Using Decision Sciences Concepts to Think Clearly about Policy Decisions

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Abstract

Policy decisions are important and complex. They are important because the differences in the consequences of contending alternatives are often large and can affect numerous people in significant ways. They are complex for several reasons including multiple parties are involved, large uncertainties are relevant, multiple objectives are of concern, the achievements on different objectives must be balanced, and often the scientific, economic, or political substance is sophisticated. There is naturally a desire to make good policy decisions, which is frequently interpreted to mean making the decisions in a rational and objective manner. But being rational or objective in making good decisions poses many challenges because of a lack of agreement about what is rational, the lack of agreement on the meaning of and/or desirability of being objective, and the problem complexity.

Thoughtful and clear analysis can provide useful insight to help policy makers make better policy decisions. However it is not easy for policy decision makers to distinguish between the quality of different analyses, and there are frequently multiple policy analyses of major important policy decisions. Some of these are well-funded and done by vested groups with viewpoints that do not necessarily coincide with what is best for the public or our country. This raises two key questions: (1) How can we decision scientists enhance the skills of policy makers to appraise and use policy analysis, and, more fundamentally, (2) How can we facilitate policy makers to make better policy decisions? One key in both cases may be to help policy makers understand the fundamental concepts in the decision sciences that will allow them to think more clearly through the inherent complexities of the policy decisions they face.

This paper outlines some of those fundamental concepts critical to clear thinking about policy decisions. The concepts considered here concern rationality and objectivity, structuring policy decisions, assessing and communicating about uncertainty, and articulating and understand value tradeoffs. Several important concepts are defined and then illustrated mainly with examples involving policies concerning homeland security and natural disasters.
Suppose future research demonstrated that if policy makers better understood our fundamental concepts, they would think more clearly about policy and that this would lead to better policy decisions. What should we do? First, research is needed to identify the fundamental concepts that matter most for understanding policy decisions. Next we need to learn why many policy makers do not understand and/or use these concepts, and then learn how to educate policy makers so they really understand these concepts and use them in evaluating potential future policies and making subsequent policy decisions.