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Analysts, advocates and applicators: three discourse coalitions of UK evidence and policy

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Background: Continued growth of the evidence and policy field has prompted calls to consolidate findings in pursuit of a more holistic understanding of theory and practice.

Aims and objectives: The aim of this paper is to develop and explore an analytical typology that offers a way to consider the heterogeneity of different actors in UK evidence and policy.

Methods: We draw upon a discourse coalitions approach to analyse a series of semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of professionals in the evidence and policy field.

Findings: We describe an analytical typology that is composed of three discourse coalitions, each with their own framings of the problems of evidence and policy relations, the practices needed to address these, the organisation of people, and their priorities for future development. These are: the analytical coalition, which typically theorises evidence and policy relations in a way that matches empirical observations; the advocacy coalition, which typically normatively refines and prescribes particular evidence and policy relations; and the application coalition, which typically evaluates contextual conditions and enacts techniques to bring evidence into policy and practice.

Discussion and conclusions: We discuss the potential of this analytical lens to inform recognised tensions in evidence and policy relations, and consider how greater awareness of the positioning of individuals within these coalitions may help to foster improved collaboration and consolidation in the field. Ultimately, we note that distinct priorities in the three coalitions signify different visions for progress within the field that need to be negotiated.

Key words discourse coalitions • evidence • policy • evidence-informed policymaking

Key messages
- Consolidation of the evidence and policy field requires a recognition of its heterogeneity.
- We propose three discourse coalitions – analytical, advocacy and application – to describe the field.
- Each discourse coalition reflects different problem perceptions, people, practices, and priorities.
- Recognition of personal positioning in the discourse coalitions could help the field's development.

Background

Efforts to critically analyse and improve the use of knowledge in decision making are the focus of an expanding field of research and practice (Boaz et al, 2019). The continued growth of activity around evidence and policy has led to calls for more systematic consolidation and synthesis of lessons and insights from the past 20 years of research, policy and practice (Smith and Pearson, 2018; Oliver and Boaz, 2019). This paper contributes to these efforts by contending that successful consolidation of the field requires more explicit appreciation of its discursive heterogeneity.

In recent years, there have been a growing range of contributions to the task of consolidating lessons from the evidence and policy field. Scholars have sought to synthesise insights and build theory through literature reviews, monographs and edited volumes, which have provided an interdisciplinary synthesis of work to date (Oliver et al, 2014a; Oliver et al, 2014b; Cairney, 2016; Parkhurst, 2017; Cairney and Oliver, 2019; 2017; Boaz et al, 2019). These have been complemented by contributions from reflexive practitioners, who have drawn upon their applied experience to offer insights on the practical challenges and opportunities for evidence-informed policy and practice (that is, Gluckman, 2014; Craig, 2018; Donnelly et al, 2018).

In parallel, there has been a growth of infrastructures and initiatives within research and policy systems (such as What Works Centres: Breckon and Mulgan, 2018) that have sought to put some of these insights and ideas into practice and refine evidence methodologies, such as systematic reviews. These developments are sometimes depicted as part of an 'evidence movement' centred on improving the use of knowledge in policy and practice (noted in Boaz et al, 2019). However, they might also indicate a more heterogeneous field of activity, in which multiple problem framings of evidence and policy relations are in play.

Researchers and practitioners working on the relationship between evidence and policy deploy a wide array of concepts and approaches to thinking about evidence (Parkhurst, 2017), from knowledge transfer to implementation science, systematic reviews to the co-production of knowledge. The field also consists of individual actors with distinct philosophies of knowledge from the natural, social and physical sciences, as well as practitioner-based perspectives (Farley-Ripple et al, 2020). This 'spectrum of understandings' (Cairney, 2017: 500) is applied in a wide range of political and institutional contexts that cut across societal concerns, from macro-economic policy to nuclear energy infrastructure projects. The complexity of epistemic, geographic and topical concerns of the evidence and policy field means that any attempt to consolidate it is likely to rely on frameworks that analytically parse it up in a way that allows insights to be drawn (Farley-Ripple et al, 2020).

In this paper, we contribute to the ongoing project of consolidation by proposing an analytical framework that foregrounds the heterogeneity of the evidence and policy field. Our analysis is based on empirical research conducted with a select cross-section of experts and professionals in the field. Drawing on interview data and on

the theory of discourse coalitions (Hajer, 1997), we analytically describe and contrast three discourse coalitions in the evidence and policy field of the UK.

The discourse coalitions approach was developed as a means to examine competing perspectives in environmental politics during the late 20th century (Hajer, 1993; Hajer, 1997). The discourse coalitions approach offers a way in which to think about how problems are constructed through discourses, or 'a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorisations… through which meaning is given to physical and social realities' (Hajer, 1997: 264). Since its development, the approach has been expansively applied in the domain of political science to a range of policy issues (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005; Kern and Rogge, 2018).

The choice of discourse coalitions in this paper rather than other similar approaches (see for example the distinction with advocacy coalitions set out in detail in Hajer, 1997: 68–72) stemmed from an initial interest in the discursive framing of evidence and policy relations through distinct terminologies, such as evidence-based policy or evidence-informed decision making. The discourse coalitions approach builds upon constructivist traditions (Phillips and Hardy, 2002) by suggesting that language is the primary means through which different actors articulate their perception of a given problem and position themselves in relation to it, as well as to each other. It is through these subject positionings that different actors come to see 'the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, story lines and concepts' (Davies and Harré, 1990: 46). The discourse coalitions approach provides a means to explore the way in which language matters to the evidence and policy field. In particular, it helps elucidate conflicts over the meaning of the evidence and policy problem, rather than solely over the sorts of action that should be taken to address it.

Here, we draw upon this approach to identify and analyse three discourse coalitions in the evidence and policy field in the UK. We understand these discourse coalitions to form around storylines that offer distinct framings of the evidence and policy problem, and thereby define the practices required to address these, the people involved, and priorities for the field's development. These discourse coalitions do not occupy shared physical spaces or forums, such as Whitehall departments or academic research centres, so much as problem spaces – bounded by a shared framing of the challenges that research and practice in the evidence and policy field is intended to illuminate and solve.

Our analysis draws on insights from recent attempts to construct typologies for similarly heterogeneous domains. For example, scholarship in the field of governance notably stretches across multiple disciplines and has been usefully categorised by some scholars (for example, Jordan, 2008, who described scholarship on governance *as an empirical phenomenon*, *as theory*, and *as a normative prescription*) in an attempt to help navigate the field. A similar process was followed by researchers in the interdisciplinary field of nature conservation, who proposed a typology (distinguishing between research *for conservation* and research *on conservation*) that they argued would 'help researchers, practitioners, and activists in debates about conservation understand what others do and why they do it' (Sandbrook et al, 2013). We suggest that the field of evidence and policy might also benefit from being understood through a typology that can help scholars and practitioners to more explicitly recognise their subject positionings and that of others.

In this paper, we developed an analytical typology of the evidence and policy field through a series of semi-structured interviews with evidence and policy professionals in the UK. Focusing on problem framings, people, practices and priorities, our analysis suggests that understanding the internal dynamics of the evidence and policy field may be as important as synthesising its lessons in supporting further consolidation and development. The paper has three sections. First, we introduce our methodological approach of semi-structured interviews with a cross-section of evidence and policy professionals in the UK. Second, we set out our findings on the value of distinguishing between three discourse coalitions: the analytical coalition; the advocacy coalition; and the application coalition. Third, we discuss the implications of this approach, noting that distinctions between the three coalitions may signify different visions and priorities for progress.

Methods

Our analysis has been informed by reflections from a six-year period of close involvement in the establishment of the International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA), between 2014 and 2020. INGSA was established to support the sharing of lessons and good practices and to build individual and institutional capacities for scientific advice and evidence-informed decision making at different levels of government and governance (Gluckman and Wilsdon, 2016), and its network now includes over 5,500 academics, practitioners and policymakers from over 90 countries.[1] Our thinking has also been shaped by discussions with, and reflections on, the development of organisations such as the Cochrane Library and the Campbell Collaboration, which have contributed to the synthesis and systematic review of evidence over many years.

We have chosen to focus on the UK as a national evidence and policy ecosystem. The UK is widely viewed as a significant contributor to the theory and practice of evidence and policy interactions (Fleming and Rhodes, 2017). As well as being home to a number of leading journals and prominent academics in the field, the UK has also developed innovative institutional arrangements, from the birth of the Royal Society of London as a source of scientific advice to governments from the 17th century onwards (Collins, 2016; Kelly and McGoey, 2018), to the establishment over the past decade of the Behavioural Insights Team in the Cabinet Office (Oliver et al, 2014b) and the network of 'What Works' Centres (Breckon and Mulgan, 2018). These and other UK innovations in the field have been influential internationally (Wilsdon and Doubleday, 2015; Cave et al, 2017).

Data collection

The empirical component of this research included 12 semi-structured interviews with evidence and policy professionals drawn from academia, learned societies, policy support organisations, and government departments (Table 1). These individuals were largely based in the UK, but included two with roles in international organisations (Peter Gluckman and Howard White). Interviewees were selected through purposive sampling, which focused on identifying elite actors spanning a range of perspectives who were willing to participate. Three considerations informed our sampling strategy. First, we reviewed the Snapshot of the Evidence Informed Landscape produced by

Table 1: Names, organisations and roles of interviewees, and date and place of interviews

Name	Organisation and role at time of interview	Date and place of interview
Howard White	Chief Executive Officer, The Campbell Collaboration	Paris, June 2017
Paul Cairney	Professor of Politics and Public Policy, University of Stirling	Online, August 2017
Alan Pitt	Deputy Director, UK Government Office for Science	London, July 2018
Kathryn Oliver	Associate Professor of Sociology and Public Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine	Online, August 2018
Claire Craig	Chief Science Policy Officer, Royal Society	London, September 2018
Guy Poppy	Chief Scientific Adviser, UK Food Standards Agency	London, September 2018
Ian Boyd	Chief Scientific Adviser, UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	London, September 2018
Jen Gold	Head, What Works, UK Cabinet Office	Online, September 2018
Jonathan Breckon	Director, Alliance for Useful Evidence	London, September 2018
Justin Parkhurst	Associate Professor of Global Health Policy, The London School of Economics and Political Science	London, September 2018
Simon Denegri	National Director for Patients, Carers and the Public, National Institute for Health Research (NIHR)	London, December 2018
Peter Gluckman	Chair, International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA) and Chief Science Advisor to the Prime Minister of New Zealand	Madrid, December 2018

the European Commission in 2017[2], which identified a list of key individuals and organisations working conceptually and practically on evidence and policy. This helped inform the inclusion of different professional perspectives and experiences in the evidence and policy field. Second, we considered potential contributors to be those who had actively engaged and reflected on meta-level questions about the scope, organisation and operation of the field of evidence and policy, through publications, commentaries, talks and workshops. This helped us to assess the propensity of potential contributors to 'be reflective, willing, and able to speak articulately' about their experiences (following Morse, 2007: 231). Finally, we drew upon prior knowledge of potential contributors who were familiar to the authors from interactions at conferences, workshops and through relevant academic and practitioner networks, notably INGSA. Data collection was concluded after 12 interviews when theoretical saturation was deemed to be achieved. Theoretical saturation is defined as the point at which 'no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category' (Glaser and Strauss, 1968: 61). Saturation was therefore reached when interviews described the same discourses and storylines that had been used by others to characterise their experience of the evidence and policy field.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person or over the telephone between June 2017 and December 2018, and lasted for between 45 and 60 minutes. Interviews focused on discussion of the evidence and policy field in general, followed by more specific exploration of the area in which the interviewee worked. Examples of the questions asked include:

a)   The domain of evidence and policy has grown significantly over recent years, how do you make sense of that landscape and how it has changed?

b) Across the range of activity around evidence and policy there appears to be a high degree of consensus about the importance of evidence. Why is there such a debate about how best to achieve it in practice?
c) Beyond a shared commitment to bring evidence to bear on policymaking, to what extent do different groups of people in this field diverge, converge or interrelate?

Data analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed by a single analyst using qualitative analysis software (Atlas.ti) in a two-stage coding process. The second analyst assessed and interrogated these findings for internal and external validity based on collected data and personal experience. Results were also cross-referenced with existing literature to inform the discussion. In the first stage, the analytical typology developed in this paper was derived through a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1968), in which analytical categories (codes) were derived inductively to identify the three coalitions described here. These codes were then compared against existing literature, which was used to harmonise findings with existing characterisations of the field of evidence and policy. For example, the terminology for the three discourse coalitions is informed by scholarship characterising the evidence and policy domain as being divided into advocates and commentators (for example, Oliver and Pearce, 2017). In the second stage, the interview transcripts were then re-analysed thematically to identify distinguishing characteristics between the different discourse coalitions. This process was informed by the discourse coalitions approach (Hajer, 1997), which we drew upon to examine thematic differences in the discourses and storylines for each discourse coalition relating to a) the problem framing; b) the organisation of people; c) the practices that they enact; and d) the kinds of solutions (or priorities) that they see as appropriate.

Limitations

The geographic scope of this study is the evidence and policy system of the UK as a whole, which is largely centred on policymaking in Whitehall. However, this perspective is also limited, in that Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have devolved policy systems, which may differ in important ways from the broader UK context (that is, the 'Scottish Approach' detailed in Cairney, 2017). Caution should therefore be applied in extending our findings at a sub-national level without further empirical analysis. Differences may also be observed in distinct topical sub-fields of evidence and policy, such as in environment or health policy. This study does not tease out such differences between topical sub-fields, instead acknowledging them as areas for further inquiry.

Furthermore, the interviewees sampled in this study represent a relatively small number of elite actors centred in the evidence and policy landscape of the UK. These individuals were also familiar to the authors from interactions at relevant conferences, workshops, academic and practitioner networks. While such familiarity can facilitate trust and enable more candid interview responses, it can also impose limitations on the range of perspectives that might be obtained. We remained cognisant of this limitation and our intent during sampling was to select

a range of perspectives from different professional roles, while acknowledging that familiarity with research subjects is somewhat unavoidable within the relatively small community of scholars and practitioners actively engaging and reflecting on meta-level questions about the scope, organisation and operation of the field of evidence and policy in the UK.

Findings

Drawing on these interviews, we developed a typology of the UK evidence and policy field in terms of three discourse coalitions: *the analytical coalition; the advocacy coalition; and the application coalition.* The analytical coalition of these is concerned with the explanatory power of different conceptualisations of evidence and policy relations. The advocacy coalition is more normative and concerned with refining and prescribing idealised kinds of evidence and policy relations that should take place. The application coalition approaches evidence and policy relations as contingent on context and is concerned with the techniques, conditions and evaluative choices through which these relations are put into practice.

Interviewees provided insights into how the analytical, advocacy and application coalitions were defined by distinct framings of evidence and policy problems, the practices required to address these, the people involved, and priorities for the field's development (Table 2). In this section, we set out the characteristics of these coalitions derived from interviews.

Analytical coalition

The analytical coalition is formed around the shared framing of a need for an accurate theorisation of evidence and policy relations. Here, practices centre on the pursuit of understanding through research and synthesis. The analytical coalition engages with discourses such as 'evidence-based policy' and 'evidence-informed decision making' in analytical terms. This means they are evaluated less for their utility and more for the extent to which they offer an accurate depiction of the reality of evidence and policy relations. One researcher, Justin Parkhurst, illustrates this in stating:

> I tend to rely on 'evidence-informed decision making' because this language has evolved out of a recognition that evidence-based policy is too simple a term, because there are multiple social goals in policymaking. So, 'evidence-informed decision making' means making decisions that at least take account of the relevant evidence but are not necessarily directed by it. (Interview, September 2018)

As this quote reflects, different approaches to evidence and policy are typically understood as discourses in the analytical coalition that can be evaluated for their theoretical robustness. It is perhaps no wonder then that the analytical coalition is largely composed of academic researchers and reflexive policy professionals. In addition, those involved are often influenced by their disciplinary backgrounds, which offer different theoretical foundations for analysing evidence and policy.

Noting the prevalence of the term 'evidence-based policy' in the natural sciences in contrast to the social sciences, the researcher Paul Cairney commented that: "if

Table 2: Summary of findings for three discourse coalitions of UK evidence and policy drawn from interviews with a cross-section of evidence and policy professionals, focusing on problem perception, practices to address that problem, people involved and priorities for future development of the domain

	Analytical	Advocacy	Application
Problem	The need for an accurate theorisation of evidence and policy relations.	The need for improved enactment of particular evidence and policy relations.	The need to evaluate context and foster appropriate options for evidence and policy relations.
Practices	The pursuit of understanding through research and synthesis.	The refinement and promotion of particular evidence and policy relations.	The evaluative choice of appropriate options for evidence and policy relations.
People	Academic researchers and reflexive policy; professionals organised by disciplinary divisions.	Academic researchers and service providers organised by competitive territoriality.	Policy practitioners and reflexive service providers organised by levels of competency and judgement.
Priorities	The bridging of disciplines to allow the consolidation of findings, professionalise the domain and to increase exposure of those in research to the realities of policy and practice.	The development and institutionalisation of standards of evidence to improve rigour or evidence use in application.	The strengthening of capacities and techniques for appropriately applying a toolbox of options of evidence and policy relations.

you had studied politics, you would know that science is often privileged [in policy making], but it's just not as central to the discussion as someone who is ensconced in science might think" (Interview, August 2017).

Disciplinary divisions were seen by several interviewees to be hampering progress in scholarship on evidence and policy. As the researcher Kathryn Oliver commented:

> What I have observed is a lot of the [disciplinary] domains tend to have the same debates and tend to refer to themselves, both literally – as in they'll only cite their own literature – but they sort of go round in circles a bit and solve the same problems over and over again. (Interview, August 2018)

One priority from this perspective was therefore to bridge disciplinary divides in order to consolidate findings and professionalise scholarship in the evidence and policy field. The researcher Justin Parkhurst, for example, suggested the need to clarify: "definition of terms, work that's been done in the past, things that have been established, tested or conceptualised, so that we're not constantly reinventing it, redoing it" (Interview, September 2018).

Alongside the building of these shared foundations, interviewees suggested that there was a need to increase exposure of those in the analytical coalition to the work of those in the application coalition. Reflecting on this, Peter Gluckman, Chair of INGSA, explained:

> I think that people who haven't been there, haven't had a foot in the door, don't really understand the dynamics in play – that policymakers… have

limited bandwidth, that they lurch from problems driven by externalities, that just presenting them with a problem is not enough, that presenting them with diverse views is useless, that you've got to go with a policy-relevant and politically-acceptable solution or range of options for them to choose from. In my experience, 99.9% of academics, if they've not worked in the policy domain, don't have a clue about any of that. (Interview, December 2018)

The value of experience was further reiterated by Guy Poppy, one of the UK cross-governmental network of Chief Scientific Advisors, who talked about the value of being "right on the frontline". Demonstrating the reflective analytical approach that is characteristic of this coalition, Poppy explained:

I would have started this job saying that [what I am doing is] evidence-based policy.... In doing the role, I think the term… evidence-informed is a better one because if you assume that the policy is being based on things much broader potentially than what you're dealing with…. [A] base suggests that it's the fundamental thing at the bottom of the pyramid on which everything's built, and that's where you might have a difference between people who are truly on the frontline, seeing it for real and living and breathing it, as against people who are sitting on a committee, who probably think it was [evidence-] based. (Interview, September 2018)

In this quote, a scientific advisor shows how they too engage in reflection on the accuracy of different terminology to describe evidence and policy relations. As such, being part of the analytical coalition does not require one to be tied to a particular physical space or professional context, such as academia, but rather it can be achieved through reflection by those working more directly in policy settings. The analytical coalition, like the others, is discursively constructed in the act of evaluating different descriptions of evidence and policy relations against empirical observations.

Advocacy coalition

The advocacy coalition is centred on the need for improved enactment of particular evidence and policy relations, typically through the refinement and promotion of particular approaches. An example of an organisation primarily operating in the advocacy coalition is the What Works network in the UK, which focuses on the synthesis of evidence in policy areas ranging from education to policing. Jen Gold, Head of the What Works Team in the UK's Cabinet Office explained their position:

For us, the type of evidence that we're keen to promote the greater use of is 'evaluation evidence', where you've got a counter factual and an understanding of whether something has been effective or not. There are lots of types of evidence, but for us, using standards of evidence and evaluation evidence where you've got a counter factual is the type that we promote. (Interview, September 2018)

In this way, the advocacy coalition centres on a normative approach to evidence and policy relations which, instead of evaluating different discourses against reality, seeks

to refine and advocate the merits of particular terminology and approaches over others. Here, discourses such as 'evaluation evidence' signify a particular standard of evidence with its own practices and practitioners that typically occupy positions as service providers. Another organisational example is the Campbell Collaboration. As its chief executive, Howard White, reflected:

> … the ways in which we engage [in the policy community] for us ideally is about establishing the Campbell brand, and that brand becoming known so that people who would want to use the systematic review evidence about the effects of a particular policy or practice will know to access and trust the Campbell library as a source they should go to for that purpose. (Interview, June 2017)

For those in the advocacy coalition, the priority is to optimise the use of evidence in policy and practice. In particular, interviewees talked about the need to improve evidence methodologies and make them more robust. As Jen Gold commented:

> … standards of evidence – protocols – mean you can apply a bit more rigour in terms of being critical in the use of evidence, allowing you to obviously distinguish between the study that's more robust and one that's got a fairly weak methodology behind it. (Interview, September 2018)

Much effort in the advocacy coalition is therefore directed to refining particular methodologies, as well as informing policy and practice communities of their merits.

In contrast to the analytical coalition, where the people involved are largely organised along disciplinary lines, in the advocacy coalition, interviewees suggested that those involved organised themselves according to competing territories. Peter Gluckman, Chair of INGSA, described this as:

> … turf protection…. It's just human nature to be territorial rather than collaborative…. Everybody wants to be the one who has the most influence on policies of choice, that's the reality…. All the players are competing still for influence and there's jobs on the line – so to speak. (Interview, December 2018)

Application coalition

The application coalition is one in which the problem of evidence and policy relations centres on the need for a range of options appropriate to different situations. Reflecting on the role of an advisory body like the Royal Society, Claire Craig, its then Chief Science Policy Officer, explained:

> … you [need] a portfolio of ways of operating, so that you build the relationships, the institutional and the personal ones, so that you're helpful basically on occasion, helpful in the sense of you're addressing things that people know that they care about, in ways that maybe help them to come to resolutions. (Interview, September 2018)

Practices in the application coalition centred on adjudicating between different options for evidence and policy relations, and selecting the most appropriate for given policy contexts. Different approaches to evidence and policy relations were therefore seen less in conceptual terms or as normative prescriptions, and more as a set of tools that could be leveraged for different purposes. As Ian Boyd, one of the UK's departmental chief scientific advisers explained:

> I live in every one of these boxes at different times, maybe not every day but most days. … I don't think they're mutually exclusive to each other, all of them are part of a spectrum of activities. (Interview, September 2018)

From this perspective, different terminologies and the practices that they relate to are seen as complementary components of capacities that are routinely enacted in policy settings. Evidence and policy relations are understood as contingent on the particular nature of the policy issue, and the setting in which it is being dealt with. Jonathan Breckon of the Alliance for Useful Evidence, explained: "It's got to be appropriate. Horses for courses!" (Interview, September 2018). However, interviewees also noted that not everyone in the application coalition was so adept. Indeed, some described the analytical coalition as being divided into those who had competency in applying a range of approaches, and those that did not. As Ian Boyd noted:

> You have to be able to judge a particular situation and make quite rapid decisions about how evidence should be downloaded into that particular situation, and that requires a significant empathy for the particular circumstance that's required…. You have to understand when you're in one space as opposed to another space and there are times where the rational linear approach, where science is sitting separate from policy and it's creating its own advice and then the advice is chucked in, there are times when that's absolutely the right thing to do, but there are a lot of times when it just is completely unhelpful…. (Interview, September 2018)

Priorities for the application coalition were seen as strengthening internal capacities to judge and appropriately apply different options for strengthening evidence and policy interactions.

Discussion: analysts, advocates and applicators

Drawing upon a discourse coalitions approach to understand the discursive construction of social realities (Hajer, 1997), our findings suggest that the evidence and policy field in the UK can be productively understood to have three discourse coalitions, each with their own problem perceptions, practices enacted, people involved and priorities. The three coalitions described here are:

- the *analytical coalition*, which typically theorises evidence and policy relations in a way that matches empirical observations;
- the *advocacy coalition*, which typically normatively refines and prescribes particular evidence and policy relations; and

- the *application coalition*, which typically evaluates the contextual conditions and enacts techniques to bring evidence into policy and practice.

There are many different ways to productively categorise actors in the evidence and policy field. There are distinctions that can be drawn between individuals and organisations that are seen to produce research and those that consume it for thought and action (as described in Higgins et al, 2014). Individuals might be mapped by their personal identities, social networks and affinities for different academic literature (as mapped in Farley-Ripple et al, 2020). And organisations might be classified according to their design, strategies and priorities in relation to evidence and action (as in the idealised archetypes of Davies et al, 2015). Our analytical framework differs from much of this previous work, because it does not describe fixed roles or identities. Instead, the three discourse coalitions presented here are discursively constructed positions that people are able to take in defining the evidence and policy problem, and their own role in responding to it. This means that the position of actors is potentially fluid and that actors from a range of different professional roles and backgrounds are able to occupy the different coalitions at different times. For example, the analytical coalition can include anyone from critical interpretivist scholars to government science advisers who consider evidence and policy relations in empirical and theoretical terms. On a single day, a science advisor may both contribute to the development of the application coalition by helping to navigate the use of various kinds of evidence in a policy setting, while also offering insights to the analytical coalition by writing editorials, books or sharing insights at conferences (for example, Gluckman, 2014; Craig, 2018; Donnelly et al, 2018). Likewise, scholars who both contribute to analytical understanding of evidence and policy relations and at times contribute to their application through advisory capacities, can also contribute to the advocacy coalition through efforts to refine and promote particular approaches to evidence and policy relations (for example, the development of evidence hierarchies for nature conservation, Dicks et al, 2014). While the amount of time dedicated to furthering the development of the different discourse coalitions is likely to be closely linked to professional roles, there is a growing expectation that individuals operate across the different discourse coalitions. For example, academic researchers are increasingly encouraged to contribute to the development of the application coalition in their work. This is reflected in the recent growth in the UK system of networks such as UPEN (Universities Policy Engagement Network) and CAPE (Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement) and Transforming Evidence[3], and the widespread availability of resources that offer researchers accessible and informed understanding of policy processes (Evans and Cvitanovic, 2018; Cairney and Oliver, 2019).

The fluidity with which individuals in the evidence and policy field can position themselves within and across these different discourse coalitions is therefore core to its heterogeneity. Yet the divergent priorities of the three coalitions also imply that actors could benefit from being more cognisant of their subject-positioning in the field. For a field sometimes portrayed as a single 'evidence movement', a more explicit recognition that the actors within it often occupy different discursive worlds may shed fresh light on how and why disagreements sometimes arise between coalitions of analysts and advocates, who may find themselves talking at cross-purposes. In particular, we see these tensions reflected in concerns that the 'agenda of "getting evidence into policy" has side-lined the empirical description and analysis of how

research and policy actually interact in vivo' (Oliver et al, 2014b: 1). Recognising that the evidence and policy field consists of multiple discourse coalitions with different priorities can explain these tensions and may be the basis for supporting these different discourse coalitions to develop accordingly. This recognition may also help to navigate different interpretations of what counts as evidence (Parkhurst, 2017) and debates over the merits or otherwise of particular terminology, such as 'evidence-based policy' (Greenhalgh and Russell, 2009). As others have noted, decisions about relations between evidence and policy – including the maintenance of the status quo – 'are value-driven and political, not just "evidence-based", choices' (Cairney and Oliver, 2017:1). The development and implementation of new activities and initiatives in the field would benefit from reflexive consideration about the problem perceptions, practices, people and priorities being elevated at different times by a given individual or organisation.

The typology that we present here is not intended as a fixed heuristic for understanding the evidence and policy field in the UK. Rather, we offer this typology as an analytical lens which can reveal certain things for certain purposes. In particular, envisaging the domain as three discourse coalitions highlights diverse perceptions of the problems in evidence and policy relations, each of which suggests its own priorities for future development. Of course, there is also a risk in parsing up the field in this way. In particular, there are benefits that flow from exchange, collaboration and co-mingling between the three discourse coalitions, as reflected in calls for 'researchers and other evidence advocates to draw on modern policy-process theories and concepts to help them to engage effectively' (Cairney, 2019: 36). As with a need to foster dialogue and learning across disciplines in evidence and policy (Oliver and Boaz, 2019), there is a vital need for facilitated and sustained interactions across the three discourse coalitions. Editorials, short articles and blogposts that share lessons are one means of communicating across the coalitions. Conferences, webinars and workshops are spaces where individuals from different coalitions can meet and exchange insights. And networks such as UPEN, INGSA and Transforming Evidence are hugely valuable in building and sustaining capacities for learning, reflection and deliberation over the longer term; although incentives for interaction are often insufficient (Oliver and Boaz, 2019).

There are three ways in which the ideas in this paper could be further developed. First, there are opportunities to use this framework as a means of explaining social networks within the field by identifying how actors interpret their roles and relations with others. This could contribute, for example, to the growing interest in network analyses of evidence and policy interactions (de Leeuw et al, 2018) by recognising that language matters to the ways in which different actors position themselves. As Smith and Weishaar (2018) point out: 'simply being part of a network can tell us little if we do not understand the roles… which network members adopt, and how they interpret these roles'. Better understanding of how social networks come into being and the role of discourses in shaping their structure could aid more in-depth study of the histories and influences of different discourse coalitions in evidence and policy (see for example work on the evidence-based medicine movement, Pope, 2003; or the randomised control trials movement in UK public policy Pearce and Raman, 2014).

Second, the extent to which the typology presented here usefully describes the diversity of concerns found in different jurisdictions requires further research. Previous research has emphasised that different national systems have their own political cultures

of evidence and expertise, or 'civic epistemologies' (Jasanoff, 2005). In the UK, there are likely to be differences in the devolved evidence and policy systems of different nations and regions (Cairney, 2017), and further research is needed to expand our understanding of evidence and policy relations from non–anglophone countries and literatures (Smith et al, 2019), including developing countries (Lavis et al, 2006; Cairney, 2016: 10; Fransman and Newman, 2019).

Third, diversity is also likely to be found in different disciplinary or topical approaches to evidence and policy. Researchers working in public health, agriculture or climate policy might find that the set of discourse coalitions in these areas differs in a variety of ways, which merit further exploration. From economics to agriculture, different topical areas have distinct professional organisations and industrial connections, which may shape how and why discourse coalitions and the territorial competition within them form. It is also possible that biomedical and health research, for instance, because of its wider influence over entire research and innovation systems, has exported its discourses into other areas (as has been the case with certain methodological emphases, such as on randomised controlled trials). The effects of a 'biomedical bubble' have been described in the context of the UK research funding system by Jones and Wilsdon (2018: 47), who observe: 'a risk that this community more than others ends up shaping key questions, dominating funding agendas, and closing down alternatives, sometimes without even realising it'. Just as this applies to funding priorities, so it may apply to the shaping of discourse coalitions for evidence and policy.

So with respect to differences in civic epistemologies, and in disciplinary and policy fields, developing and sharing an 'understanding of what others do and why they do it' (Sandbrook et al, 2013) is likely to be an important step in ensuring that those committed to an evidence–informed agenda do not stifle each other's progress.

Conclusion

There have been a number of recent calls to consolidate scholarship in the evidence and policy field, and a recognition that achieving this necessitates a partial reorganisation of the evidence and policy field itself to overcome disciplinary boundaries, synthesise and share previous insights, and develop a stronger community around a forward–looking research agenda (Smith and Pearson, 2018; Oliver and Boaz, 2019; Farley–Ripple et al, 2020). Yet, to do so requires an understanding of the internal dynamics of the evidence and policy field itself as it continues to mature. The analysis in this paper offers a contribution to these collaborative efforts by exploring the field in discursive terms with a specific intention to encourage scholars and practitioners to understand their positioning in fresh ways. This may help to overcome implicit tensions or competing visions for the field's development that may otherwise hamper its consolidation.

Notes

[1] https://www.ingsa.org/about/

[2] https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/publication/brochures-leaflets/snapshot-evidence-informed-policy-landscape

[3] See https://www.upen.ac.uk/; https://www.cape.ac.uk/ and https://transformure.wordpress.com/ (Accessed: 31 July 2020)

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Research ethics statement

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Contributor statement

JW and JM conceptualised and designed the study. JM and JW conducted data analysis and interpretation. JM and JW wrote the first and subsequent drafts of the manuscript.

Conflict of interest statement

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

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