

When Evidence is not Taken for Granted: The Use and Perception of “Evidence” in the Czech Republic Ministries¹

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Abstract

The role of evidence in policy-making is one of the most researched topics in public policy and public administration. However, surprisingly little research has been done on how public officials actually use evidence in everyday life practice. Moreover, these studies have been limited to countries that have been influenced by the evidence-based policy movement (EBP). Little is known about how the evidence is conceptualized and utilized in other countries which have not been so strongly influenced by EBP movement. This paper addresses this gap. Using a large-N survey on the Czech ministerial officials and in-depth interviews with them, we explore what is understood under the term of “evidence”, what kind of evidence is used and preferred by public officials and why. In doing so, we use four theoretical perspectives on the use of evidence. We show that despite the long-established tradition of using research in policy-making the importance of research evidence in the Czech Republic is far from being taken for granted. On the contrary, the immediate and personal experience is often preferred over the research findings. The exception to that are census-like statistical data and comparative data published by international organizations. We find some support for the two-communities metaphor, though these communities are not defined by their socio-demographic characteristics, but rather by their internal discourse and understanding of evidence.

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1. Introduction

The rise of the “evidence-based policy” discourse is one of the most visible trends in the public administration and public policy in the last decade. The evidence-based policy movement (hereinafter “EBP”) represents both a set of professional practices and aspirations and political rhetoric (Head 2010, 77). Although the claim that policy-making should be evidence-based has long roots, the current concept of EBP is mainly associated with the Blair Government in the United Kingdom in the 1990s. Blair argued that “what matters is what works” (Nutley et al. 2007, 10), and that policy-making should not be based upon ideological thinking, but rather on available evidence. EBP soon became popular in other countries, especially in the USA, Canada and Australia.

Despite EBP being now a well-recognized movement, its definitions range from a rather narrow view (a particular methodology for producing a specific form of evidence), to a broader all-encompassing view on what it represents (Nutley et al. 2007, 12). Although many governments and practitioners have been very enthusiastic, EBP has also been criticized and challenged for several reasons (Head 2010), for instance for assuming that research evidence can provide objective answers – and ultimately resolve – inherently politically questions. Recently, Oliver et al. (2014) have persuasively summarized and challenged three basic assumptions of EBP: 1) that a policy-evidence “gap” exists; 2) that policy is usually not based on evidence; 3) that use of more research evidence by policymakers would lead to a “better” policy.

Despite all the critique, many initiatives and projects on “bridging the gap between policy and research” have been realized especially in Anglo-Saxon countries. In these countries, EBP discourse is now deeply embedded in public administration practices. For instance, Stevens (2011) in his ethnographic study observed a high commitment of civil servants to the use of evidence. Interviewed civil servants “thought it proper to use evidence”, and claimed that “evidence is a prerequisite for policy” (Stevens 2011, 240). Consequently, in countries that have been strongly influenced by EBP ideas, it seems hard to challenge the basic claim of EBP that evidence should be used in policy-making. The use of evidence – whatever this term may mean – is taken for granted.

But the strong EBP discourse can have an effect on the reported use and perception of evidence in surveys of public officials. If a use of research evidence is understood as a “right thing”, politicians and public officials might tend to overestimate – consciously or unconsciously – their actual use of research evidence. The social desirability bias, that is the tendency of survey respondents to answer ques-

tions in a manner that will be viewed favourably by others, might occur (Ganster et al. 1983).⁵ Similarly, we may hypothesize that in countries with a strong EBP discourse at least some public officials might be tempted to overreport their use of research evidence. There are several methods how to reduce the social desirability bias, e.g. by asking indirect questions (Nederhof 1985). However, it is never possible to separate completely the context in which the survey is realized, and the impact of the environment. The strong normative ideal of EBP might influence how people think and talk about the evidence, but not necessarily their actual daily practices.

For a better understanding of the knowledge use, it thus might be interesting to study the use of evidence in countries that have not been influenced by the EBP movement, and where the use of evidence is not automatically taken as the right thing. Unfortunately, the research on the use of evidence still concentrates on Anglo-Saxon countries, or countries such as the Netherlands, Norway or Sweden (Nutley et al. 2010). In other words, the research focused upon countries where it is expected that knowledge from research *should* be used in policy-making. Very little is known about the use of evidence in countries where the use of evidence in policy-making is *not* taken for granted.

This paper aims to explore the understanding and use of evidence in Czech Republic ministries as the central institutions of public administration. This country represents an interesting case in studying the use of evidence in policy-making. The production and use of policy-relevant information has a long tradition in the Czech Republic, and the Czech social science has always had a strong practical orientation (Veselý 2016). In addition, demand for the science-based policy-related knowledge led to the establishment of different types of research institutions serving directly the ministries (so-called "*resortní ústavy*"; Veselý and Nekola 2016). Although both their number and their impact have decreased after 1989, the stress upon relevant and practical social science has prevailed. At the same time, however, the idea and discourse of EBP has never seriously entered into the debate of public administration and policy-making. Very few people in public administration are familiar with the concept of EBP. There have been no initiatives or projects on incorporating more evidence into policy-making and decision-making in the public administration, and the use of research evidence in policy-making seems to be quite limited. In addition, the basic concept of "evidence" is hardly translatable into the Czech language.

In this paper, we ask some of the traditional questions in using evidence by public officials: What is considered evidence by public officials? What kind of evidence is used? What kind of evidence is taken as important? In so doing, we draw upon four strands of theories that focus upon different aspects of the use of evi-

5 For instance, in the general population voting is often seen as a civic duty and not voting as constituting a violation of the norm. Thus some survey respondents overreport voting (Belli et al. 2001).

dence. We discuss to what extent these theories, mostly developed in context with strong EBP discourse, might be applied in a context where the EBP is almost unknown. The paper is structured as follows. First, we review theoretical approaches of the use of research evidence. Then we describe the methodology and data used in this paper. Then we answer research questions using data from a large-N survey of public officials in the Czech Republic as well as data from our qualitative research. We conclude with findings and implications for further research.

2. Theoretical approaches in studying the use of evidence

Multiple theoretical frameworks and approaches have been used in studying the use of research evidence (Nutley et al. 2007). The “traditional” theoretical approaches, however, can be divided into two basic strands (Innvær et al. 2002; Oliver et al. 2014).

The first theoretical strand, labelled the “two-communities hypothesis”, postulates the existence of two camps that lack the ability to take into account the perspectives of one another. Caplan (1979) borrowed C. P. Snow’s conceptualization of the humanities and the hard sciences as two different cultures and argued that researchers and policy-makers live in “separate worlds, with different and often conflicting values, different rewards systems, and different languages” (Caplan 1979, 459). The social scientist is concerned with pure science and esoteric issues. They see themselves as rational, objective and open to new ideas. By contrast, government policy-makers are action-oriented, practical persons concerned with obvious and immediate issues. They see themselves as responsible, action-oriented and pragmatic; they see scientists as naive, jargon-ridden and irresponsible in relationship to practical realities (Innvær et al. 2002).

The “two-communities thesis” has been criticized as too simplistic and as downplaying the wider political and organizational context (Gibson 2003). Recently, Newman (2014) and Newman and Head (2015) argued that “two communities” is an empirically erroneous metaphor. They argued that in reality there is an important subgroup of policy-makers and public officials who do use academic research. Those public servants who claim to use academic research in their policy work are more likely to have much in common with academics, including having postgraduate degrees and work experience in the university sector. In other words, according to Newman and Head there are no two different and homogenous groups that are isolated from one another. However, despite this and other critiques, the “two-communities” metaphor has remained quite popular and has become the starting point for more recent and more sophisticated models that focus upon communication and interaction as the crucial aspect in explaining the link between research and policy (Lomas 1997, 2000).

The second strand of the literature focuses upon the ways of using evidence. This strand of theorizing follows the original – and still influential – contribution of Carol Weiss (1979). She argued that the use of social science research in public policy is a complex phenomenon and extracted six different meanings that have been associated with the concept of “use”: the knowledge-driven model, the problem-solving model, the interactive model, the political model, the tactical model and the enlightenment model. Since Weiss, numerous typologies of knowledge use have been proposed. However, these categories have been formulated mainly theoretically. The empirical boundaries between different types are often blurred and may not be mutually exclusive. Consequently, empirically-based studies often report only several basic categories of the evidence use. Innvær et al. (2002) in their systematic review found three basis categories of research use: direct (“instrumental” or “engineering”), selective (“symbolic” or “legitimizing”) and enlightening (“conceptual”). Similarly, McClintock and Lowe (2007), Head (2013) and Newman and Head (2015) use the following three types: *instrumental* application where specific findings have a direct influence on policy decisions, *symbolic or political application* in which findings are used to justify prior preferences, and *conceptual* use in which findings gradually shape the thinking of the public and policy communities. Although authors differ in their assessment of which type of knowledge use is the most prevalent, starting from Weiss’s original contribution, there seems to be an inclination to view the role of research mostly as conceptual or enlightening.

While the first strand of literature focuses upon the *actors*, and the second upon the *use* of knowledge, authors have recently started to focus upon the content that is used or transmitted.⁶ In other words, they asked “what is supposed to be evidence?” In the original and “strong” version of EBP, inspired by evidence-based medicine, evidence was equated with rigorously and reliable knowledge about “what works”. Or more precisely, it was assumed that forms of evidence create an “evidence pyramid”, ranked in terms of the methodological rigor of the research design. Many EBP proponents argued that randomized control trials should be taken as “a gold standard” of obtaining evidence, whereas evidence from case studies and other research designs might be misleading. Consequently, the failure to base a policy upon rigorously obtained evidence has been interpreted as a “lack of evidence”.

Empirical research, however, has shown that policy-makers draw on a wide range of information and knowledge (Hanney et al. 2003). Their interpretation of what counts as useful and relevant evidence is simply different from the EBP proponents. Policy-makers interpret and use “evidence” in a broad sense, which is usually not acknowledged by academic commentators (Oliver et al. 2014, 4). Other evidence than that from research might be important for them. For instance, in the field of health they may prefer to use local information such as patient or practice

6 It should be acknowledged that the question of different types of knowledge has been raised already in now classical articles in the field (Caplan 1979).

data or views held by local councils (Oliver and de Vocht 2017). It led to revisiting the types of evidence. Head (2008) argued that there are at least three types (or “lenses”) that should be considered in analyzing the role of evidence in policy-making. These include: political knowledge (know-who, analysis and judgment of political actors), scientific (research-based) knowledge as the product of systematic analysis and practical professional field experience.

The three strands of literature outlined above form the basic conceptual “bricks” for studying EBP: 1) actors and institutions, 2) types of evidence and knowledge that is communicated among these actors, 3) different uses of evidence. However, the use of evidence is a dynamic process, embedded in a broader policy-making process. In the last decade, thus, various scholars argued that research on the use of evidence should explicitly consider the messy and complex policy-making process and should focus upon understandings of the daily lives of policy actors, including an analysis of how they conceptualize evidence and what their roles and daily practices are (Oliver et al. 2014, 4). The most recent accounts of use of evidence thus try to take into account the political and administrative context and strive to incorporate theories of the policy-making process.

The three strands of literature emphasize and focus upon different aspects of the use of evidence. As a result, they are to be taken as complementary rather than as contradictory. Following Oliver et al. (2014), Head (2010) and others, we seek to *understand* the use of evidence in the Czech Republic central public administration rather than lamenting on how little evidence is used and how to increase the amount of evidence in policy-making. Our aim is to analyze the link between evidence and policy from an unprejudiced stance and discuss how the four theoretical “building blocks” mentioned above help us to understand the reality. In doing so, we hope to get new insights in how these theories, formulated in context where the “evidence is taken for granted” is applied in contexts where it is not so obvious.

3. Research questions and methodology

The aim to this paper is to repeat some of the most salient questions on the use of evidence in policy in the context of the Czech Republic ministries. Specifically, we have asked the following questions:

- 1) What is considered evidence by public officials?
- 2) What kind of evidence is used?
- 3) What kind of evidence is taken as important? When and how is the evidence used in the policy-making process?

To answer these questions we have used both quantitative and qualitative data. As for quantitative data, the team conducted a large-N survey on policy bureaucrats in the Czech Republic ministries between April and July 2013. Step by step, 11 min-

istries agreed to participate in the survey (and disclose their staff directories, which served us as our sample frame). In seven ministries, data was collected by face-to-face interviewing: interviewers met with respondents, asked them a series of pre-defined standard questions and recorded their answers on a paper form (CAPI) or in a computer application (PAPI). For two ministries which preferred to participate without the involvement of interviewers, data was collected by the administration in the form of online questionnaires (CAWI). In one ministry, a combination of CAPI and CAWI was implemented. The respondents were selected randomly from each ministerial sample frame. However, after a number of waves of random sampling, all individuals from each sample frame were eventually invited to participate. Thus, what was intended to be a random sampling turned out a census. A total of 1351 complete questionnaires were obtained, and the response rate was 29.4 %.

The qualitative data come from in-depth interviews realized by the authors that specifically focused upon the use of evidence. These interviews were conducted from April 2016 to May 2017. Altogether we interviewed 23 respondents from different Czech ministries. Four researchers, members of the research team, led the interviews following the common interview guide. The topics of the interviews concerned the description of the strategic work of the respondent, description of his/her usage of the scientific or other knowledge, his/her experience with the usage and the status of evidence in the broader context of his/her ministry and the state administration.⁷ The in-depth semi-structured expert interviews lasted about one and half or two hours, were recorded, and the field-notes were developed. The records were transcribed verbatim, and the interviews were coded and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) with a focus on the identified patterns concerning the use of knowledge in various contexts and phases of the policy process.

Prior to empirical analysis, it should be noted that we have encountered a huge variety of responses across policy domains and institutions. The perception of the use on the evidence depends upon personal experience and personal characteristics, which are often quite idiosyncratic. Some of the views of the respondents were even mutually contradictory. However, despite this heterogeneity, we have been able to observe and detect some more general patterns that are reported below.

7 The interviews had a partially structured nature. The questions were formulated in an interview guide with suggested ordering. However, the interviewers were free to add questions or modify them as deemed appropriate. The interview guide (in Czech) is available from the authors on request.

4. Findings

4.1 What is considered evidence? Problem of language and conceptualization

Before discussing the findings from our research, it is necessary to explain the basic concept of “evidence” in the cultural and linguistic context of the study, that is in the Czech Republic. The Czech language has the word “evidence” but with a meaning different from the English one. In Czech, *evidence* is derived from the verb *evidovat* which means “to register”. Consequently, the Czech word *evidence* is usually associated with other types of activities such as *evidence obyvatel* (population register) or *elektronická evidence tržeb* (electronic register of sales). Thus the word evidence is usually understood as a “register”, i.e. centrally gathered and stored information.⁸

As mentioned above, few people in public administration and even in academia are familiar with the EBP concept. Occasionally, however, the concept is mentioned. Given the fact that *evidence* in the Czech language is associated with “register” (which is quite different from its original English meaning), EBP has often been translated as *politika založená na důkazech*. This literally means “policy based upon proofs”. This is, of course, quite a narrow interpretation of evidence, as the “proof” includes only evidence that is unquestionable and that gives definitive answers. To avoid this terminological confusion, in our research we have used the term “*poznatky*”, instead of “*evidence*”. This concept is broader and the most neutral of all related concepts. It can be translated as “knowledge”, or more precisely as knowledge created through the process of cognition. The concept of *poznatky* has a slight connotation with research (research knowledge), but is not necessarily associated with research. A man can get *poznatky* through non-scientific activity, too. In sum, the term *poznatky* seems to be quite close to the concept of evidence in the phrase of “evidence-based policy”.⁹

Not only the term *evidence* but also other concepts are used differently from how we understand them in academic discourse. When using the term “quantitative”, respondents frequently meant administrative data, statistics and prognoses made on their basis. At least for some respondents, representative samples (such as surveys) have been considered *qualitative*. Thus, for instance, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) based upon sophisticated methods of student testing has been reported as a source of *qualitative* data. The qualitative empirical studies, as we understand it in academia (e.g. ethnography, discursive analysis...) were not mentioned in in-depth interviews as an example of source of

8 Consequently, if you ask Czech public officials “Do you have evidence?”, you are likely to get answers such as: “Of course, we have evidence. We have a register of citizens, a register of arms, a register of attendance...”.

9 Besides *poznatky*, the Czech language has another word for knowledge, and that is *vědění*. We have chosen the term *poznatky* as more general and with less connotations than *vědění*. Consequently, for translating EBP we would suggest “politika založená na poznatcích”.

knowledge at all (sic!). This is also true for conceptual and theoretical papers. Some of the respondents even explicitly expressed their distance from the papers like this ("the theory work, it is for you, people in academia, for us, it has no use...").

We might tentatively conclude that the metaphor of two communities cannot be completely disregarded. At least, in the Czech case, the world of public administration and academia are indeed two different worlds. However, the difference between public officials and academics is not so much in educational background and other demographic characteristics. Public officials are often university-educated young professionals, many of them (13.2%) with PhD titles. Some of them (7.3% in our sample) worked in research before entering the public administration. The difference is more in culture and different conceptualizations of evidence and the discourse and language used than in characteristics detectable in quantitative surveys. Public officials seem to conceptualize and give quite different meanings to evidence than academics.

4.2 What kind of evidence is used?

While the qualitative interviews are useful for more in-depth analysis of the use of evidence, they do not tell us anything about the actual use of various sources of evidence. Figure 1 shows the findings of the above-mentioned survey from 2013 concerning the use of various sources of information in different ministries. In terms of frequency of use, the evidence used can be divided roughly into three groups. The most important – or to be more precise the most often used – sources of evidence include: directives, mandates, notices and methodical guidelines, legal norms (laws), personal experience and consultations with colleagues from other departments or organizations of public administration. More than 3/4 of the public officials report to use these sources of information often or very often.

The second group of information includes: information from the mass media (press, television and broadcast, internet news), technical and evaluation reports, briefing papers, Czech professional literature and scientific journals, budget data, information on expenditures and other financial indicators, consultations with Czech experts, strategic and conceptual documents from the national or supranational level. More than 1/3 of the public officials report to use these sources of information often or very often. The last group of evidence that is least used consists of foreign professional literature and scientific journals, information from commercial sphere representatives, information from non-profit organizations, professional advice, strategic and conceptual documents of the regions, consultations with foreign experts and political party documents.

This macro picture might be complemented by findings from qualitative interviews that revealed several significant "groups" of evidence. The first, and in terms of significance and the frequency in narratives the clearly predominant type are the "data": administrative data, data from administrative registers and statistical reports

based on this data. If respondents talk about evidence (knowledge) they talk mostly about the *numbers* in the domain of interest (number of pupils, number of nurses, capacity of elderly homes...). The civil servants sometimes express their dissatisfaction with low compatibility of the data from different registers, which complicates their work. And – in contrast to the clear dominance of the “data” – they express their frequent experience that there is no systematic monitoring of the outcomes of interventions, and the monitoring is not required or expected by politicians.

Table 1
The use of evidence in the Czech Republic ministries

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Very often
Czech professional literature and scientific journals	14.8	45.6	26.3	13.3
Foreign professional literature and scientific journals	38.4	44.2	12.3	5.1
Technical and evaluation reports, briefing papers	18.5	35.7	30.4	15.4
Strategic and conceptual documents of the regions	68.7	25.2	4.4	1.6
Strategic and conceptual documents from the national or supranational level	24.0	43.4	24.0	8.6
Consultations with domestic (Czech) experts	12.4	43.8	32.8	11.0
Consultations with foreign experts	54.2	37.1	7.3	1.3
Consultations with colleagues from other departments or organizations of public administration	2.0	20.7	42.2	35.1
Information from mass media (press, television and broadcast, internet news)	14.3	38.6	27.0	20.1
Budget data, information on expenditures and other financial indicators	27.4	37.7	21.9	13.0
Professional advice	61.6	31.4	5.0	1.9
Personal experience	1.2	12.4	30.4	56.0
Information from commercial sphere representatives	35.9	47.9	12.6	3.7
Information from non-profit organizations (service organizations, think-tanks and the like)	41.1	45.1	10.8	3.0
Political parties documents	74.8	22.0	2.9	.4
Legal norms (laws)	1.8	14.0	26.2	57.9
Directives, mandates, notices and methodical guidelines	1.2	10.0	26.4	62.4

Notes: Entries are %. Ranked as originally in the questionnaire. Question: How often in your work do you use the following sources of information?

A very significant type of evidence comes from personal contact and consultations. Various types of personal contacts take place in the process of developing a strategic document. On a formal basis, various actors (politicians, civil servants, beneficiaries, service providers, representatives of municipalities, experts) meet, negotiate, quarrel, barter and decide in steering groups or in working groups. Other formal events, used explicitly as a source of evidence, are seminars, internal conferences and meetings with interested actors. Many meetings between actors take place on an informal basis. As some respondents point out, "the Czech Republic is a small pond, we know each other here (in a specific area of interest)". All the respondents consider these personal contacts and meetings where the strategies are discussed and developed to be very influential. In the accounts the role of negotiation, collaborative clarification and joint decision seems very important. This is the way how common knowledge emerges and consolidates and how common (sometimes implicit) values are spread and strengthened.

In our qualitative interviews, the scientific sources, such as research peer-reviewed articles or monographs, have been missing completely or were mentioned quite rarely. This is at least partially inconsistent with the findings from the quantitative survey, where the reported use of research articles was not so infrequent. The lack of use of research literature might be partially explained by the fact that civil servants are more likely engaged in the phase of elaboration of the strategy, where they do not use abstract studies. This conceptual or theoretical literature is used, and the narratives demonstrate it, by external experts, who are hired to "bring" their (academic, expert) knowledge to the strategic process and to "translate" it for politicians (in steering groups) and for civil servants (in working groups). Therefore, the personal contacts and consultations – rather than research papers per se – are so frequent and important – they are the way how the scientific knowledge enters the bureaucratic sector. In other words, it seems that the evidence reaches the policy-maker indirectly through the experts.

In general, our data confirms theoretical claims that public officials use different sources of evidence. Public officials work with quite different types and sources of evidence and their classification of evidence differs from the classification used in academia. Personal experience, "stories", anecdotes from working groups, round tables are used together with "hard data" and other sources of information, especially documents produced by other public officials. In contrast, research papers as such seem to be relatively rarely used directly. The dominant use of evidence produced by other public administration bodies again seems to resonate with the two-communities metaphor. Despite the fact that public administration definitely is not a closed system and there are many interactions with other actors, the "knowledge" embedded in public administration is often *internally* reproduced.

4.3 How important is evidence? What kind of evidence is taken as important and useful?

The reported use of evidence is not the same as the evidence that is supposed to be useful and relevant. It might well be that some type of evidence (typically research evidence) is favoured and praised but for some reason (such as the lack of access or the inability to comprehend) is not actually used. Therefore, we were also interested in what kind of evidence is perceived as useful and relevant. In fact, we have asked the officials how important evidence as such is for them.

In contrast to the countries with a strong EBP discourse, we have not found that there is a felt lack of evidence and no huge calling for data and knowledge. This might be explained by the lack of EBP in the Czech public administration discourse. Nevertheless, the public officials sometimes complained about the incompatibility of various sources of administrative data. Frequently, they reported a lack of a central analytical unit in their ministry, where their “knowledge demands” would be answered without what can amount to a Sisyphean task of finding and gathering the data all over the administration bodies.

We also asked what types of evidence are preferred. Consistently with what has been said above, the most favoured evidence are administrative data and comparative international data. The preference of international evidence is not obvious, and it differs from countries like Scotland, where policy-makers are particularly keen to find internal Scottish evidence to inform Scottish policy development (Nutley et al. 2010, 140). The reason why foreign data (and partially also experience from abroad) is so popular is their tinge of objectivity or neutrality that increases their ability to persuade in political battles. Public officials do not judge evidence on the same principles as academics (rigorousness, reliability and validity) but rather in terms of its political usefulness. However, it may lead to a paradox, because comparative data are not any better than the national Czech data (in fact they are based on them).

On a more general level, we can say that unambiguous knowledge and evidence is preferred over more complex evidence. Some officials assume that inconclusive evidence is not persuasive and reliable. Good research is assumed to provide definitive answers and clear interpretations. There is clearly a call for “packaged” and unambiguous results that can be readily used. In accordance with Stevens (2011) we may also conclude that public officials dislike uncertainty, complexity and contradictions, as it can impede the smoothness of the policy process. Another explanation (to the best of our knowledge not mentioned in current EBP literature) is that public officials are constantly under time pressure (or at least they feel to be under time pressure). The civil servants stick to “hard” data (administrative, quantitative research, international comparison) because they know that “their” politicians want those as they consider them clear and incontestable. Public officials are highly motivated to deliver what is rewarded. They are not rewarded for ambiguities or different alternatives, but for (at the first sight) short and clear documents. The

overall picture, however, is not completely clear on this. While some respondents do not see other alternatives and find unambiguous data optimal, other respondents can see the limits of this setting and claim to be happy to have more time for preparing sophisticated documents and handouts.

Our findings also confirm that public officials prefer evidence that is easily applicable and directly useful to them. The useful evidence is assumed to represent the specific topic and be tailored to the precise problem they intend to solve. Public officials argue that they have no time to read long papers that presuppose sophisticated reading and interpretation by them. The documents should ideally respond to their knowledge demands and fit the stage of the policy process.

5. Conclusions and implications

The use of evidence in the Czech Republic differs in many respects from what is reported in countries with a strong EBP discourse. Public officials do not report commitment to the use of evidence in the meaning of "what works" (though they do not oppose it). More precisely: they do not show commitment to scientific evidence, but to the "administrative data" evidence. Generally speaking, they are not interested in "proof", but in "evidence" that can be used to legitimize the political goals and that support the negotiated consent on the policy. They do not claim that policy should be based upon the knowledge of what works, and that "what works" should be based upon rigorous experimental research.

It is impossible to exactly determine to what extent these differences are caused by different governance in the Czech Republic, and to what extent it is caused by the low impact of the EBP movement in the country. It is likely that these two are linked to one another. All respondents refer to the relative political instability and frequent changes in the overall setting of public policies which leads to two consequences for their work. First, they perceive time pressure that it is necessary to act very quickly. Second, they report the (repeated) experience of unrealized policies and strategies because of personal changes in the leadership of the ministry. The time pressure leads public officials to find and prepare easy-to-understand documents. Those respondents who have worked on some policy document which was left unfinished, abandoned or even withdrawn from the Government decision process because of the change in the position of the minister or his/her deputy report lower motivation for any complex work and data analyses. It is then coupled with low internal pressure (in a given ministry) to use evidence in the policy process maintained by only slowly changing the overall culture of the ministries.

We also find many commonalities with the findings in other countries. Most notably that public officials use different types of evidence and that they apply their own criteria on what counts as evidence, and what is "useful evidence". Public officials use very diverse sources of evidence, but the evidence that has been pro-

duced by other officials (or for officials) is used most intensely. In general, all four strands of theories seem to be useful in generating hypotheses about the use of evidence in the no-EBP context, too. Even the first theory (or metaphor) of two communities that has been strongly challenged in recent academic works seems to have some merit in the Czech context. Although public officials and academics do not differ so profoundly in their background, they do differ in their discourse and vocabulary, and also in terms of standards through which they judge the merit of evidence. It shows the strength of the social role of the official and of the overall culture of administrative bodies. Our findings suggest an important role of experts or “knowledge brokers” that translate the world of science into the world of practice. However, more detailed research is needed to explore who exactly the knowledge brokers are and how they work.

Our analysis also suggests that the recent move towards adding the context in analyzing the use of evidence is quite promising. The use and understanding of evidence are strongly influenced by daily practices of public officials as well as by their immediate social milieu. The use of evidence cannot be separated from the whole policy process in which it is embedded. Public officials want research that “helps them in their work”. And what is supposed to help them is influenced by the policy stage and expectations from them. Combined with the recent emphasis on the type of knowledge and evidence, this can be a very promising way for further research.

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