P202 / Critical applied policy evaluation? Methods and manners of incorporating critical perspectives into mainstream policy evaluation (and vice versa)

Topic : Methods & Research Design

Chair : Rebecca Glover (London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, University of London)

Second Chair : Agata Pacho (Purdue University)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Applied policy evaluation and critical policy research are often artificially siloed, with the former sometimes caricatured as a technocratic measurement of narrow programmatic outcomes, and the latter occasionally dismissed as abstract textual deconstructions lacking nous. This conceptual dichotomy obscures a deep, shared foundation (Gates, 2025; van den Berg, 2019). Cairney (2023) asserted three general shared reference points between the approaches: (1) neither is objective or ‘rationalist’, (2) neither assumes the policy development process is orderly or fair, and (3) neither ignores politics' role in policymaking. Furthermore, methodologies and theories are shared between the two approaches (Durnová, a et al, 2020). Close readings, gap analyses, discourse analyses, and policy analyses are readily used across both traditions, though for different questions (Apgar, 2024; van Uffelen, 2025). Moreover, while academic policy evaluations are often expected to deliver mainstream evaluations replete with actionable evidence, researchers frequently find themselves grappling with the underlying politics, framing, and discursive gaps of the policies they evaluate. In practice, many academic evaluators 'smuggle' critical sensibilities into mainstream evaluation designs, even sometimes producing one mainstream academic article, and another, subsequent critical output from the same evaluation, data, or even research question (Pacho, Mays, and Glover, 2024; Pacho and Glover, 2025).

This panel explores how both perspectives can be intentionally integrated into a single evaluation lifecycle, from scoping and logic-model design to fieldwork, data analysis, and the formulation of recommendations, and asks how we can better navigate this dual identity. The aim of this panel is to create dialogue between scholars who have trodden this line in evaluation across any domain of public policy. Ultimately, the panel seeks to establish a shared vocabulary for critical applied evaluation grounded in the idea that critical insights facilitate evaluations seeking to explain why programs succeed or fail structurally, while remaining sensitised to the funding realities that privilege mainstream evaluation over critical research lines.

Apgar, M et al. Rethinking rigour to embrace complexity in peacebuilding evaluation. Evaluation, 31(1), 1–26. (2024) https://doi.org/10.1177/13563890241232405

Cairney, P. The politics of policy analysis: theoretical insights on real world problems. JEPP, 30(9), 1820–1838. (2023) https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2221282

Durnová, A.P., Weible, C.M. Tempest in a teapot? Toward new collaborations between mainstream policy process studies and interpretive policy studies. Policy Sci 53, 571–588 (2020) https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-020-09387-y

Gates, E. F. et al. A critical, integrative review on evaluating systems change and transformation, Part One: 2011–2021. Evaluation, 31(4), 482-506. (2024) https://doi.org/10.1177/13563890251363232

Pacho A, Mays N, Glover RE. The appropriateness of self-care policy for urinary tract infections among women from racialised minorities and low-income households in the United Kingdom: A qualitative study. JHSRP 30(3):189-197. (2025) 10.1177/13558196251313736

Pacho, A., & Glover, R. E. (2025). Learning from self?care practices among marginalised women: Towards embedding health justice in the UK health policy. SHI, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.70112

Van den Berg, R. D., Magro, C., & Mulder, S. S. (Eds.). (2019). Evaluation for transformational change: Opportunities and challenges for the Sustainable Development Goals. International Development Evaluation Association (IDEAS).

van Uffelen N, Goyal N, Martinez-Reyes A. (Not) just policy success: Incorporating justice in policy

evaluation. Policy Sci. 2025;58(3):449-468. 10.1007/s11077-025-09588-3.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We anticipate that this discussion will generate new ideas for future critical applied policy research and evaluation, as well as tangible novel approaches for developing evaluations. As such, we hope the panel will read across public policy domains to generate clear benefits to both critical and more mainstream policy evaluation/research.

To this end, we pose the following questions for the panel to consider, though it is sufficient for each submission only to consider one or two of the questions below:

1) What are examples of where you have successfully incorporated both approaches in one evaluation?

2) What methods and techniques did you use to bridge the two approaches? What worked well and less well?

3) What concepts and theories from policy studies and critical public policy can be readily applied to mainstream/applied public policy evaluation, but are currently weakly or poorly applied?

4) How do you translate critical insights—such as textual silences, ideological biases, or discursive framing—into a format that policy customers and mainstream evaluators will accept as credible evidence rather than dismissed as "too academic"?

5) How can we evaluate policy success when standard performance indicators must be reconciled with critical insights on power, language, and structural inequality?

We invite paper-givers to provide primarily theoretical and/or applied empirical contributions according to their wont, so long as some proportion of each abstract/submission is given over to an example of an evaluation that contributed to both traditions, and relates to any of the themes below.

1) Methodological hybrid case studies in public policy evaluative practice.

2) The (micro)politics of applied evaluation and the role of the ‘critical friend’ in evaluation

3) Translating *critique* into ‘evidence’ into “impact” or vice versa?

Accepted papers are expected to share new knowledge on policy evaluation, including analytical frameworks, comparative analyses and critical/mainstream hybrid approaches. The panel will take place from the 7th to 9th July on-site in Rennes, though allowing remote presentations. The deadline for papers submission is the 29th of January 2027, and accepted papers will be notified by the 15th of February 2027.