In Evidence We Trust

Keith Adams

Keith Adams is the social policy advocate at the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice. His primary areas of research are housing policy and penal reform.

Bamboo Airplanes

After World War II ended, when the US military were withdrawing from military bases in Melanesia– a region of the South Pacific Ocean composed of an azure-hued network of islands and archipelagos – strange behaviours were observed amongst tribes within the indigenous population.[1] Locals assumed that the largesse of material wealth accompanying the war, which the hundreds of thousands of American soldiers brought from the skies, could only emanate from the spirit world. In the hope of enticing the American military to return with their "cargo", replete with its bounty of tinned meat, whiskey, motorbikes, and chocolate, the islanders begin to construct full simulacrums of US airfields complete with runways, lighting systems, communication infrastructure such as towers and antennae and, even, wooden headsets.[2] Using basic materials such as bamboo, rope, and stones, the indigenous tribes hoped to see the return of "cargo". The islanders went through the exact motions that had led to the landings of the US military cargo planes and their bounty, without understanding the significance of these actions.[3] Upon witnessing primitive people swept up in a wave of religious fervour, anthropologists named this social phenomenon as "cargo cults."[4]

Like the "cargo cult" aircraft and landings strips, there are plenty of innovations within the world of social policy which look like scientific, sound scientific, and yet may have as much scientific merit as an airplane made from bamboo and rope.[5] In the past two decades, "evidence-based policymaking" has become widespread within the discourse of the Irish government, perceived as a "tool of good governance."[6] Coupled with its ubiquity, evidenced-based policymaking is treated referentially as self-evident within the institutions and agencies of the State. The perception of evidence as impartial and uncontested is clear within current public discourse and rhetoric.[7] Therefore, as a consequence

---

[1] Melanesia is a subregion of Oceania, north of Australia, which denotes an ethnic and geographical grouping of islands. It consists of the island of New Guinea – second largest island in the world after Greenland – and "island Melanesia" composed of a variety of archipelagos, islands, atolls, and reefs. Subregion includes the four independent countries of Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea.

[2] Philip Stark and Andrea Saltelli, 'Cargo-Cult Statistics and Scientific Crisis', Significance Magazine, 5 July 2018, https://www.significancemagazine.com/2-uncategorised/593-cargo-cult-statistics-and-scientific-crisis.

[3] Stark and Saltelli.

[4] The "cargo cults" discovered in the central highlands of New Guinea in 1946 were not a new social phenomenon but a recurrence of the collision of European civilization with the indigenous cultures of the southwest Pacific. Since the arrival of Christendom in the form of missionaries and their "cargo" in the 1800s, primitive tribes throughout Melanesia wait upon the future return of this abundance. For more, see Peter M. Worsley, '50 Years Ago: Cargo Cults of Melanesia', Scientific American, accessed 14 August 2019, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/1959-cargo-cults-melanesia/; Paul Raffaele, 'In John They Trust', Smithsonian, accessed 15 August 2019, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/in-john-they-trust-109294882/.

[5] Michael Hanlon, 'Cargo Cult Science', *European Review* 21, no. S1 (2013): 52.

[6] Richard Boyle, 'The State of Policy Evaluation In Ireland', Research Paper (Dublin: Institute for Public Administration, September 2014), 6.

[7] Frances Ruane, 'Public Policy Must Be Based on Evidence and Not on Ideology or Anecdotes', *The Irish Times*, March 2013, https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/public-policy-must-be-based-on-evidence-and-not-on-ideology-or-anecdotes-1.1324140.

of its proximate relationship to the State, upon which it relies for funding, civil society – primarily the community and voluntary sector – have also had to accept the axiomatic nature of this evidence-based policymaking. In fact, in some instances, the community and voluntary sector have become its most fervent disciples.

Post-Ideology

The "evidence-based policymaking" movement originated within the health sector, specifically within the practice of evidence-based medicine in the early 1990s.[8] The first venture of evidence-based policymaking into national politics was with Tony Blair's New Labour government in 1997, signalling a new "post-ideological" approach to public policymaking where all decision-making would be grounded in "scientifically" established "facts."[9] This notion that policy should be evidence-based has only gained further popularity in both the UK and Ireland since then. With current managerialist emphases on value for money, effectiveness, and efficiency, the methodologies of evidence-based medicine have been applied to research and policymaking in a wide range of social service fields, far beyond the original context of health.[10]

It is now the well-established policy of the Irish State to impose an ostensibly "scientific" method of evaluation of initiatives in the community and voluntary sector. This is achieved through stipulations on funding and commissioning which call for "evidence-based practice."[11] Widespread usage of "evidence-based policy," particularly within the field of politics and governance suggests this term or correlated terminology can have broad meaning, offering a buttress within any argument. Baron offers a definition of "evidenced-based policy" within the provision of social services as:

> encompass[ing] two core elements: the application of rigorous research methods, particularly randomized controlled trials (RCTs), to build credible evidence about "what works" to improve the human condition; and the use of such evidence to focus public and private resources on programs, practices, and treatments ("interventions") shown to be effective.[12]

This essay has two modest and related aims. Firstly, to develop a short theoretical critique of evidence-based policy within the interconnecting nexus of neoliberalism, austerity, and governmentality in Ireland. The rapid growth and proliferation of the evidence-based policy movement can only be understood and analysed when these three environmental factors are also in place. Secondly, by understanding the Irish State's mode of governing the community and voluntary sector, this essay will outline the concrete risks associated with offering state-support to charities to provide youth justice services based around intervention science or "impact measurements." In essence, motivated by the broad, relatively uncritical acceptance of evidence-based policymaking vocabulary in Irish political and civil society, it is timely to consider what risks are contained within

---

[8] Michael Naughton, '"Evidence-Based Policy" and the Government of the Criminal Justice System-Only If the Evidence Fits!', *Critical Social Policy* 25, no. 1 (2005): 50.
[9] Naughton, 51.
[10] Kathleen Nolan, 'Neoliberal Common Sense and Race-Neutral Discourses: A Critique of "Evidence-Based" Policy-Making in School Policing', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 36, no. 6 (2015): 898.
[11] Within this essay, 'evidence-based policymaking' and 'evidence-based practice' are not used interchangeably. Evidence-based policymaking will be discussed in relation to the State and governance, whereas evidence-based practice will refer to the interventions and projects utilised by the community and voluntary sector, alongside the research and evaluation stipulations accompanying the respective funding.
[12] Jon Baron, 'A Brief History of Evidence-Based Policy', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 678 (July 2018): 40.

evidence-based practice, specifically with the policy intervention around youth criminality and youth justice.

Sacrifice is Required

In the throes of Ireland's recent economic collapse, the Irish government published the Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes in 2009,[13] outlining the roadmap for future austerity and providing legitimation of present and future decisions.[14] This report had the folksy moniker of "An Bord Snip Nua"[15] but its underlying intentions were far from innocuous. Aside from the reframing of the economic crisis as a result of profligate public spending on health and education, this report proposed a top-down model of accountability with evidence-based approaches as the guideline for decision-making.[16] Decisions about public sector reform and the reining-in of public spending would not be made based on political or ideological grounds but using the unbiased and impartial considerations associated with weighing up facts and evidence.

In 2013, as the harshest cuts of the austerity regime were subsiding, the Director of the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) wrote an Irish Times opinion piece entitled "Public policy must be based on evidence, not on ideology or anecdotes."[17] At the outset, Frances Ruane identifies evidence-based policymaking as "a natural consequence of more open and transparent government" where decisions should be based on "verifiable and robust evidence, rather than on past practice, anecdotal evidence or ideology."[18] Each government department was implored to avail of this mode of governance as evidence must inform all government decision-making from planning to higher-education to reorganisation of the health systems. This proposal for transparent decision-making was difficult to argue against as it seemed mightily sensible.

As the Ruane's opinion piece progressed, the real heart of the argument for continued evidence-based policy was revealed: an intensification of the calls for public sector reform found in the 2009 report. Outlining steps to implement an evidence-based approach to decision-making, the econometric language of neoliberalism and austerity emerged as the public sector should be helped to "design and deliver the most economically beneficial services" and "raise the quality of economic evidence going into policymaking at all levels."[19] In the absence of social partnership structures, it was inevitable that once the public sector was brought to heel, the community and voluntary sector follow.

Knowledge as Power

Ireland fully embraced neoliberalism by the late 1980s, as a means of structuring its economy, government and society, and the Irish political elites have been unwavering in their adherence to

---

[13] Colm McCarthy et al., 'Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes', 2009.
[14] Elizabeth Kiely and Rosie Meade, 'Contemporary Irish Youth Work Policy and Practice: A Governmental Analysis', *Child & Youth Services* 39, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 19, https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2018.1426453.
[15] Noel Whelan, 'Bord Snip Nua Shows Government Is Getting Serious', The Irish Times, November 2008, https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/bord-snip-nua-shows-government-is-getting-serious-1.916649.
[16] Kiely and Meade, 'Contemporary Irish Youth Work Policy and Practice', 19.
[17] Ruane, 'Public Policy Must Be Based on Evidence and Not on Ideology or Anecdotes'.
[18] Ruane.
[19] Ruane.

neoliberal doctrine since then.[20] Neoliberalism is "knowledge-driven", particularly in the discourses it produces about the socioeconomic order. Within this production of knowledge, "evidence-based" policy-making and discourses of positivism serve an ideological function that is masked through the idea that policy is objectively informed.[21] Michel Foucault's work is helpful to understand that this relationship between the representation of reality and the actions that follow is a relationship between power and knowledge.[22] Power is articulated in the context of discourses about knowledge.

The image of the Victorian prison or the mental asylum, present in Foucault's early work, sometimes leads to a cursory reading of his understanding of power as negative; power as something inherently prohibitive and coercively enforced.[23] This is to misunderstand his overall body of work as he built towards his culminating research on "governmentality," where he primarily understands power as constitutive and productive – "producing distinctive ways of acting, thinking, being, relating, and understanding."[24] In short, the essence of power was most clearly evident in its ability to constitute various forms of discourse or bodies of knowledge. Foucault argued that we must cease once and for all describing the effects of power in entirely negative terms: "In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth."[25]

Foucault named this new form of power or governmentality as "bio-power," which is not about the domination of a pre-existing subject but, rather, is a matter of the management of the population in the "administration of life."[26] Also conceptualised as "the conduct of conduct,"[27] government can be encapsulated by "all endeavours to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others,"[28] such as the diverse interventions, discourses, and actions that seek to direct behaviour in ways desirable to the state actors. This is where "evidence" or "evidence-based policymaking" comes in. The production and selective management of evidence in the government of the population is a vital component in the manufacture of legitimate authority to implement desired ideological reform agendas. In this process, "evidence-based-policy" is presented as a safeguarding mechanism, which purports to ensure that government follows democratic principles and precisely does not impose its will upon a dominated population of subjects.

Zeal of the Newly Converted

In the 2000s, the Irish government began to actively proselytise the benefits of enhanced private sector, philanthropic, and corporate funding for the fields of youth, community, and voluntary sector activity.[29] Funding from Atlantic Philanthropies was contingent on the delivery of evidence of outcomes and effectiveness as all the "[organisations] not only benefitted from the largesse of Atlantic, but also learned from the ethos of evidence-based outcomes that was contingent on

---

[20] Kevin Hargaden, *Theological Ethics in a Neoliberal Age*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), xvi-xix.
[21] "Neo-liberalism is not merely destructive of rules, institutions and rights. It is also productive of certain kinds of social relations, certain ways of living, certain subjectivities." Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2013), 8. Sue Clegg, 'Evidence-Based Practice in Educational Research: A Critical Realist Critique of Systematic Review', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 26, no. 3 (2005): 415–428.
[22] Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (University of Chicago Press, 1991).
[23] Naughton, 47.
[24] Kiely and Meade, 'Contemporary Irish Youth Work Policy and Practice', 20.
[25] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, Trans. Alan Sheridan* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 194.
[26] Foucault, *The Foucault Effect*, 87–104.
[27] Nikolas Rose, 'Government and Control', *British Journal of Criminology* 40, no. 2 (2000): 321–339.
[28] Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge university press, 1999), 3.
[29] Kiely and Meade, 24.

receiving those funds."[30] Similar to the tribes in Melanesia, the community and voluntary sector reasoned that the production of evidence-based practice for prescribed outcomes was correlated with the availability of resources and funding. Arguably, its example provided the impetus for the government to enthusiastically pursue the evidence-based agenda.

Evidence-based policymaking is a key technique of governmentality in the exercise of power within the criminal justice system and, by extension, youth justice, which may explain the Irish government's apparently unyielding commitment to its delivery.[31] Evocation of the sacred image of "taxpayer's money" and a perception of financial probity added a moral weight to the usage of evidence-based policymaking. An Irish-based review of international youth justice systems (which included Ireland) concluded that "youth justice systems globally are moving to align their programmes and services with what has become known as evidence-based and evidence-informed practice."[32]

Based in the University of Limerick, the Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice (REPPP) Project[33] recently developed a report for the Irish Youth Justice Service[34] with the express purpose "to improve knowledge of evidence-informed practice and decision-making in youth justice by describing how systems in a variety of jurisdictions measure the outcomes of responses to youth crime and offending."[35] Reddy and Redmond conclude that there is an increasing use of evidence-based practice within the youth justice system.[36] This finding would be consistent with the 2014 national policy framework for children and youth which sits alongside the Irish Youth Justice Strategy[37] and specifies that services for children and young people must be more outcomes-driven

[30] Liam Collins, 'The Atlantic Philantrophies: Republic of Ireland' (Dublin: At;lantic Philantrophies, 2017), 94. This final report, as it reflected on its learning within Ireland, outlined one of the key advantages it gave to the community and voluntary sector (which was the focus of the second half of Atlantic's work in Ireland) was that they were "no longer dependent on anecdotal evidence but on cold, hard facts that could influence public discourse, funding and policy." Atlantic Philanthropies' influence was widespread as they distributed 1,030 grants to 245 grantees.

[31] Naughton, 55.

[32] John Reddy and Sean Redmond, 'Improving the Measurement of Effectiveness in the Irish Youth Justice System.' (University of Limerick: Research Evidence into Policy, Programmes and Practice (REPPP), 2019), 69.

[33] The REPPP project is a strategic research partnership between the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the School of Law at the University of Limerick. REPPP's purpose is to contribute to improving the evidence-base for policy, programme and practice reform in relation to youth crime in Ireland. The project implements practically focused research studies linking directly with policy priorities identified by Irish Youth Justice Service, informed by multiple sources of evidence and focused on better outcomes for children. REPPP examines the policy relevance of research evidence but also programmes and practice, in recognition that reforms in the area of human programmes require change in all these areas to achieve substantial traction.

[34] The Irish Youth Justice Service (IYJS) is responsible for overseeing the administration of youth justice in Ireland. The Service is an executive office of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and staffed by officials from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Department of Justice and Equality. At national level, the IYJS works to support the coordination of youth justice services (including detention schools) across relevant statutory departments and community/voluntary agencies. At local level, it seeks to develop structures required to enhance and integrate service delivery, maximise cost-effectiveness in responses implemented to reduce youth crime, and facilitate effective communication, information sharing, and evaluation processes among service agencies. Irish Youth Justice Service, 'Tackling Youth Crime - Youth Justice Action Plan, 2014-2018.' (Dublin: Stationery Office, 2014).

[35] Reddy and Redmond, 6.

[36] Reddy and Redmond, 5.

[37] Irish Youth Justice Service, 'Tackling Youth Crime - Youth Justice Action Plan, 2014-2018.'

and evidence-based.[38] The Minister of State for Equality, Immigration and Integration lauded the "potential for evidence-based research to positively impact on policies currently shaping key areas of Irish society."[39] This is significant as community-based youth services provide over 100 Garda Youth Diversion Programmes, which also implement routine monitoring and evaluation processes, including periodic independent evaluation of interventions.[40] The Department of Justice has recently begun engaging private companies to provide community-based sanctions services, which raises the spectre of how decisions are being made and what ideological underpinnings are being obfuscated or accepted. These are significant developments and warrant close critical scrutiny.

Blind Faith

The story told about evidence-based policymaking within Ireland is that it signalled a break from an ideological past. It promises a future for politics, and particularly decision-making, which transcends ideology. A moment's reflection reveals that evidence-based policymaking cannot achieve this aim. At best, this approach can only camouflage the ideological commitments which drive policy development. The methodology has become a key component of state governmentality during the years of austerity as its vocabulary of measurement, efficiency, and transparency fits within the broader neoliberal restructuring of society. Like the airplane made of rope and bamboo sitting amid an airstrip carved out of dense forest, the talk of evidence is at best a simulacrum because the data is always fundamentally tampered whether by researchers, practitioners, or service-users. This is not to cast aspersions on the integrity or ambition of any person involved in the research process, but it is to be honest about the influence and subjectivities of people (including funders) within the process. Evidence-based policy has yet to fully grapple with the difficulty of the concept of "evidence" in public policy conversations.

The risks of an uncritical acceptance of evidence-based policymaking within youth justice in Ireland must be considered. This methodology, which apparently offers impartial and unbiased decision-making generates risks around the control of knowledge production, discipline through coercive funding, and the legitimation of structural inequalities through attribution of individual wrong-doing.

"How we know what we know"

Proponents of evidence-based policymaking conceive of an unproblematic relationship between research and practice, and also amongst policy, research, and practice.[41] No-one, either layperson, practitioner, or politician could argue against the idea that professional practice should be based on evidence. Its opposite – interventions or programmes without evidence, or against the evidence – sounds absurd. But an alternative interpretation arises when we understand evidence-based policymaking as a mechanism within neoliberalism to produce knowledge and as a means of implementing ideological agendas.

---

[38] Department of Children and Youth Affairs, *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020* (Government Publications Dublin, 2014), 15.
[39] Law Society Gazette, 'Data-Driven Reforms to Shake up Youth Justice', March 2019, https://www.lawsociety.ie/gazette/Top-Stories/data-driven-reforms-to-shake-up-youth-justice/.
[40] Reddy and Redmond, 5.
[41] Bronwyn Davies, 'Death to Critique and Dissent? The Policies and Practices of New Managerialism and of "Evidence-Based Practice"', *Gender and Education* 15, no. 1 (2003): 98.

A strength of evidence-based policymaking is the general acceptance of its impartiality and objectivity. This is the grounding for the high regard with which it is held in policy circles. The notion of evidence is more contested than it appears even in the world of clinical interventions.[42] This problem is heightened when it comes to questions of social policy, where research evidence is "so much more ambiguous and contingent."[43] Experimental research methods – where the gold standard is randomised controlled trials (RCTs) – are utilised to give the appearance of an unchallengeable link between evidence and practice. Whether or not this process, which applies wonderfully in the context of the hard sciences, can be applied meaningfully to policy questions is rarely considered by the service providers, the civil servants, or the politicians behind the initiatives. In fact, Angus Deaton and Nancy Cartwright suspect that a high proportion of the published results from RCTs in development and health economics are *unreliable*.[44] They further observe that the RCT approach doesn't just imagine an "objectivity" in the social or political space, but it is also logically-gapped.[45] Advocates of evidence-based policymaking and politicians rely heavily on the authority of experimental research to undergird their policy proposals or spending choices. Yet the discourse does not dwell on how the translation of these approaches from laboratory to the public square is – at best – philosophically fragile. If nothing else, how these preferred experimental research methodologies are often uncritically naïve about the subjectivity of the researchers ought to prompt our scepticism.

In the 2019 *Making it Count* report on the Irish Youth Justice system, the authors outlined the methodology of how a youth justice intervention is assessed. In essence, an intervention's efficacy or adequacy is evaluated against the normative framework or specific agreed targets that a system is meant to achieve, such as national policy targets.[46] Therefore, instead of cultivating the creativity and experience of practitioners alongside a recognition of the individual needs of each young person, evidence-based policymaking in youth justice assumes that there is a universal agreement about the ends of youth justice work.[47] Singular responses to complex problems may make sense from the perspective of Government or service-providers, but the analysis of such approaches requires more critical precision than is often displayed. This example of evidence-based policy would not meet the standards demanded in clinical contexts (where "health" exists as a much less ambiguous universal agreement) or the hard sciences (where falsification through double-blind testing applies in a way that would be reckless in the policy arena).

---

[42] Naughton, 55.

[43] Naughton, 55.

[44] Angus Deaton is a previous Economics Nobel Laureate and Nancy Cartwright is an acclaimed Philosopher of Science. Angus Deaton and Nancy Cartwright, 'The Limitations of Randomised Controlled Trials', *VoxEU.Org* (blog), 9 November 2016, https://voxeu.org/article/limitations-randomised-controlled-trials.

[45] Deaton and Cartwright. "Cumulative science happens when new results are built on top of old ones – or undermine them – and RCTs, with their refusal to use prior science, make this very difficult. And any RCT can be challenged ex post by examining the differences between treatments and controls as actually allocated, and showing that arguably important factors were unevenly distributed; prior information is excluded by randomisation, but reappears in the interpretation of the results." Deaton and Cartwright provide a more sustained critique in: Angus Deaton and Nancy Cartwright, 'Understanding and Misunderstanding Randomized Controlled Trials' (Princeton University, Durham University and UC San Diego, August 2016).

[46] Reddy and Redmond, 7.

[47] Kiely and Meade, 25.

This provides a clear demonstration of how "new managerialism"[48] works, the objectives come first and then the "experimental research evidence" will be generated to justify them.[49] As long as the objectives have been met, then questions about the appropriateness of the evidence or the intervention can be left unasked and unanswered. Worryingly, there is a tendency within intervention science for data to be generated from the perception of the effectiveness and efficacy of the intervention amongst key stakeholders, not solely from the impact of the intervention on the young person or family. Equating positive perceptions with programme effectiveness, particularly in youth justice, can reinforce common sense notions about crime and safety while assuming objectivity through positivistic language.[50] Positive stakeholder perceptions are simply taken as "evidence" of programme success.

As the community and voluntary sector is increasingly shaped by the need to constantly generate evidence of outcomes, practitioners can become attuned to the expectation of the "knowledge" which should be produced. Boden and Epstein have argued that evidence-based government commissioned evaluations are fundamentally flawed by the fact that Government, in its broadest sense, seeks to capture and control the knowledge-producing processes to the point where research becomes "policy-based evidence."[51] This circularity is a critical intellectual problem for evidence-based policy methodologies, but more fundamentally it is a critical political problem, since it runs the risk of effectively narrowing the activities of civil society so that they practically overlap with the agenda of Government.

Means of Discipline

As the advocates of evidence-based policymaking and politicians often do not consider the risks of grafting experimental research into the social world, so they also fail to countenance the influence of funding on the research process. That the funder of the research and the funder of the programme (and, by extension, the community organisation) are the same entity does not seem to create a moment of hesitation or, even, surprise that this has happened. In the last 20 years, funding for the community and voluntary sector has been used to shape the conduct of the actors.

In 2000, the White Paper on the Relationship between the Community and Voluntary Sector and the State,[52] the State positively committed to providing three-year funding frameworks for local projects, which compared generously with the year-on year funding models in the previous decade,

---

[48] "New managerialism", sometimes referred to as "neoliberalism" in the UK and "total quality management in the US, is a system of government of individuals created during the years of the Thatcher and Reagan regimes. Davies argues that it is only possible to critique and understand the place of evidence-based policymaking within the overarching framework of "new managerialism". Its origins and implications are discussed further in; Davies, 'Death to Critique and Dissent?', 97. Nikolas Rose outlines how "new managerialism" is characterised by the shifting of the locus of power from the knowledge of practising professionals to auditors, policy-makers and statisticians who do not need to know anything about the profession or policy area in question. Rose, *Powers of Freedom*.

[49] Davies, 100.

[50] Nolan, 901.

[51] Rebecca Boden and Debbie Epstein, 'Managing the Research Imagination? Globalisation and Research in Higher Education', *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 4, no. 2 (2006): 226.

[52] Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 'White Paper on a Framework for Supporting Voluntary Activity and for Developing the Relationship between the State and the Community and Voluntary Sector' (Dublin: Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 2000).

which were much more administratively and strategically demanding.[53] Since the zenith for funding in 2000, the current funding frameworks have regressed beyond the year-on year funding for community projects and have settled on "commissioning"[54] for individual programmes with Shaw and Canavan indicating that "it appears that reform is inevitable and a commissioning agenda … is part of the contemporary culture."[55]

This entirely avoidable sense of precarity around funding has a disciplining effect on the community and voluntary sector. Withdrawal of funds is one measure from a toolbox of strategies to ensure that the appropriate response is generated to ensure the meeting of objectives.[56] With the funding requirement for evidence of outcomes to be generated alongside the actual delivery of the intervention, community and voluntary organisations are not in a position to return research where the outcomes of their youth justice interventions are in conflict with the prescribed aims set out in advance.

An incident in the early 2000s offers some insight into the possible catalysing moment for the acceleration of evidence-based policymaking within Ireland. As part of the imposition of "new managerialism" of the community and voluntary sector, the government set up a new Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (DCRAGA) with the official rationale that a Special Minister with responsibility for "citizenship projects" would strengthen the support to the community and local development sector.[57] Soon after, officials from DCRAGA brought the message from politicians that community and local development projects were not to engage in political activism or campaigning work. The sector was formally warned at a public meeting in 2004. A strong message was later given to the sector by the Centre of Effective Services, who were contracted by the DCRAGA, that the sector should not undermine or be in conflict with representative democracy:[58]

> When the State funds community development, however, decision-making needs to be congruent with policy if it is not to undermine or to conflict with representative democratic processes.[59]

Often the underlying intention of a mode of governance is revealed, not when it works, but when it does not work. In this case, the imposition of "new managerialism" was failing to produce the "right"

---

[53] Patricia Kelleher and Cathleen O'Neill, 'The Systematic Destruction of the Community Development, Anti-Poverty and Equality Movement (2002-2015)', October 2018, 5.

[54] 'Funding and Commissioning', The Wheel, accessed 19 August 2019, https://www.wheel.ie/policy-and-research/issues/funding-and-commissioning.

[55] Aileen Shaw and John Canavan, 'Commissioning in Ireland: Exploring the Landscape for Child and Family Services: A Literature Review.', 2016, 26.

[56] Davies, 100.

[57] Kelleher and O'Neill, 'The Systematic Destruction of the Community Development, Anti-Poverty and Equality Movement (2002-2015)', 21.

[58] In this essay, the production of knowledge through "evidence-based practice" has been identified as the primary means of governance chosen by the Irish government. Power is positively framed, being understood as productive. However, this episode demonstrates that if positively framed (productive) power is not achieving its political objectives, the State can, and will, revert to a negative form of power utilising coercion and repression. So, in Ireland, when participative democratic structures failed to generate a coherent message, a forceful clarification of the relationship between the state and civil society was delivered. John Bamber et al., 'Benchmarking the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme and Community Development Programme against the International Evidence Base in Community Development' (Dublin: Centre for Effective Services, 2009), 20, cited in Kelleher and O'Neill, 'The Systematic Destruction of the Community Development, Anti-Poverty and Equality Movement (2002-2015)'.

[59] Bamber et al., 20.

knowledge so dissent had to be suppressed in order to produce the "right" knowledge. The coercive nature of funding stipulations and subsequent precarity ensured that the "right" knowledge was produced to ensure that the State capture of the community and voluntary sector would be achievable.

Individual Wrong-doing

Within evidence-based policymaking in youth justice, the illusion of objectivity disguises the power of professional and research "knowledge" to make assertions about "normality", "criminality", "risk", "family life", "community values", and so on, that should be more appropriately located in a public debate about social values, citizenship, and the politics of social inclusion and exclusion in our society.[60] The acceptance of evidence-based policymaking as uncontested functions to close down debate about the role of researchers in relation to public policy and their accountability in respect of the manufacture of social policies that are by their very nature political. In this respect, the illusion of a value free research (of evidence-based policy) is the illusion of a depoliticised technical rationality.[61]

The default argument within neoliberalism, despite its proclivity to produce knowledge, is the anodyne common-sense position summed up by the maxim "what works" or "best practice". Nolan warns of the serious risks within youth justice and youth criminality by the assumptions embedded within the research which presents as a "post-hoc legitimation of policy and practice rather than a genuine effort to inform it."[62] Programme evaluations on youth justice interventions by community and voluntary organisations are premised on the inevitable common sense understanding that youth justice is beneficial and necessary to reduce youth crime. As effectiveness and efficacy are assumed, so it becomes, instead, a question of which components of an intervention or programme are most popular with stakeholders or perceived to be beneficial.[63]

Youth justice interventions are premised on two primary concepts; "risk" factors which serve as an indication of future offending or possible pathway to desistance; and "responsibilisation" which mutes the socioeconomic environment of the young person and focuses on behaviour modification and individual decision-making. The widely-accepted account is that policy can interrupt a potential path of criminality[64] but there are risks with the metrics we generate to justify these potentially harmful interventions. Risk factors to identify young people "at-risk" of offending behaviour have a class bias which leads to the likelihood that young people from specific socioeconomic strata or areas will be identified.[65] Furthermore, the indicators for the effectiveness of a successful intervention are all negatively framed – such as the absence of offending behaviour or contact with the criminal justice system – and these outcome measures may not have occurred anyway in the life of the young person. Labelling theory suggests that contact with the criminal justice system, either

[60] Derrick Armstrong, 'A Risky Business? Research, Policy, Governmentality and Youth Offending', *Youth Justice* 4, no. 2 (2004): 100–116.
[61] Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics*, vol. 404 (Beacon Press, 1971).
[62] Nolan, 'Neoliberal Common Sense and Race-Neutral Discourses', 900.
[63] Nolan, 901.
[64] Irish Youth Justice Service, 'Tackling Youth Crime - Youth Justice Action Plan, 2014-2018.'
[65] Stephen Case, 'Questioning the Evidence' of Risk That Underpins Evidence-Led Youth Justice Interventions', *Youth Justice* 7, no. 2 (2007): 91–105.

formal or informal, can have consequences for the identity of a young person and the likelihood of criminogenic activity.[66]

With the framing of youth justice interventions based on "at-risk" assessments as common sense, the question becomes "how should we implement a risk intervention?" rather than "should we?" As the youth justice interventions premised on agency of the individual become accepted as "best practice," so structural injustice is legitimated by its absence from evidence-based policymaking or wider discourse.

No Airplanes Land

As the hopes of the Melanesian islanders who longed to see the return of the "cargo" hinged on a facsimile of a US airplane parked in a replica airfield, so too the hopes of the Irish government and community sector for a "fairer" and more "just" Ireland hinge on "evidence-based policymaking," an imitation of transparent and participative governance. Despite the diversity of visions of what constitutes a "good" society amongst the various actors, there is an unwavering belief amongst politicians, high-level civil servants and wider civil society that "evidence-based policymaking" will usher in the progressive policy needed on which to base our economy and health, education and justice systems. In a famous commencement address at California Institute of Technology, Richard Feynman, a Nobel Laureate in physics, borrowed the anthropological observations from the "cargo cults" of Melanesia and coined the phrase "cargo cult science."[67] Speaking with the physical sciences in mind, but still applicable to our discussion, Feynman uses "cargo cult science" to castigate practices that have the semblance of being scientific, but do not in fact follow the scientific method, and therefore fail to produce scientifically useful results.[68]

Aside from the imitative aeronautical infrastructure, the hierarchical social structure of "cargo cults" also helps to elucidate the production of knowledge as the true essence of power and, by extension, governance. Lindstrom, a social anthropologist who lived amongst the Melanesian people, identified that knowledge control is a significant dimension of inequality in Melanesia as power depends on the control of knowledge as much as wealth.[69] The knowledge of the means to obtain cargo is the ultimate concern to the tribal leaders, not the cargo.[70] Knowledge of the production of "cargo" is perceived as having more political value than the actual "cargo." After the economic collapse which followed a period of relative social cohesion with social partnership,[71] the Irish government entered a period of deep uncertainty as people were questioning the structures of the neoliberal project, so the knowledge of the production of "cargo" was traded for actual "cargo."

---

[66] Barry Goldson, 'Taking Liberties: Policy and the Punitive Turn', *Child Welfare and Social Policy: An Essential Reader*, 2005, 255–67.

[67] Richard P. Feynman, 'Cargo Cult Science', 1974, http://calteches.library.caltech.edu/51/2/CargoCult.htm.

[68] Feynman.

[69] Lamont Lindstrom, 'Doctor, Lawyer, Wise Man, Priest: Big-Men and Knowledge in Melanesia', *Man*, 1984, 291.

[70] Lindstrom, 303.

[71] Social partnership began in 1987 as a form of corporatist bargaining between state, employers and the unions. A Community and Voluntary Pillar was added to the process in 1996 to participate in the formal talks to develop *Partnership 2000*. Kieran Allen, 'Social Partnership and the Fiscal Crisis in Ireland: Acceptance or Acquiescence?', in *Sustainable Politics and the Crisis of the Peripheries: Ireland and Greece* (United Kingdom: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2011), 74; Joe Larragy, 'Origins and Significance of the Community and Voluntary Pillar in Irish Social Partnership.', *Economic & Social Review* 37, no. 3 (2006): 1.

A period of overlap existed between social partnership, the previous form of governmentality, which ended in 2009,[72] and the emergence of evidence-based policymaking in the mid-2000s.[73] However, stipulations attached to the European Union – International Monetary Fund bailout programme required the provision of evidence.[74] So, with the utility of social partnership being removed from the State's toolbox, the need for "evidence-based policymaking" was accelerated by the Irish government from 2010 onwards. "Evidence-based policymaking" became the latest form of "conduct of conduct" or Social Partnership 2.0, a repackaging of the coercive elements from the original relationship with the Community and Voluntary Pillar.[75] Extolling the virtue of robust evidence during the implementation of austerity budgets, the director of the State's lead research institute surmised that "it can be easier to persuade disappointed groups to accept the outcomes of difficult decisions if they can see how evidence supports decisions."[76]

Policymakers have demonstrated a fondness for the versatility of the term "evidence-based" as it provides a sense of impartiality and transparency without revealing very much of the decision-making process. In response to recent parliamentary questions, the term "evidence-based" has been used by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection,[77] Department of Children and Youth Affairs,[78] Department of Health,[79] and Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.[80] Klein suggests that evidence-based policymaking is a result of a failure to understand the policy process, when the policy process is, in fact, already governed by "evidence," but of a very different kind from the positivistic view of evidence which is proposed by the evidence-based policy movement. Policy decisions incorporate evidence as to whether a policy will be politically acceptable and implementable. If a policy cannot meet these requirements it is deemed to be not worth pursuing, whatever the research evidence says.[81] Somewhat ironically, some academics conclude that evidence-based policymaking lacks an evidence base:

> One might be surprised by the lack of evidence for evidence-based policymaking, either as a process which can take place or as a process which will lead to better policy outcomes. It

[72] Following the unilateral action of the state to impose public sector cuts in Budget 2010, the elaborate governance structure of social partnership formally ended. Allen, 'Social Partnership and the Fiscal Crisis in Ireland: Acceptance or Acquiescence?', 79; Kevin P. O'Kelly, 'The End of Social Partnership in Ireland?', *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 16, no. 3 (2010): 428.

[73] Ferris sketches the emergence of evidence-based policymaking discourse in Ireland and he identifies a key starting point as the National Economic and Social Forum conference in 2005 on the topic of evidence-based policymaking. Tom Ferris, 'Reflections on the Public Policy Process in Ireland', *Administration* 62, no. 4 (2015): 97.

[74] Ferris, 96.

[75] Rosie Meade, 'We Hate It Here, Please Let Us Stay! Irish Social Partnership and the Community/Voluntary Sector's Conflicted Experiences of Recognition', *Critical Social Policy* 25, no. 3 (August 2005): 349.

[76] Ruane.

[77] Houses of the Oireachtas, 'Living Wage – Thursday, 11 Jul 2019 – Parliamentary Questions (32nd Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas', 11 July 2019.

[78] Houses of the Oireachtas, 'Child Protection – Wednesday, 10 Jul 2019 – Parliamentary Questions (32nd Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas', 10 July 2019.

[79] Houses of the Oireachtas, 'Citizens Assembly – Wednesday, 15 May 2019 – Parliamentary Questions (32nd Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas', 15 May 2019.

[80] Houses of the Oireachtas, 'Value for Money Reviews – Thursday, 18 Apr 2019 – Parliamentary Questions (32nd Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas', 18 April 2019.

[81] Rudolf Klein, *From Evidence-Based Medicine to Evidence-Based Policy?* (SAGE Publications Sage UK: London, England, 2000), 65.

> might be argued that, far from being unideological, evidence-based policy is, in itself, a kind of ideology; and one for which there is remarkably little supporting evidence.[82]

Community and voluntary sector organisations had little option but to accept annual funding with the stipulations of annual reviews and the production of evidence-based practise. Reflecting on the experience of youth work and state funding, Kiely and Meade conclude that "the state remains a site where there is a concentration of power … [b]ecause it is the primary source of funding for the Irish youth work sector and is positioned to exert significant influence over youth work agendas in the jurisdiction".[83]

In light of the success of evidence-based policymaking as a means of governance or "conduct of conduct," Irish policymakers have a "growing fetish" for evidence-based policymaking, value-for-money approaches and the delivery of prescribed outcomes.[84] Some government departments have gone so far as to declare themselves as "a strong proponent of evidence-based policy making."[85] The Institute of Public Administration concluded that "the general approach being taken to anchoring the evaluation regime in Irish government is sound."[86]

The result is the creation of a hegemonic "evidence-loop" that privileges ideologically driven research that assumes a "scientific" stance and obscures class bias, while it excludes the critical research on youth justice.[87] Kiely and Meade echoed the sense of policymaking in Ireland being stripped of any ability to countenance an alternative as "the expectation that policy and practice must/will be evidence based has become hegemonic in Ireland".[88] G.K Chesterton warned that "fallacies do not cease to be fallacies because they become fashions."[89]

When a mode of governance – evidence-based policymaking – has become so all-encompassing where it "produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth"[90] resulting in "distinctive ways of acting, thinking, being, relating, and understanding,"[91] the opportunity to create a counter-narrative is difficult. But two tentative first steps are necessary. Firstly, evidence-based policymaking will manifest in some form within Irish politics but it needs to be restored to its proper place, where it does not over-claim on its utility. Goddard and Myers ask the question:

> What does this suggest about the utility of the prevention and intervention sciences? To us, it suggests that the "what works" perspective ought to be used only to fine-tune small parts of a larger blueprint for a decent, safer society … Perhaps we ought to institute healthcare facilities, afterschool programs, early childhood education, family-friendly employment policies and many other social goods that safe societies offer, fund them well and make them stable, and then worry about testing to see which individual-level program "works" for

---

[82] Fiona Reid, 'Evidence-Based Policy: Where Is the Evidence for It', *School for Policy Studies Working Paper Series. Paper*, no. 3 (2003): 20.
[83] Kiely and Meade, 'Contemporary Irish Youth Work Policy and Practice', 22.
[84] Kiely and Meade, 18.
[85] Houses of the Oireachtas, 'Common Agricultural Policy – Thursday, 4 Apr 2019 – Parliamentary Questions (32nd Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas', 4 April 2019.
[86] Boyle, 6.
[87] Nolan, 894.
[88] Kiely and Meade, 25.
[89] Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill. 1904* (Oxford University Press, 1994) cited in Stark and Saltelli, 'Cargo-Cult Statistics and Scientific Crisis'.
[90] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 194.
[91] Kiely and Meade, 20.

> helping a marginalized youth with his personal problems, as real and profound as they might very well be[92]

Secondly, as evidence-based policymaking legitimated structural inequalities by accepting common-sense understanding of youth criminality, space should be developed for creative or innovative solutions to youth justice and the accompanying structural inequalities at a community-level. Not all programmes and practices lend themselves to the evidence-based policymaking paradigm. This is not to dismiss the importance of research that relies on scientific methods but to be cognisant of the context, actors, and influences involved in the production of "evidence." Power is exposed when the production of knowledge is revealed and how knowledge is reproduced within research and policy-making processes. Identifying the risks inherent with evidence-based policymaking, particularly in the field of youth justice, begins to challenge the legitimation of the existing structural inequalities and power dynamics.

Though "evidence-based policymaking" appears to follow all the fundamentals and forms of scientific investigation, no airplanes will land.

[92] Tim Goddard and Randolph R. Myers, 'Against Evidence-Based Oppression: Marginalized Youth and the Politics of Risk-Based Assessment and Intervention', *Theoretical Criminology* 21, no. 2 (2017): 161.