in the Community–Cultural Power repertoire, though, where Lukes' third dimension was most visible. In this repertoire practitioners referred directly to more diffuse forms of influence that existed outside specific people or groups and instead within systems and structures. These in turn shaped the expectations and relevance of particular forms of evidence. The perceived different expectations of Health and Skills policy around evidence standards is one example of this, as is the positioning of Treasury's interest in evidence as a disciplining device to control government expenditure. It is interesting that practitioners themselves seem to be conscious of this 'hidden' dimension, even if they do not explicitly frame this as a form of power relationship.

Power was also an explicit focus of the Democratic repertoire. Here, the role of power relationships in policy work was highlighted; the policy world was constructed as one where different interests struggled for advantage and influence, and evidence was a key element of these struggles. Drawing on what Hearn (2012) would characterise as a 'physical' conception of power, evidence was constructed as a resource for policy stakeholders; it

could challenge entrenched interests, and provide a way for marginalised groups to have their voices and interests represented. But beyond this, in aspects such as *Peter's* description of interactions with those in the sector (and their “suspicion” of information produced by government) this repertoire also highlighted the point that evidence is itself a terrain or setting in which power relationships can play out.

This leads into a broader power question raised by the participants’ responses: who defines the meaning of EBP. The Evaluative, Scientific, and Pragmatic stances represent quite different conceptions of what evidence-based policy can involve, while the point that people shift between these repertoires adds an additional layer of complexity. However, underlying this diversity there was a clear sense that certain forms of evidence were treated as more valid than others. Sometimes this was presented explicitly as a flaw in practice or culture, such as in manager’s desire for a metaphorical ‘magic number’ or *William's* reference in Chapter 7 to policy leaders wanting to be seen as using particular forms of evidence in order to be “part of the club”. As discussed in regard to the Evaluative stance, however, this was also presented as a concern that the language of EBP was restrictive and controlling – leading to key sources of information being discounted from consideration. This points to the ‘control’ of EBP as being an important question for those who advocate its use, and one that reinforces Parkhurst’s (2017) emphasis on the governance of evidence use as a key issue for the movement that is worth exploring further.

10.1.4 Insights From the findings

The final contribution this thesis makes relate to the specific findings from the research. In Chapter 6, I identified three practice repertoires: the Analytical, Interpretive, and Interactive. In Chapter 7, I identified three contextual repertoires: Political–Ministerial Power, Organisational–Managerial Power, and Community–Cultural Power. And in Chapter 8, I identified five evidentiary repertoires: Objective, Holistic, Democratic, Transformative, and Legitimation. These represent different ways that practitioners construct aspects of their work within the broader context of evidence-based policy. Then, in Chapter 9, I identified how within the texts these repertoires related to each other in coherent patterns – what I have termed interpretive stances. I identified three of these: the Evaluative stance, the Scientific stance, and the Pragmatic stance.

Policy practitioners' views of EBP – and of policy work more broadly – are characterised by diversity. The range of repertoires present in the interviews highlights the point that there is no single 'correct' answer to what constitutes EBP from the perspective of a practitioner. For example, within the Analytical repertoire a practitioner constructs their role as that of intellectual 'truth-seeking', using robust formal techniques to identify the correct course of action for government agencies and ministers to take. This suggests a very different role for evidence than in the Interpretive or Interactive repertoires, which respectively emphasise the need for 'sense-making' through professional judgement or 'system-operation' through relationship management and compromise. In the first of these, evidence is a vehicle for identifying what is true and correct, while in the second evidence is simply one of many inputs that inform policy work, and in the third it represents a platform for supporting engagement between stakeholders.

This diversity raises practical questions for agencies' recruitment and management processes. As practitioners shift between repertoires, rather than being fixed to one, it is not possible to specifically recruit for a repertoire or stance. However, recruitment patterns can produce a team that leans more towards one stance than other; a person from a quantitative background or with a disciplinary history in hard sciences seems likely to lean more toward the Scientific stance than someone from, say, social work or with a qualitative background. Recruiting consistently from specific backgrounds may suppress certain stances and repertoires, while the reverse is true of diverse recruitment models. More importantly, considering how team cultures and management approaches might validate or discourage particular repertoires or stances is something that managers may take into account.

Beyond diversity, however, my research also highlights the fluidity of meanings that policy practitioners bring to their work. Policy practitioners do not simply adopt a single way of thinking about what, for example, constitutes evidence. Interviewees shifted from, for example, talking about evidence as a way of seeking truth, to a way of promoting democratic participation, to a way of justifying and legitimising decisions. It is telling that, while some interviewees tended to emphasise one or two repertoires over another, in all but two cases every repertoire was represented in each interview. This point highlights the 'messiness' of the way in which most people engage with ideas on a practical level; a

practitioner does not, for example, present themselves as having an Analytical or an Interpretive understanding of policy work. Rather they simply approach concepts from a perspective that suggests certain framing and particular solutions; this is what enables people to shift repertoire with relative ease.

And yet at the same time, these repertoires are not disconnected from each other. In Chapter 9 I have described how practitioners' use of these repertoires coheres into recognisable patterns that associate repertoires with each other. By integrating different repertoires these interpretive stances act as frameworks that allow policy workers to make sense of EBP within the context of their day-to-day practice. The repetition of these patterns across both different points in the texts and different participants demonstrate that these stances seem to be relatively consistent and persistent; while a particular practitioner might connect a given repertoire with any other, these links seem to be 'stable' across the corpus of texts.

These stances represent connections across the three dimensions I have analysed; each represents a way of connecting repertoires of practice with those of context and those of evidence. But they also represent connections within dimensions of EBP. For example, the Evaluative stance involves a strong connection between the Interpretive and Interactive repertoires of practice. This represents participants sliding between two repertoires to engage with a concept or claim such as the value of using a diverse range of evidence forms. Within the Interpretive repertoire this represents gaining a broader picture of an issue, providing a range of sources upon which to base one's judgement, while for the Interactive repertoire it represents wide-ranging engagement with stakeholders and communities, enabling them to have a voice in the policy process. Such intra-dimensional connections emphasise the earlier point about fluidity of meaning; practitioners do not construct aspects of their work in only one way, and it is a mistake to treat them as doing so.

10.2 Limitations and areas for extension

As with all research, this thesis has limitations. Importantly, however, while these constrain the findings they also point the way forward for future work. In this section I therefore treat these as two sides of the same coin, using the limitations as the basis for considering how this work could be extended.

10.2.1 Generalisability and Transferability

As a piece of qualitative work, the ability to generalise from this research is necessarily somewhat limited. This is not in itself a flaw in the research; the purpose of it was not to establish a globally definitive picture of 'what practitioners think', but rather to dig deep into a phenomenon (evidence-based policy) in a specific context (senior officials working in New Zealand skills policy). As Wood and Kroger (2000) note, the purpose of discursive approaches is not to make broad generalisations applicable across all settings, but rather reasonable inferences from the specific situation being explored.

A similar point applies to my recruitment method. Snowball sampling is also often treated as more susceptible to bias compared to random sampling methods (as discussed in Chapter 5). This specific critique is, however, not as relevant to this study. To begin with, discursive approaches to research tend to dispute the concept of an 'unbiased' sample; their foundation point is that the ways in which people understand and respond to concepts are constructed by a variety of external factors. Indeed, it is exploring these social factors that is the whole point of discursive social research. Each participant in a discursive study is considered to be more or less unique, as is each set of participants; the focus of sampling is therefore not to get a fully representative sample, but one that will generate productive insights. Beyond this, however, the skills policy community in Aotearoa New Zealand is both small and relatively homogenous, and my sample consists of a significant portion of people working in this area across the three agencies involved. It is unlikely that a more randomised approach would have resulted in a notably more representative group of participants. In a similar vein, while a larger group of participants may have allowed additional nuances of the repertoires and stances to emerge – this is always a possibility when new texts are added to a corpus – I believe that this is unlikely. A point of 'data saturation' (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) was reached through the existing interviews, and it was unlikely that simply adding more would have affected the substantive findings from this research.

Nevertheless, the focus of this research on a specified group of practitioners does mean it would be valuable to extend this work into other areas. My interviews were all undertaken with policy practitioners from one policy field. As discussed in Chapter 5, this is a diverse area that sits across many boundaries: economic (both macro- and micro-), education, social

welfare/ development policy are all major lenses for approaching the topic. This intersectionality may itself affect how practitioners approach the concepts of EBP; having to deal with the two cultures of education and business stakeholders may, for example, make practitioners particularly sensitive to nuances and differences in, for example, what 'evidence' might mean. A similarly rich area for exploring repertoires may be Health policy, where not only does EBM cast a long shadow over conceptions of evidence use but the field involves multiple sub-fields with different cultures and traditions of practice and research. Not only is knowledge shaped by professional divides (such as between medicine and nursing), but important divisions exist within some areas, such as medical versus social models of mental health and disability, or within public health the different goals and techniques of health protection, prevention, and promotion.

Moreover, cultural differences between agencies and/or policy fields were a noteworthy and recurrent theme in the interviews. Following from this, it would be interesting to explore the repertoires present in other areas – especially those with specific epistemic associations. For example, practitioners in fields where natural and physical sciences have a prominent role, such as the work of officials in primary industries, statistics, or environmental policy might draw strongly on the Objective repertoire identified in this research. On the other hand, it would be interesting to explore policy fields such as foreign affairs or culture and heritage, which are bound up strongly with social interaction or values. In these areas the positivist forms of evidence valorised by the hardline RCT-focused end of the EBP movement have less of a cultural hold in research and practice, and this may flow through into different practitioner repertoires for engaging with an EBP agenda. Fruitful areas for extending this work include exploring the specific repertoires that arise in other policy domains and whether they differ in tenor or characteristics from those that manifest in skills policy.

A further point of potential extension lies in the types of practitioners involved in the research. All the participants were senior practitioners with significant experience in the public sector – including areas outside skills policy. It would be interesting to take the opposite approach and explore the repertoires used by new and early-career practitioners. These officials do not have a practice history to draw on, and they have not yet been subjected to the discourse practices of their agencies (or the public sector more broadly).

This which may lead to different repertoires, and even stances, being apparent amongst them. A particularly valuable line of inquiry here may be practitioners who are new to the world of policy work, but who have significant experience in other fields. This could involve looking both at practitioners entering from associated ‘stakeholder’ occupations (such as a teacher entering Education policy or an ecologist entering Environment policy) and those with less direct connections (such as a lawyer or engineer entering Transport policy).

Finally, this research focused on practitioners within government agencies. It would be worthwhile extending this research to those who work outside government agencies, such as NGOs and independent think tanks. Although these people are often excluded from definitions of policy practitioners, they clearly form part of the broader policy community that influences actions and decision-making. Exploring how their positions are reflected in their repertoires – and their approaches to EBP more broadly – would add significantly to understanding of how evidence influences the overall world of policy work.

10.2.2 The Value of Surface Commentary

The goal of this research was to explore in depth the repertoires that practitioners use to engage with the concept of EBP. However, focusing on depth does necessarily mean that some of the more interesting surface commentary was neglected, just as a film critic concentrating on a film’s thematic elements may neglect interesting details of the plot. The richness of the interviews – and the candour of the participants – gives rise to a number of questions about the manifestation of EBP-in-practice, such as the effectiveness of specific evidence institutions and processes, the evolution of particular evidence cultures, and the role of policy evaluation. Although these comments have been touched on in chapters 6 to 9 in the context of what they revealed about repertoires or stances, they have not been explored as issues in their own right. Two themes that recurred across interviews are worth emphasising as productive areas for further exploration.

Firstly, participants regularly raised the issue of co-location between those who generate and those who use evidence. This was not simply a matter of high-level ‘community engagement’ of the type that is the subject of much literature on knowledge brokerage and exchange, but rather the perceived benefits of occupying the same organisational and physical space. As touched on in Chapter 7, comments on the difference in effectiveness

between two 'knowledge teams' in a single agency highlighted the difference between teams that were highly integrated with policy functions, and ones that were more separate. Integration was universally acclaimed as more effective at promoting good evidence use; not only because of the formal structures involved (joint meetings and the like) but also because of the level of social interaction it encouraged. Rather than building a bridge between 'two communities' of researchers and policy practitioners, this model was seen to dissolve the distinction between the two. This suggests that focusing on practitioner-level socialisation strategies may be more effective at encouraging evidence use than creating dedicated structures and roles – especially given the point that participants rarely mentioned formal strategies intended to promote evidence use (such as DSAs or the Policy Project). Perhaps more importantly, though, it also has possible management and structural implications for government agencies. 'Knowledge management' and 'policy development' are often separated, not simply as different teams but as wholly different divisions of the organisation. Such structures may accentuate the very divisions that the EBP movement is attempting to avoid. This points to the value of what Nutley et al. (2009) refer to as *Organisational Excellence* model, which highlight the role that organisational composition can play in promoting and shaping evidence use.

The second recurrent theme was the perceived distinction between 'employee' and 'manager' approaches to EBP. As highlighted in the discussion of the Organisational–Managerial repertoire, many participants contrasted their own experience as generators and users of data with those of their organisations' senior management. The primary focus of these comments was tension around the relative capability of leaders in an organisation to understand and use evidence compared to that of practitioners, with many interviewees feeling that public sector leaders had a relatively naïve and shallow view of the limits and nature of evidence. This is particularly relevant given that, as noted above, when the public sector participates in discussions around EBP it is usually institutional elites (Chief Executives and their deputies for example) that are the focus of engagement. This is possibly another manifestation of the movement's tendency towards structural rather than practice-focused analysis and action. As structures are formally established by leaders, it would therefore seem logical from a structural point of view for EBP advocacy to focus on convincing and lobbying leaders to create them. And yet, comments from practitioners in

this research suggest that leaders (for reasons including personal ability, pressures involved in their position, and time away from working ‘on the ground’) are often perceived to have a poor grasp of what represents effective use of evidence. Not only is this worth investigating in its own right, it also suggests that further practical work on EBP in organisational settings would benefit from engaging with a broader cross-section of practitioners.

10.2.3 The Position of Indigenous Knowledge

None of the participants in the research – as far as I am aware – identified as Māori, and the concept of indigenous knowledge was not raised by participants in any of the interviews. This does not constitute a limitation *per se*, in that the point of this thesis has been on exploring the repertoires that practitioners used to engage with the concept of evidence-based policy. Inserting a question specifically about the position, use or contribution of mātauranga Māori would have been an artificial intrusion into this in a way that, for example, asking about the Social Investment approach to policy was not.⁶¹

Nevertheless, as noted in Chapter 2 the question of how indigenous knowledge sits in relation to evidence-based approaches is particularly relevant for Aotearoa New Zealand. The overall relationship between indigeneity and evidence-based policy – especially within post-colonial/ settler states – is relatively under-explored, and very little scholarship has engaged with the specific position of EBP in relation to Māori. This would be especially valuable as in this country the question has both epistemic and political dimensions. While the first of these relates to the value (and type of value) policy workers ascribe to Māori knowledge, the second relates to how EBP aligns with the position of Māori as a community and specifically the rights guaranteed under Article 2 of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Using interpretive repertoires to explore how Māori and non-Māori approach these issues would be a significant contribution to understanding the position of EBP within Aotearoa New Zealand’s distinctive policy landscape.

⁶¹ Even then, specific EBP-related topics like Social Investment, the work of Peter Gluckman, or the Policy Project were only raised when they occurred in the course of the interview. I do acknowledge, however, that a researcher with a stronger background in Māori perspectives on policy and/or knowledge may have seen some points as obviously leading to discussions of indigenous knowledge when I did not.

10.3 Final Words

In this thesis I have focused on exploring evidence-based policy from the perspective of practitioners. Rather than treating 'evidence-based' as a characteristic of policy outputs, using it as an adjective that applies to the policies, decisions, and actions that result from policy work, I have provided the case to instead approach it as a characteristic of practice – a way of working. Without this focus on policy workers and evidence-in-practice, there is a risk that the evidentiary turn becomes one of Pollitt and Hupe's (2011) 'magic concepts': a term with vaguely positive connotations of modernity and progress, but whose emptiness of definition make it more like a marketable slogan than a genuine contribution to theorising, researching, and most critically doing policy work.

This focus on practice should not, however, mean establishing a single dominant meaning of what it means to work in an evidence-based way. Many of the criticisms of EBP outlined by practitioners centred on perceptions that the movement espoused a narrow conception of valid evidence that did not reflect the features of *in situ* policy work. This narrowness could provide a shallow picture of issues, shut certain stakeholders out of policy debates, or exclude many favoured evidence sources for their perceived technical shortcomings. Moreover, the existence of multiple repertoires and stances means that attempting to establish a 'single source of truth' in this regard is likely to create failure. It is important that advocates for evidence use in policy work recognise and accept this diversity.

On that note I return to one of the starting points of this research: that it is inappropriate to frame evidence use within policy environments in binary terms. Public and professional discussions of evidence use in policy often assume a clear divide between when evidence is and is not used. Similarly, calls for evidence-based policy often imply that desirable decisions can – and should – be identified simply by 'looking to the research', or greater use of a particular methodology. However, just as evidence-based medicine has occasionally been critically caricatured as 'cookbook' practice these positions represent a cookbook approach to policy, and just as EBM has always had more sophisticated underpinnings, so too do these calls represent a simplistic view of what EBP can and should involve. As shown in this thesis, not only is this an inaccurate portrayal of the current state of literature and thinking about evidence-based policy, it is also a construct that does not resonate with many

of those who work in the world of policy. Taking a practitioner-focused perspective that draws on the idea of evidence-in-practice provides a richer view of how policy workers experience and perceive the language and rhetoric of the EBP movement. This in turn creates a more comprehensive picture of the position of evidence in policy processes.

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APPENDIX A: Participant Information Sheet



Understanding policy practitioners' engagement with evidence

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Thank you for your interest in this project. Please read this information before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to participate, thank you. If you decide not to take part, thank you for considering my request.

Who am I?

My name is Nicholas Huntington and I am a Doctoral student in the School of Government at Victoria University of Wellington. This research project is work towards my doctoral thesis.

What is the aim of the project?

This project will explore how policy practitioners engage with evidence, and the factors that influence this engagement. It is not intended to identify whether or not practitioners use evidence, but rather how they think about evidence, their perceptions of what types of evidence are or are not used in particular contexts, and their views on the different ways in which evidence is deployed within the policy process. The goal is to provide a practitioner-focused account of these areas, and in particular to consider how different types of relationships, structures, and organisational cultures might affect them.

The focus of the project is on practitioners who work within the broad area of skills policy. This phase of the project involves a series of interviews with policy practitioners in agencies that work in areas related to skills.

This research has been approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee, Reference Number 0000022733.

How can you help?

If you agree to take part I will interview you in a place of your choosing – this could be a public place, such as a café, or a more private space such as an office or meeting room at your workplace. I will ask you questions about your professional experiences and views on evidence use in the public sector, covering the following themes:

- What does the phrase 'evidence based policy' mean to you?
- What different types of evidence can be used in making policy?
- How is evidence used as an input into policy making?
- What factors that affect when and how evidence is used as an input into policy making?

The interview will take between 30 minutes and one hour, and will be scheduled around your availability. I will record the interview and write it up later. You can stop the interview at any time,

without giving a reason. You can withdraw from the study up to four weeks after the interview. If you withdraw, the information you provided will be destroyed or returned to you.

This project involves three phases and this interview is part of phase two. Taking part in this phase does not create any obligation to participate in phase three.

What will happen to the information you give?

This data is confidential. I will not name you in any reports, and I will not include any information that would identify you. If it is referred to, the agency for whom you work will likewise be kept confidential (for example, referred to as 'Agency A'). Following the interview I will transcribe the recording and make a summary of the key themes and points. You may request a copy of the summary of the interview if you would like. The interview transcripts, summaries and any recordings will be kept securely and destroyed five years after the research ends.

What will the project produce?

The information from my research will be used in my PhD dissertation. I may also use the results of my research for conference & professional presentations, journal articles, and public talks. I will take care not to identify you in any presentation or report.

If you accept this invitation, what are your rights as a research participant?

You do not have to accept this invitation if you don't want to. If you do decide to participate, you have the right to:

- choose not to answer any question;
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview;
- withdraw from the study up until four weeks after your interview;
- ask any questions about the study at any time;
- request a copy of your interview recording (if it is recorded);
- read over and comment on a written summary of your interview;
- read any reports of this research by emailing the researcher to request a copy.

If you have any questions or problems, who can you contact?

If you have any questions, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:

Student:	Supervisor 1:	Supervisor 2:
<i>Name:</i> Nicholas Huntington	<i>Name:</i> Dr Amanda Wolf	<i>Name:</i> Associate Professor Jane Bryson
<i>Student Email:</i> [Redacted]	<i>School:</i> School of Government	<i>School:</i> School of Management
<i>Personal Email:</i> [Redacted]	<i>Phone:</i> [Redacted] [Redacted]	<i>Phone:</i> [Redacted] [Redacted]

Human Ethics Committee information

If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Victoria University HEC Convener: Associate Professor Susan Corbett. Email [Redacted] or telephone [Redacted].

APPENDIX B: Participant Consent Form



Understanding policy practitioners' engagement with evidence

CONSENT TO INTERVIEW

Researcher: Nicholas Huntington, School of Government, Victoria University of Wellington.

- I have read the Information Sheet and the project has been explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can ask further questions at any time.
- I agree to take part in an audio recorded interview.

I understand that:

- I may decline to answer any question or request that the interview be stopped at any time, without having to give a reason.
- I may request that my data be withdrawn from this study up to four weeks after the interview, and any information that I have provided will be returned to me or destroyed.
- The information I have provided will be destroyed five years after the research is finished.
- Any information I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and his supervisors. I understand that the results will be used for a PhD thesis. and a summary of the results may be used in academic reports and/or presented at conferences and public talks
- My name will not be used in reports, and every effort will be made to exclude information that would clearly identify me or my employer. However, given the small size of the New Zealand policy community it is possible that some readers may guess the source of specific quotes.
- I would like to receive a link to the final thesis and have added my email address Yes ☐ No ☐
below.

Signature of participant: _____

Name of participant: _____

Date: _____

Contact details: _____

APPENDIX C: Interview Schedule

Thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed for my PhD research. Just for the record, this will be a semi-structured interview, so I have some key questions that I'll ask, but we can let the interview evolve in a fairly organic way and follow what you're interested in.

So just for the record, you've seen the information sheet and in particular know that you have the right to pause or stop the interview at any point? [Answer] And are there any questions that you'd like to ask me before we begin?

1. To start, could you give me a bit of description of your current role, and some background on your career in the public sector?
2. So what does the phrase 'evidence based policy' mean to you?
PROMPTS:
 - a. When did you first hear the term? Do you think its meaning has changed over time?
3. So what do you think 'evidence-based policy' looks like in practice? What would be some of the distinctive features or characteristics?
PROMPTS:
 - a. And how would that contrast with 'non'-evidence-based policy? What does that look like, or what are some the features of that?
4. Thinking about your experiences, what do you think are some of the main factors that affect how evidence gets used in the policy process?
PROMPTS:
 - a. So who do you think are the 'main players' in how evidence gets used?
 - b. Are there differences between different government agencies?
5. Would you feel comfortable talking about an example where evidence was or wasn't used? I understand that you might prefer talking in generalities.
PROMPTS:
 - a. So what were the main things that affected how evidence was used in that example?
6. Finally, I'm using a snowball sampling method for my PhD, so are there other staff here at [Name of Agency] that you would recommend I talk to on this topic?
7. Finally, is there anything that you'd like to add or ask me?

THANKS FOR PARTICIPATING ETC.

APPENDIX D: Glossary of Terms, Organisations, and Abbreviations

ACC	Accident Compensation Corporation; Aotearoa New Zealand's national no-fault injury insurance scheme
Aotearoa	The Māori name for New Zealand
BIM	Briefing to the Incoming Minister; documents prepared by agencies post-election and/or for new ministers introducing them to their portfolio area
Business NZ	The national representative body for business
CBA	Cost–Benefit Analysis
CTU	New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, the national representative body for the union movement as a whole
DSA	Departmental Science Advisor; individuals appointed to an agency's leadership team in order to improve the use of science in the agency's work.
HLFS	Household Labour Force Survey; a quarterly survey of the labour force.
IDI	Integrated Data Infrastructure; a centralised official information source that links together (anonymised) individual-level data held in a wide variety of government and non-government databases.
ITF	Industry Training Federation; until early 2020 the national representative body for Industry Training Organisations.
ITO	Industry Training Organisation; an industry-owned national skills body with a monopoly on developing qualifications at levels 2 to 6 of the NZQF and organising workplace-led education in that industry. These will be disestablished as a result of RoVE.
ITP	Institute of Technology and Polytechnic; public tertiary education providers that concentrated on skills- and practice-oriented education and training. Transformed into subsidiary units of Te Pūkenga as a result of RoVE.
Māori	The indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand
MBIE	Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment; an agency formed in 2012 by merging multiple standalone entities. Key policy responsibilities include labour markets, immigration, housing, and the science system.
MoE	Ministry of Education; the agency responsible for providing policy advice and system oversight of the education system. It also directly manages the compulsory school system (other than exams and quality assurance), while in tertiary education the TEC (q.v.) has operational responsibility.
NEET	Not in Employment, Education, or Training; a term that conceptually distinguishes people who are not working because they are students or trainees from those not working for other reasons.
NZIST	New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology (see Te Pūkenga)

NZQA	New Zealand Qualifications Authority; the agency responsible for managing Aotearoa New Zealand's integrated qualifications framework (NZQF), approving non-university qualifications, and quality assuring non-university tertiary education.
NZQF	New Zealand Qualifications Framework; an integrated qualification structure incorporating all qualifications, from school to doctoral level. Broadly, school and foundation qualifications sit at levels 1 to 3, vocational education at levels 3 to 6, degrees at level 7, and postgraduate qualifications at levels 8 to 10.
PBRF	Performance-Based Research Fund; an equivalent to the United Kingdom's <i>Research Excellence Framework</i> or the <i>Excellence for Research in Australia</i> framework. It differs from many comparable regimes in that it focuses on evaluating each individual (research) staff member at an organisation; unit and institutional results largely consist of aggregated individual results.
PHARMAC	Government agency with monopsonistic purchasing power over pharmaceuticals for Aotearoa New Zealand's public health system.
PTE	Private Training Enterprise; privately-owned tertiary education providers, permitted (as a class) to offer education at all levels of the NZQF.
RCT	Randomised Control(led) Trial; a research methodology involving the application of an intervention to one population and non-application to another identical (or very similar) population.
RoVE	Reform of Vocational Education; described in Appendix E.
RSLG	Regional Skills Leadership Group; regional groups being established by MBIE (q.v.) as a result of current reforms, and intended to lead cross-sectoral and cross-policy approaches to region-specific skills issues.
Te Pūkenga	A new national tertiary education organisation being established as a result of current reforms, that has taken the place of the previous system of autonomous ITPs (q.v.) and will take over much of the workplace training role of ITOs (q.v.).
TEC	Tertiary Education Commission; the agency responsible for funding tertiary education organisations, including negotiating funding agreements and monitoring performance against them.
TES	Tertiary Education Strategy; a five-yearly strategic plan setting out the then-Minister's priorities for the tertiary education system over that period.
Wānanga	Tertiary education organisations that teach with a distinctively Māori approach and set of practices (kaupapa).
WDC	Workforce Development Council; crown entities that will take over a strengthened qualification development and industry skills leadership role from ITOs (q.v.).

APPENDIX E: The Reform of Vocational Education (RoVE) Programme

Recent changes introduced by the fifth Labour-led Government have changed the formal vocational education and training environment considerably. On his appointment as Minister of Education after the 2017 election, Chris Hipkins was immediately presented with two apparent challenges. The first and most critical of these was an Institutes of Technology and Polytechnic (ITP) sector that was increasingly unsustainable. While the cause and extent of this was disputed, and a small handful of Aotearoa New Zealand's ITPs appeared to be in an acceptable financial state, declining enrolments had led to severe financial stress for the polytechnic sector (Minister of Education, 2018). At the same time, there was a perception on the part of many stakeholders – including those in the sector – that Aotearoa New Zealand's approach to vocational education and training was in need of reform. Key issues included that the relationship between skill demand and supply was not working well, there was significant inconsistency and poor collaboration between different players in the system, and the funding model was in need of significant reform (Minister of Education, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2018).

As a result, two workstreams were established in 2018: the ITP Roadmap 2020 and the VET System Review. The first of these was led by the TEC and focused on developing a new sustainable model for the ITP sector, while the second was led by the Ministry of Education and intended to examine system-level framework, policy, and regulation issues. In late 2018 these were combined into a single Reform of Vocational Education (RoVE) project, on the basis that the importance of the ITP sector meant that it was not possible to do one of these without the other. The initial RoVE decisions were released in February 2019 and, following consultation and some consequent changes, confirmed in August 2019 (Minister of Education 2019). The core changes being implemented through RoVE involve replacement of the ITP and ITO sectors, and the introduction of a new funding model for VET.

Firstly, the system of individual, autonomous ITPs has been dismantled and replaced with a single Aotearoa New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology (NZIST), later named Te Pūkenga. Te Pūkenga has taken over the assets, staff, and students of the previous ITPs, but is intended to operate in a fundamentally different way than ITPs have previously – most

notably by demonstrating greater responsiveness to industry demand and need. It would also be able to make greater use of workplace-led learning models, which have to date been the sole preserve of ITOs. The legislation establishing these changes was passed in early 2020 and took effect from April 1, 2020. At that point Te Pūkenga formally came into existence and each former ITP transformed into its own semi- autonomous business unit within the NZIST. This situation will last for two years, at the end of which the former ITPs will be fully integrated into the structure of the Institute.

Secondly, the Industry Training system is to be abolished. The strategic and standards-setting functions of ITOs will transfer to six industry-led but government-established Workforce Development Councils (WDCs). These WDCs will have more power over other parts of the VET system than ITOs possess; a provider will explicitly not be able to offer a VET programme without the approval of the relevant WDC, WDCs will be able to require specific content, assessments etc. within programmes, and they will directly advise the TEC on how it should fund training for their industries. The training that ITOs currently arrange – most notably workplace-based programmes – will become the responsibility of the NZIST, wānanga, and PTEs. The legislation enabling this to occur (the Education and Training Act 2020) has been passed, but at the time of writing WDCs had yet to be established and how functions will be transferred was slated to be confirmed at some point before 30 September 2021.

Wānanga and PTEs are largely unaffected by these changes, although they will be able to offer fully or predominantly workplace-based education and training programmes. Private providers will be subject to the power WDCs possess over programme approval and the like, but wānanga will only be subject to these insofar as they offer workplace-based programmes.

Finally, funding will be reformed to better support the new VET system. Few details on what this might involve in practice had been publicly released at the time of writing. However, the stated intent is for the current funding model to be replaced with a more flexible system that can better account for differences in delivery modes and the needs of specific groups of learners (Minister of Education, 2019).