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IF POLICY ANALYSTS ARE DEPRESSED, WHAT SHOULD THEY DO ABOUT IT?

Roy T. Meyers

David R. Beam places policy analysts on the couch, and expertly diagnoses depression. Because recognizing an illness and thinking about its causes are the beginning steps towards wellness, this is an important contribution. I will soon turn to the next steps—considering alternative therapies and tentatively offering prescriptions. But first, I consider whether analysts should be severely depressed or just somewhat discouraged.

A SMALL DOSE OF A WEAK ANTIDEPRESSANT

Emotional problems, like policy problems, vary in severity. While all people suffer emotional trauma, those who bear frequently repeated ones are more likely to be plunged into the depths of depression for long periods. Chemical imbalances in the brain also contribute to depression; neurological research has shown that emotional traumas tend to reduce the capacity of the brain to cope with later stresses. Pharmacologists have developed antidepressant drugs that repair these psychic scars by reinstating proper chemical balances.

An unrealistic aspiration—for example, an expectation of perfection—is a classic cause of depression. And there is no doubt that, in the 1960s, policy analysts, and the political regime they served, hoped to change the world more than was possible. When Beam looks back at these “golden days,” he primarily sees pyritic reflections—the overoptimism of policy analysts about their abilities, and the disappointing results from many policy initiatives. And he fears that skepticism about government interventions has shifted to cynicism, given how complex and rigid social conditions seem to be.

Although the hubris of early policy analysts is undeniable, it should not negate their contributions and their record of government interventions. It is not difficult to match examples of policy failures with stories of successes—I will nominate less polluted water, better protected consumers, and more kids who receive nutritious food and better health care—nor is it hard to find examples where analysis prevented mistakes or improved programs. We can still be confident that decisionmakers can be informed by policy analysis, despite our appreciation for its limits. Although we may have only hammers, there are plenty of nails left to pound! Consider, for example, how analysis is being incorporated into the regulatory and budgetary processes of the federal government. Although the Reagan and Bush administrations’ devotion to politically inspired *ex parte* contacts dug a grave for benefit-cost analysis in regulatory review, it has not been filled; analytical balancing is central in the current process. And following the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, the government is again integrating strategic planning and performance measurement with budgeting; there has been significant progress, despite the difficulties posed by opposition control of the Congress and the administrative capacity limits created by spending caps and the National Performance Review’s staffing reductions. Leadership commit-

ment is one reason—although the budgetary process is often depressingly antianalytical, improvements should be expected when the Office of Management and Budget is headed by Alice Rivlin (who is not the only Clinton appointee with a stellar analytical record).

In other words, if we use a marginalist perspective when we do policy analysis, perhaps we should use the same approach for judging the impacts of our work. “Expect imperfection and be glad for small victories” is a common suggestion from therapists, and for that matter, the approach of most modern texts and schools of policy analysis.

Political Stress and (Nonlithium) Bromides

That small dose of antidepressants was not meant to resemble the typical effect of Prozac, a recently developed drug that often wondrously transforms the depressed. Older antidepressants are generally less efficacious, in part because they are less selective in the pathways within the brain in which they operate, thereby producing more undesirable side effects. It seems plausible that policy analysis has had its own side effects to contend with.

As numerous critics have observed, policy analysis tends to be a conservative force, in the sense that audits, evaluations, and the like more often uncover limits than suggest possibilities. Paradoxically, this may be more the case at the mass rather than the elite level. Most citizens digest analytical work via the translators of *60 Minutes* and numerous other media outlets whose production values favor exposés of faults rather than summaries of the pros and cons of government actions. Consequently, citizens learn from analyses that “government does nothing well” even as they cash their timely benefit checks.

It is through this mechanism that analysis probably bears some responsibility for the shift in power to the conservative Republicans who have dominated the political agenda since the November 1994 election. If government really cannot do anything well, then maybe a shift to the right is in order. I believe that this is one of the major reasons for the discouragement of many analysts. The new regime not only questions the desirability of an activist federal government (as did previous Republican administrations, though more often in rhetoric than in practice); it damns the federal government. Promising to destroy many established programs would not necessarily be so bad—after all, many analyses are consistent with this result—were it not for the logic used to arrive at this platform, or at least to justify it before the public. That logic has little if any room for concepts like public goods and negative externalities, which in contrast are starting points for most analysts. Those who desire evidence might check out the debate in 1995 on appropriations for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), in which numerous riders would have prevented the use of appropriate tools to deal with documented environmental and public health threats.

Another common criticism of policy analysis is that it tends to emphasize the value of efficiency over values like equity and justice. Perhaps this has been another contribution by analysis to the resurgence of the Republicans, many of whom support radical downsizing of social insurance programs. In partial defense of analysis, it is worth noting that numerous analysts have skillfully quantified the growth of economic disparities over the past two decades. But in the current political environment, those who would reduce

these inequities through the use of taxes are often said to be “promoting class warfare.” This is just one of many examples that could support Beam’s complaints about the quality of public discourse. Elected political leaders seem to rely more and more on manipulating citizens’ belief systems than to improving them. Sophisticated polling and marketing technologies and the public’s difficulty in understanding policy complications often make this approach possible, and electoral incentives often make it desirable.

One such method used by politicians is to omit facts or concepts that analysts view as indispensable. To continue with the topic of income redistribution, when the Republicans advocated block grants for income security programs, many recognized its encouragement of the race to the bottom, but for strategic reasons were unwilling to admit it. They avoided discussing the obvious issue of how recessions stress state and local fiscal conditions and increase economic inequities; instead, they charged those who raised this important consideration with being “federal know-it-alls” who mistakenly did not trust the capacity of state and local governments to do what is right—a vague but often effective discussion stopper. The Democrats were just as bad with their “Mediscare” campaign. Making the “Harry and Louise” ads look reasoned, they argued that all of the Republican’s cost-reducing proposals (some of which were similar to those proposed by President Clinton just two years before) would somehow threaten the health security of seniors. An approach of long-standing political effectiveness, it conveniently ignored how Medicare creates a huge intergenerational transfer under its current design. Few analysts could say that in either case the public debate was up to the standards of “adequate speech,” never mind “ideal speech.”

Could we help design a process that could inhibit this manipulative cycle, one that would replace bromides for citizens with invitations for them to think? This is the goal of a more participatory democracy; in its simpler model, agencies and elected officials would inform and then ask citizens to help them make complex trade-offs. Many analysts will turn down this experimental prescription, given their technocratic antipathy to political processes. Other analysts are already taking full doses, particularly in the environmental policy area. The complexities of the American political system make their task daunting, yet I believe analysts can give valuable advice, particularly on the design of choices that would be presented to citizens for their consideration.

Disciplining as Therapy for Depression

Beam also argues that, while some analysts are depressed because they do not know what to say, others complain that their good advice is ignored. Politicians like “bad ideas” as much as, and sometimes more than, those “in good currency” within “the policy community.” That community’s influence is challenged by the politicization of the policy research process, in particular by oxymoronic “advocacy think tanks.”

Most analysts have experience with the demand for bad ideas. Who hasn’t briefed a decisionmaker who wants information to support a fixed position rather than to select a course of action? Sometimes this “supply-reduced demand” seems strongest when analysts have *good* advice to give. The information asymmetry is intentional on the decisionmaker’s part, for ignoring quality analysis allows maintenance of a politically attractive position.

It is an interesting but neglected empirical question whether advocacy-oriented analytical institutions reduce the quality of the policy debate by oversupplying bad ideas. It is conceivable, moreover, that their effect is benign. Assuming that these institutions are representing the fixed positions of organized interests in the guise of searching for “truth,” at least their lobbying messages take a different form than the classics of “we’re with you at the polls” and “we gave you a lot of money.” When the argument takes the form of “we prefer x policy details because we believe that they will have y effects,” it is then exposed to possible contradiction by disinterested analysts.

The implication of Beam’s diagnosis is that the policy analysis community could do more disciplining of others as depression therapy. Especially subject to criticism would be those who recommend untested ideas without appropriate qualifiers and those advocacy institutions that play fast and loose with data. After all, one of the main functions of a discipline is to control quality through the communal imposition of standards.

A risk of this prescription is that some disciplining would be either too harsh or politically biased or both. That may have been the interpretation of some right-leaning analysts when reading my arguments about the Republicans’ agenda or Beam’s unfavorable comparison of Heritage to Brookings. Whatever the merits of our examples, this risk of enforcing quality control is undeniable. Disciplines are well known for ignoring or penalizing those outside their mainstreams, and if done too often, disciplines ossify and lose out to competition. Many of the organizations that sponsor this journal were created in part to provide a perspective that was generally missing from public administration. “Why do this?” is as important a question as “how can we do it well?” It would be ironic if now-mainstream policy analysts would make the mistake of discouraging diversity of thought.

A Whole New Me!?

Psychiatrists report that Prozac not only eliminates depression but that it also enhances the mental and emotional capabilities of many patients. Might there be a similar prescription for depressed analysts, one that would make them better suited for the new, more political environment? Specifically, would it be safe and efficacious for policy analysts to manipulate rhetorical symbols as much as they apply traditional policy analysis tools?

Budding analysts have long been warned that they will often be ignored, and that their work will be twisted and misportrayed for political advantage. Many practicing analysts cope not only by reducing their expectations of impact, but also by learning tactics of self-protection and influence (Meltner’s [1976] work on this topic is still wonderful). A new literature potentially improves pedagogy in this area, describing how analysts might better use rhetorical skills in the policy argumentation process.

In the Winter 1996 issue of this journal, Edward F. Lawlor argued that this literature “creates more problems for the policy analysis business than it solves” (p. 120). He is probably right for some analysts. To go totally overboard with armchair psychology, many analysts show temperaments in which skepticism exceeds faith, and prefer interacting with data rather than with politicians; yet rhetoric is usually a simple result of adding politicians to faith.

The rhetorical prescription may be more positively transforming for other analysts, particularly those not greatly constrained by their institutional roles. For me, one attraction of rhetoric is that it may improve opportunities for good ideas—"managed care" sounds a lot better than "implicit rationing." Rhetoric also provides an alternative to quantification for accurately describing phenomena. Consider, for example, the famous Sierra Club ad warning about two proposed dams in the Grand Canyon, which asked "Should we also flood the Sistine Chapel so that tourists can get nearer the ceiling?" I had the good fortune of paddling the Grand Canyon two years ago, and felt the analogy was entirely appropriate, and certainly more accurate than a dry statement that "recreational opportunities would be lost." Or consider the recent debate on the bill to "end welfare as we know it." Analysts have been quantifying potential increases or decreases in employment, poverty, homelessness, and hunger, but telling personalized narratives may also give policymakers good advice. Imagine a young kid, Joey, whose mother was neglected as a child, is dependent on drugs, has no job skills, is offered no training or job by a state, and then loses income support because of federally mandated time limits. And imagine Helen, a mother who because of the threat of withdrawn income support, finally remedies her educational deficiencies and obtains a job with a living wage. Asking "how many Joeys should be risked for how many Helens?" may not only help frame the policy dilemma, it may help analysts feel better, if not well.

Conclusion

Emotional illnesses are interesting because assessment is relatively subjective—a bone is either broken or not, but cracks in the psyche are harder to measure. Determining the position of policy analysts is similarly difficult, especially now when the policymaking process appears to be changing in significant ways. I accept the right of respected analysts to be depressed about the possibility that their role has diminished. But because policy analysts have had some successes, and seem likely to have some more in the future, I wonder whether this depression is due primarily to overly high aspirations for analysis in what has always been a very political world.

Fixing the self is also complicated by uncertainties regarding the effectiveness of available alternative treatments. One result has been conflict between the disciplines of care, particularly between psychotherapists and psychiatrists. Given the antipolitical roots of the policy analysis field, experimental prescriptions like making analysis more rhetorical and trying to discipline "bad" practitioners have the potential of creating a similar level of enmity. But because the field still continues to value logic and evidence, conducting some controlled studies may allow policy analysts to assess their problems and develop coping strategies, if not cures, without losing a sense of community. Perhaps this dialogue of cognitive therapy for policy analysts has been suggestive enough to stimulate some.

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