Evaluation use has been, and remains today, a pressing issue in the evaluation literature. Are evaluations used? Do they make a difference in the decision-making process or at all? If not, why?

For decades, little or no evidence of evaluation use was documented. More encouraging studies followed in the 1980s, acknowledging the complexity of defining and measuring evaluation use. With a broadened conception of use, studies suggested that evaluations were used in the policy- or decision-making process, but not as the sole information informing the process; rather decision-makers used evaluations as one of many sources of information. Additionally, these studies helped social researchers, evaluators, and decision-makers to temper unrealistic expectations and recognize the multi-faceted realities of the policy development process.

This chapter revisits the notion of evaluation use. We incorporate literature on knowledge utilization that preceded and informed research on evaluation utilization – literature that we believe merits greater mention than found in earlier reviews. The chapter has several goals: (1) review studies examining the role of knowledge utilization to inform social science and policy, and their linkage to current studies of evaluation utilization; (2) summarize previous studies of evaluation utilization; (3) discuss prominent themes that emerge, such as definition of use, and factors associated with use; and (4) address a variety of related issues, such as impact, utility, and misutilization.

KNOWLEDGE UTILIZATION

This section discusses some of the studies which examined the issue of knowledge utilization. In doing so, we do not argue that issues related to knowledge use are synonymous with those related to evaluation use. There are subtle differences...
between social science research and evaluation, largely based on their purposes and the potential impact of the political contexts within which they operate. Rather, we argue that the knowledge use literature greatly informed the evolution of the evaluation utilization literature and that the former had a far greater impact on the latter than has been reported in earlier literature reviews.

Knowledge utilization in the social sciences refers to the use of social research to inform decisions on policies. Generally, social scientists hope their efforts influence the policy development process and ultimately contribute to the improvement of societal functioning and human welfare. In the 1960s and 1970s, despite increased federal funding for social research and programs nationwide, social scientists and government officials remained concerned that research efforts went largely unnoticed and that policies were often debated and passed without consideration of, or in spite of, research findings. Speculations about the mismatch between expectations and performance emerged, but no empirical studies regarding the prevailing state of social science research utilization among government officials were available (Caplan, Morrison, & Stambaugh, 1975).

Recognition of problems in this area compelled the scientific community to examine the use of social science information and its impact on policy-related decisions. Schools of public policy emerged in the early 1970s, as did the Center for Research on Utilization of Scientific Knowledge, housed at the University of Michigan, and new academic journals like Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization.

Early contributions to knowledge utilization research emerged from landmark work by Caplan (1974), then Caplan, Morrison, and Stambaugh (1975). In the latter study, conducted in 1973–74, Caplan and his colleagues interviewed 204 upper-level officials in ten major departments of the executive branch of the United States government to see how they used social science information to inform policy formation and program planning. The surveys included direct and indirect questions related to social science utilization, including self-reported use of knowledge, specific information involved, policy issue involved, and impact of the information on decisions.

Caplan et al. (1975) noted that the definition of social science knowledge one employed greatly influenced how much it was used in federal decision-making processes. “Soft” knowledge (non-research based, qualitative, couched in lay language) appeared to be used more by decision-makers than “hard” knowledge (research based, quantitative, couched in scientific language). Hard knowledge once retrieved may or may not prove crucial to outcomes of a particular decision-making situation, but it could serve as a validity check of pre-existing beliefs as well as provide new information.

Interestingly, Caplan found hard knowledge yielded little impact on policy formulation. Widespread use of soft knowledge among government officials, although difficult to assess, suggests “that its impact on policy, although often indirect, may be great or even greater than the impact of hard information” (Caplan et al., 1975, p. 47). Simultaneously, Rich (1975) examined independently how knowledge and information were used over time, yielding results congruent with