

H4 Consulting Brief

Experiential Evidence

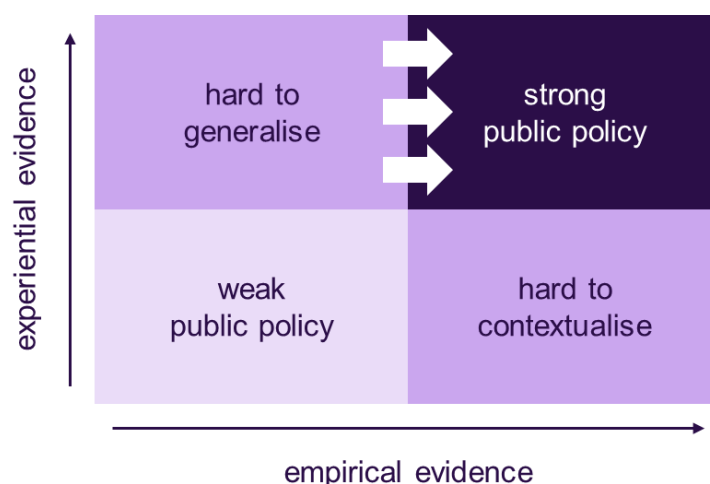
Different people are persuaded by different kinds of information and have different expectations about evidence. Many, perhaps even most, people tend to value experiential evidence over empirical evidence. Public policy analysts who have been trained in rigorous analytic techniques tend to dismiss intuitive and tacit knowledge as an invalid basis for decisions, inadvertently excluding whole cohorts of stakeholders and their wealth of experience.

The modern world is complex. Empirical techniques have become increasingly specialised, increasing the sum of human knowledge but making an ever greater proportion of that knowledge inaccessible to most people's everyday experience.

It can be hard to accept the assurance of experts we do not know about things that are hard to understand, especially on sensitive matters. Experiential evidence is easier to understand and easier for many people to trust. This is the intuitive or tacit knowledge—insights, understandings, skills, and knowledge of individuals—that people rely on when they value experience over other evidence, like believing that their child's teacher should set education policy, or that their neighbour's experience in hospital should drive health policy.

Evidence and experience are often perceived to be in opposition, with experts drawing from empirical evidence and stakeholders from personal experience. It is difficult for policy processes to work well if analysts dismiss experience as aggregated anecdote and stakeholders dismiss empirical evidence as out of touch, or even wilfully deluded or misleading. It is easy for parties who are talking at cross purposes to feel like opponents, each telling their own truth, rather than allies with access to different kinds of evidence.

When analysts rely too much on quantitative methods, their proposals are often unacceptable to decision makers and stakeholders. When stakeholders rely too much on their experience, their policy preferences are often self-interested and unworkable at scale.



Policy decisions are made better by a solid grounding in relevant evidence, noting that relevance is not solely determined by the technical sophistication of the underpinning calculations. Experiential evidence, when captured and analysed with appropriate rigour, can be just as valid and valuable a source for policy making as empirical evidence. It can also enrich the interpretation, design, and communication of both experimental research and public policy.

Gathering experiential evidence is often conflated with summarising how stakeholders feel and what they want, rather than accessing and analysing what they know. Policy analysts, and analysis, would benefit from similar standards of conceptual and methodological rigour being applied to working with experiential evidence as to experimental evidence.

Experiential evidence is not a substitute for empirical rigour, or vice versa. Experience and scientific methods are complementary contributors to evidence-based policy that is effective, understandable, and implementable.

When stakeholder experience is genuinely valued and treated as evidence, there is more space for genuine collaboration in policy making. Stakeholders who are respected as contributors can engage in conversations about policy responses to the evidence as a whole, rather than feeling compelled to advocate for policy positions that feel authentic to them and against empirically driven conclusions that do not.

Pooling experiential and analytic resources enriches public policy, creating a wealth of public value.

To find out more about how you can use this approach in your organisation, contact us: info@h4consulting.com.au
Find additional resources at www.h4consulting.com.au/resources