

A background image of a dark wooden bookshelf filled with numerous books of various colors and sizes. The books are arranged on several shelves, creating a sense of depth and a library-like atmosphere. The lighting is soft, highlighting the spines of the books.

# **THE IMPORTANCE OF CONVENTIONS**

**A Critical Evaluation of Current  
Practice in Social Cost Benefit Analysis**

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# The Importance of Conventions: A Critical Evaluation of Current Practice in Social Cost Benefit Analysis

## A PARLIAMENT STREET RESEARCH PAPER

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to critically evaluate current practice in social cost benefit analysis (SCBA). It focuses on how SCBA evaluators may seek to quantify social costs and benefits in public and third sector projects, programmes and policies. Using the French school of thought *L'économie des conventions* (Economics of Conventions), this paper argues that SCBA, which uses traditional economic methods, should not claim objectivity as the use of SCBA implicitly reflects the social conventions of the evaluator. These social conventions emerge over time and reflect society's value and virtues. Therefore, such claims of objectivity are not just unrealistic, but extremely implausible.

### Keywords

Social cost benefit analysis (SCBA), quantification, Economics of Conventions (EC), project evaluation

### 1. Introduction

The fundamental premise of the study of economics is that resources are not infinite and that this constrained availability leads to the conscious requirement by us –

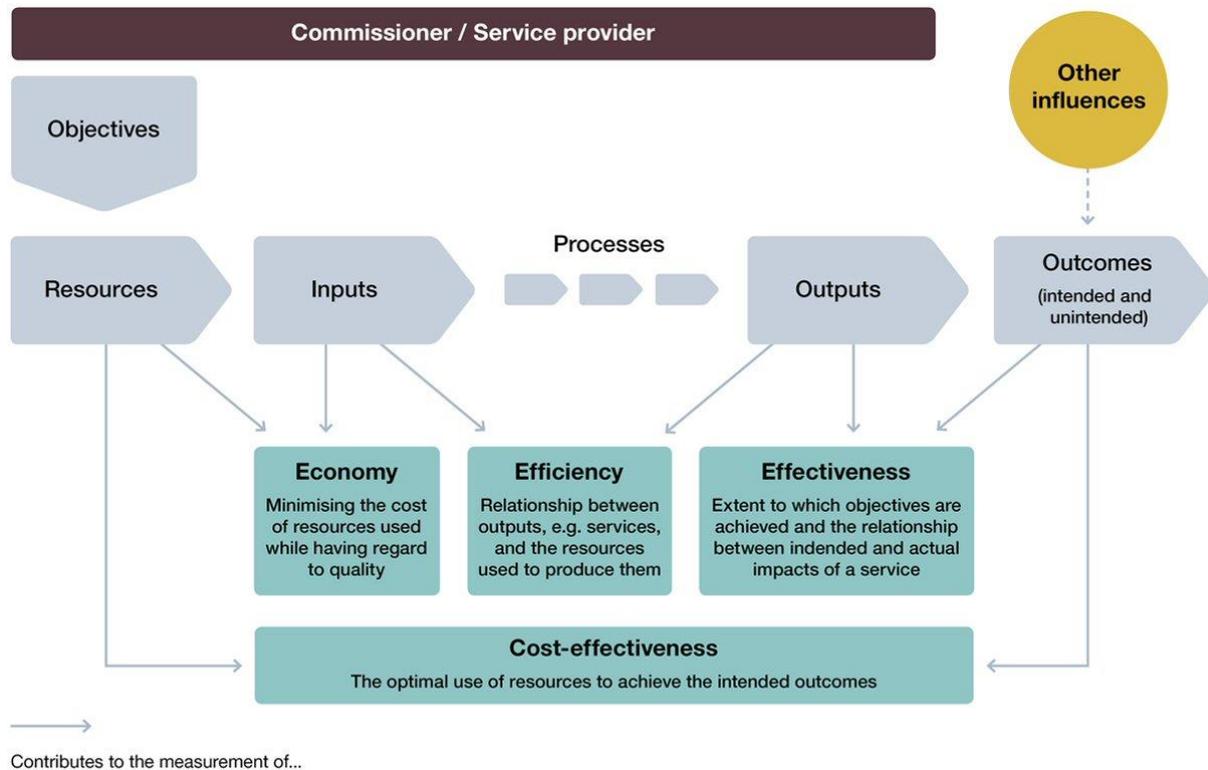
mankind – to make decisions and take actions to allocate them as best we can.

From this simple recognition of what economics is about, there has spawned a wide field of study that ranges from the world of microeconomics and involves the detailed study of how each of us form our preferences and how we function with our biases and limitations, through to the study of macroeconomics, which seeks to understand the global forces and trends that steer both national and the global economy.

For those who operate within the public sector and in contexts where transparency and accountability of decision-making are important considerations it is likely that there will be mandates to ensure that circumstances involving significant allocation of scarce resources, i.e. large sums of money, demonstrate compliance with norms to ensure that optimal allocation is sought. For example, in the United Kingdom, demonstrating ‘Value for Money’ has become a central obligation of policy, projects and programmes that are delivered by the public and third sectors (Mulgan, 2010). Indeed, the National Audit Office (NAO), the UK’s main evaluator of public and third sector organisations (TSOs), requires these organisations to convincingly demonstrate they are delivering their intended policy outcomes while also showing:

- **Economy:** minimising the financial cost of resources used or required (inputs) (i.e. spending less);
- **Efficiency:** the relationship between the output from goods or services and the financial resources used to produce them (i.e. spending well); and
- **Effectiveness:** the relationship between the intended and actual results of public spending (outcomes) – (i.e. spending wisely) (NAO, 2016).

These have become known as ‘the 3 E’s of evaluation’. The following diagram from the NAO shows what they are, when they occur and how they link:



Source: NAO (2016)

A broad review of current literature testifies to methods such as Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) or Social Cost Benefit Analysis (SCBA) being increasingly used for *ex ante* (pre-implementation) evaluation and *ex post* (post-implementation) evaluation across an expanding range of policy areas, as illustrated in the national approach taken in New Zealand (New Zealand Treasury, 2015). These include but are not limited to: mining (Wakefield & Myers, 2016), agriculture (Sain *et al*, 2017), controlling pollution (Anderson & Parker, 2013; Bartik, 2015; Gao *et al*, 2016), financial regulation (Alfon & Andrews, 1999), education policy (Hummel-Rossi & Ashdown, 2002; Ross, Barkaoui & Scott, 2007; Dalziel, Halliday & Segal, 2015), public participation in health (El Ansari & Andersson, 2011), mental health reform (Wolstenholme, Monk & Todd, 2010), addiction and its treatment (French *et al*, 2000;

Schori, 2011), library provision (Francis, 1976; Cummins, 1990; Holt & Elliot, 2002; Linn, 2010; 2011), the location of Government Training Centres (GTCs) (Hughes, 1977), criminal justice policy (Fass & Pi, 2002; Roman, 2004; Caldwell, Vitacco & Van Ryboek, 2006; McFadden & Porter, 2011; Welsh & Farrington, 2011; Elliot & Beech, 2012), family planning (Lanzona, 2013), World Cup bids (de Nooij, van den Berg & Koopmans, 2011), recycling (Jemelske & Kipperberg, 2006), public transport (Cervero & Guerra, 2011; Scheitzer, 2011; Weisbrod, Mulley & Heshner, 2016), highways (Waters, Hyder & Phillips, 2004), partially-automated vehicle collision avoidance (Harper, Hendrickson & Samaras, 2016), volunteering and volunteers (Handy & Mook, 2011), fisheries (Bavinck & Monnereau, 2007), flooding (Joseph *et al*, 2014), local investment subsidies (Willis, 1985), gambling (Walker, 2006) and research (Florio & Sirtori, 2016; Florio, Forte, & Sirtori, 2016; Schopper, 2016). In the United Kingdom, SCBA has recently, and perhaps most controversially, been applied to megaprojects such as High Speed 2 (HS2) (Durrant, 2015), and the Thames Tideway Tunnel (DEFRA, 2015).

The potential for controversy with ever grander and more ambitious megaprojects around the world has led to increased attention to the use of such techniques as can be illustrated by the cases of the *ex post* evaluation of The Three Gorges Dam in China (Kittinger, 2009), the interstitial review of the Californian Highspeed Rail (Caltrain) project (California State Auditor, 2018) and has similar applications for Amtrak's current reviews of long-distance rail services (Wall Street Journal, 2019). Given their increasing adoption these techniques themselves require further evaluation.

## 1.1. Evaluation as social construction

“Policy evaluation is an inherently normative act [...] It is only a slight exaggeration to say, paraphrasing Clausewitz, that policy is nothing more than the continuation of politics by other means” (Bovens *et al*, 2006. pp. 319-321).

Despite its widespread use, and as Bovens *et al* (2006) suggests in the above quote, the evaluation of public policy is not an exacting or objective science. It is a normative exercise in social construction. This paper will argue that this can be clearly evidenced in the definition and quantification (valuation) of social costs and benefits in public and third sector policies, projects and programmes.

As noted in the earlier cited work from the New Zealand Treasury, an important starting point is to distinguish between different types of costs and benefits:

**Direct costs** are defined as the costs incurred within the project/programme during its delivery/implementation. These are generally straightforward to quantify and set in monetary terms using standard accounting procedures. For example, the estimated or receipted cost of raw materials or labour. Linked to this are private costs, which are the costs incurred by a clearly defined party (such as the client or contractor) that occur as a result of a private transaction. Direct costs are therefore expected to be private costs.

**Social costs** are those costs incurred by a wider and more disparate set of parties – such as those in the local or more general society. These may be incurred as a result of a private transaction, in which case they are called the negative externalities of that transaction. For example, a new airport or waste incinerator that will create

air pollution which is expected to negatively affect the health and wellbeing of those living nearby.

**Benefits** are the resultant and typically longer-term effects of project/programme that arise from the initial project deliverable or outputs. Therefore, the exercise of benefits management concerns itself with “defining, quantifying, measuring and monitoring benefits” (APMBOK, 2012. p.14). The delivery of benefits is intended and indeed the production of project-based benefits is typically the kernel of the business case that drives the project, but these benefits can also be the unintended consequences of private transactions, often referred to as positive externalities. For example, getting immunised not only benefits one individual but reduces the likelihood of the spread of the infectious condition and therefore also benefits those around them.

Drawing on existing research, this paper explores current evaluative practice before arguing that the Economics of Convention poses a strong and possibly insurmountable challenge to that practice.

## **2. Current quantification/valuation practice**

To demonstrate ‘Value for Money’ (VfM) of a project/programme, evaluators must quantify (i.e. give a financial value to) the expected costs and benefits. However, in practice it may soon become obvious to those charged with this requirement that there are many costs and benefits, especially those affecting society and the environment, that are not easily quantified. If we take, for example, a city-wide

project to 'green' public spaces (put in more parks, plant more trees and so forth), how does one quantify the additional 'public amenity' (social benefit) of having these 'green spaces' that will be attractive to residents, visitors and, potentially, wildlife? To help those obligated to undertake this VfM exercise there are a range of economic valuation models that have been developed by economists which attempt to quantify (value monetarily) social costs and benefits. The following section is a summary of these:

- **Contingent valuation method (CVM)**

Contingent valuation method "involves eliciting the maximum amount that people are willing to pay for welfare improvements and the minimum that they are willing to accept as compensation for welfare loss, to derive a demand curve for the good in question" (Quah & Toh, 2012. p. 14). Using our 'greening of public space' example, CVM could involve a survey asking city residents how much they would personally be willing to pay (WTP) for the additional green spaces, or how much they would be willing to accept in compensation for losing them. Within CVM an important distinction can also be made between 'stated preferences', i.e. asking people what they would pay for a service or outcome, and 'revealed preferences' which "examines the choices that people have actually made to infer the relative worth of different options" (Mulgan, 2010. p. 41). This distinction is important as there can be a wide gulf between what people say they would be willing to pay, and the reality of their economic decisions. This can have dramatic consequences in areas such as expensive traffic congestion relief projects that involve tolls, such as in the case of the Sydney Cross City Tunnel (Phibbs, 2007).

- **Hedonic pricing**

Hedonic pricing uses price differentials in existing markets as proxies for prices with certain attributes (Quah & Toh, 2012). To give a very simple example, if one house is worth £2m with an average ambient noise of 20dB (say the noise generated by passing traffic) while another is only worth £1m and has an average ambient noise level of 35dB, we could price a reduction of noise by 15dB as £1m. This technique requires ideally all but one variable to be common, so the reality that there is much heterogeneity in things like the variety of houses in an area, typically means that hedonic pricing needs large sets of data to allow for the selection of only one or a small number of variables of interest. As projects become more esoteric and differentiated, so this becomes a problem.

- **Travel cost method (TCM)**

Also known as the 'Hotelling-Clawson-Knetsch technique' (Hotelling, 1949; Clawson, 1959; Clawson-Knetsch, 1966), TCM is most often applied to estimating the value of recreational sites such as holiday resorts and parks. The travel cost method uses the cost of travel as a proxy for price (also known as a shadow price), thus allowing us to create a demand curve for the amount people are willing to pay to visit a particular destination. This method, again, uses what economists refer to as 'revealed preferences' (Mulgan, 2010).

- **Shadow pricing**

Shadow pricing is a proxy value of a good/service, often defined by what an individual must give up in order to gain an extra unit of the good/service. For example, the journey time saved by motorists as a result of a new motorway can be quantified using an average hourly wage rate, presuming that the motorway is

provided for the purpose of improving productive capacity and reducing costs of production.

- **Quality-Adjusted Life Year (QALY)**

A QALY is a measure used by health economists to estimate both the quantity and quality of additional years of life. For example, if a new cancer treatment offers a patient an additional 10 years of life in perfect health (a utility of 1), where perfect health has a value of 1 and death has a value of 0, then overall this yields 10 years x 1.0 = 10 QALYs. The health utilities used to create QALYs are found through surveys of patients or the public, e.g. the Euroqol 5 dimensions of EQ-5D<sup>1</sup> (Jackson, 2012).

- **Life Satisfaction Assessment**

Life Satisfaction Assessment evaluates social projects and programmes by how much additional income people would have to have spent to achieve an equivalent gain in life satisfaction (Mulgan, 2010). This is a relatively new unproven approach and is highly sensitive to what assumptions are made about inputs.

Nevertheless, regardless of which economic evaluation method is used, all suffer a fatal weakness: they are not value-neutral, but in fact loaded with the social conventions (social norms) of those who use the evaluation method. The following section explores these conventions, and how they have been adopted in economics.

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<sup>1</sup> EQ-5D (Euroqol 5 dimensions) is a family of instruments used to describe and value health. It uses surveys of the general population to develop the utility weights linked to different dimensions (the 5 dimensions) of health. These are mobility, self-care, usual activities, pain/discomfort and anxiety/depression (Euroqol, 2019)

### **3. *L'économie des conventions* (Economics of Convention)**

When conducting economic evaluations, or indeed any form of research, researchers are expected to adopt a focal theory. A focal theory can best be defined as the theoretical model or paradigm used as a framework through which data is understood, analysed and explained. It is akin to the lens through which the world is viewed and analysed. 'Classically trained' neo-classical economists tend to adopt the positivist focal theory, believing that the social world, like the natural world, can be observed empirically and objectively. Economics of Conventions (EC), on the other hand, is an interpretivist research paradigm which entails certain epistemological and ontological assumptions. For instance, interpretivism accepts that concepts within the social sciences are subjective, that meaning is socially constructed, and relativism exists.

Traditional epistemology (theory of knowledge), i.e. Plato's tripartite conception of knowledge as 'justified true belief' is no longer accepted unequivocally or indeed as adequate. In part this is due to the impact made by the two scenarios presented by Gettier and now referred to as the Gettier counterexamples (1963)<sup>2</sup>. The counter position is that knowledge of real people in real communities is defined in terms of the beliefs that are generally accepted on the basis of the knowledge standards of criteria of such a community (which may differ and develop along historical and/or cultural lines). This means that knowledge is not just a social psychological notion of 'shared belief', but also defined in the socio-cultural terms of epistemic communities and their specific criteria or standards (Van Dijk, 2008). An ontology (theory of meaning) of relativism argues that the constructed nature of social reality naturally leads to

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of these Gettier counterexamples see: <http://www.philosophy-index.com/gettier/counterexamples/> (accessed April 2019)

variations between societies. Thus, morality cannot be judged against any objective standard, i.e. there is no absolute truth or validity, only relative and subjective values. Therefore, we must examine the conventions which exist within each and every society and recognise that these are fluid through time.

### 3.1. What are conventions?

Although the academic study of conventions goes back as far as David Hume (1738; 1748)<sup>3</sup>, it re-emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century with *Convention* by David Lewis (1969). It is within this broader philosophical tradition that an approach to economic institutions and conventions emerged in France in the late 1980s called *L'économie des conventions* (The Economics of Conventions)<sup>4</sup> (Dequech, 2011). The definition of conventions has evolved as a result. Hume first defined a convention as:

“...a sense of common interest; which sense each man feels in his own breast, which he remarks in his fellows, and which carries him, in concurrence with others into a general plan or systems of actions, which tends to public utility” (1748. p. 257).

Hume was clearly linking individual behaviour to wider systemic and perhaps institutional behaviour. This is a link developed more recently in *L'économie des conventions* (Defalvard, 2002; Bessy & Favereau, 2003. cited in Dequech, 2011).

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<sup>3</sup> Followed soon after by Adam Smith (1759).

<sup>4</sup> Key thinkers included Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Eymard-Duvernay, Olivier Favereau, Andre Orlean, Robert Salais, Laurent Thévenot and Alain Desrosières.

Lewis succinctly defined conventions as: “a regularity in behaviour” (Lewis, 1969. p. 51). Lewis developed his argument further by introducing the concept of ‘common knowledge’. To quote the argument directly:

“Let us say that it is *common knowledge* in a population *P* that \_\_\_\_ if and only if some state of affairs *A* holds such that:

(1) Everyone in *P* has reason to believe that *A* holds.

(2) *A* indicates to everyone in *P* that everyone in *P* has reason to believe that *A* holds.

(3) *A* indicates to everyone in *P* that \_\_\_\_.

We can call any such state of affairs *A* *basis* for common knowledge in *P* that \_\_\_\_\_. *A* provides the members of *P* with part of what they need to form expectations of arbitrarily high order, regarding sequences of members of *P*, that \_\_\_\_\_. That part it gives to them is the part peculiar to the content \_\_\_\_\_. The rest of what they need is what they need to form *any* higher-order expectations in the way we are considering: mutual ascription of some common inductive standards and background information, rationality, mutual ascription of rationality, and so on” (pp. 56-57).

To help understand how this works one can substitute into the argument a reasonable and subtle convention. For instance, how to greet friends: a kiss, a handshake or a hug. Indeed, often what we consider as ‘traditional’ is in fact an example of a convention. The ‘traditional’ image of a City of London banker in pinstriped suit, bowler hat and tightly furled umbrella represented such a convention. Another example may be what signs signify binding agreement prior to the signing of a contract – convention has it that ‘my hand[shake] is my bond’ – a convention that emerged in the age of chivalry which showed that a person had no weapons in their hand. A final example is provided to point out the issues when conventions are breached, as in the case of queuing. An orderly and self-created queue can be shattered by those who elect to push-in or abandon the queue all together. It is the case that societies and economies operate smoothly and routinely largely through the acceptance and utilisation of a vast array of conventions.

Such 'conventions' signals also help to distinguish between those who are (or not) part of a given community and worthy of trust which enables collective action to be coordinated. Therefore, as a society we are able to solve problems of coordination in situations of uncertainty by following conventions with their associated expectations, and by assuming that such conventions are common knowledge. This can, and does, cause confusion when the convention is ingrained but then altered – as is the case where a car driver able to read signs in only their native language, drives in another country that drives on the 'other' side of the road and where the various road signs are not immediately understood. It is in due recognition of the power of such convention that car-ferry ports will typically have warnings in foreign languages when the convention of side of the road to drive on is changed (as is the case in both French ports such as Calais and English ports such as Dover).

Although Economics of Conventions primarily focuses on administrative statistics, the process it highlights are equally relevant to project evaluation. The important link is how social phenomena are problematised (identified as a problem), analysed, categorised and quantified to become social statistics which are then used for evaluation purposes. Social scientists often appeal to the claimed 'objectivity' of social statistics. As Centemeri argues:

“Quantification and objectivity are strictly associated, since historically objectivity emerged in our societies as a fundamental category in the construction and organisation of modern politics, to quantify a knowledge produced according to conventions (rules and procedures) supposed to guarantee impersonality, impartiality and fairness” (2012. p. 1).

However, as Centemeri goes on to argue, such conventions of quantification (or statistical conventions) are not value-neutral but in fact loaded with the social conventions of those who create them:

“Quantification is guaranteed by ‘conventions of quantification’ that are the outcome of controversies about the good, or convenient, way to evaluate persons and things, according to desirable social goals aimed at” (Centemeri, 2012. p. 1).

Therefore, according to Centemeri ‘conventions of quantification’ are underpinned by the moral values and social expectations of those who then decide how to quantify social phenomena. Such moral judgements and expectations are important, for example, to the way individuals with certain features are categorised by policy makers, and how such categories are defined. Thus, individuals are ‘counted’ and ultimately ‘treated’ in different ways by policy based on their statistical treatment. Through history we have seen this ‘treatment’ vary in the cases of slavery, child labour, women’s rights, disability and, more recently, gender identity.

Returning to the theme of economics, an excellent example of the process of quantification of conventions can be seen in Robert Salais *et al* (1986) in their work *L’invention du chômage* (The Invention of Unemployment). Salais *et al* argues that ‘unemployment’ is a social and historical construction that emerged towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and culminated in the 1930s in France. ‘Unemployment’, they argue, was not a re-naming of a previously existent social reality, i.e. being out of work, but this category was created as a central pillar of Keynesian economic management; that not having work was a social problem requiring public action, and therefore measurement. Therefore, “[...] unemployment is not the reflection of a pre-existing

social problem but a quantified social object whose founding conventions are embedded in a specific form of economic regulation [...]” (Gautié, 2002. cited in Centemeri, 2012. pp. 14-15). More importantly, the emergence of the convention allows for the changing of behaviours. In this case French employers began to discharge surplus employees (who became recognised and registered as ‘unemployed’) rather than re-distributing the available work between them – a concept now understood as underemployment. Thus, the emerging convention re-shaped both public and private manpower management strategies.

As a consequence of this process “To quantify is to reshape our world, introducing new entities that are clearly separated from us, and that, once created, have an independent life” (Centemeri, 2012. p. 16). Once established, a convention of quantification becomes “the ‘natural’ way to measure a reality” (Centemeri, 2012. p. 17) as these conventions stabilise and ultimately solidify in academic and wider nomenclature.

In the context of capitalism, the private sector quantifying reality in terms of revenue, cost, profit and loss is done in accordance with the accepted accounting conventions. The emergence of New Public Management (NPM) in the 1980s (Hood, 1995), and its drawing upon private sector management practice, has led to the ‘financialisation’ of social issues and social policy (i.e. the need to demonstrate ‘Value for Money’), further encouraging quantification. As a result, over time policy makers have adopted, co-opted and re-defined countless social and statistical conventions, for example, the recognition of ‘unemployment’ and corollary ‘employment’, and the rise of the nomenclatures of ‘youth’, ‘disability (physical and mental)’, ‘single-parenthood’,

'homelessness', 'elderly', and 'older workers'. This is important because these statistical conventions will therefore measure what is important to the policy maker, such as reducing the cost of the policies providing out-of-work benefits, and this may be to the detriment of what is important to those who are the focus of policy.

### **3.2. The social construction of meaning within evaluations**

This paper argues that the meaning of what we define as 'value' within economic evaluation is socially constructed. Economic evaluations, such as social cost benefit analysis, and indeed any academic discourse which relies upon the use of quantified measures such as statistics, is therefore also socially constructed. Walker (2001), echoes this view, arguing that all reality is contested and is defined categorically in terms of the worldview of policymakers. This is important because it raises the question of whose conventions do we adopt and why? What are the moral convictions driving those conventions? Who, therefore, is to decide which measures/indicators (conventions of quantification) are used? These are all important questions as the decisions made at this stage may come to affect the statistical outcomes, i.e. the headline statistics. The relevance of raising this at this point in the first quarter of the twenty-first century is growing as we accumulate more data and derive greater insight into the ramifications and consequences of our past and current decisions and actions. We are now aware of the significance of climate change and resource depletion, we are observing unrest at the national and regional level, and we can see the way that demography will lead to imbalance as some nations (e.g. Japan, Italy) have populations dominated by the older and less economically active citizen.

### **3.3. Strengths of The Economics of Conventions**

We accept the Economics of Convention as it has apparent and obvious merit. Of the greater number of justifications for the consideration of the Economics of Conventions, it can be argued that it has two key strengths. Firstly, it is able to offer an analytical framework for the underlying behaviour of individuals, and thus the behaviour of institutions, social and political groups. This is useful when seeking to explain how and why policy makers form their policies and evaluative constructs.

Secondly, it may offer a greater depth and richness of explanation than positivist attempts at economic analysis would be able to offer. While a positivist analysis would merely observe and count what it claims to be 'social objects', Economics of Conventions questions how social statistics are constructed including the social expectations and moral values which become intertwined with the definitions used and are used to encourage conformity towards what could be called conventional behaviour.

### **3.4. Limitations of 'The Economics of Conventions'**

The Economics of Conventions is not, however, without limitations. While positivism claims to be able to 'objectify' the world and reach conclusive answers, the Economics of Convention accepts that any findings remain contestable due to their subjective nature. This is unlikely to be viewed as a limitation by many readers within social sciences who accept that conclusions often remain contestable. However, it may be

viewed as a limitation by readers from positivist disciplines who claim that statistical objects are sufficiently external from the observer to not remain contestable.

Similarly, Economics of Conventions could suffer criticism from those who subscribe to traditional definitions of 'reliability' and 'validity', i.e. given that Economics of Conventions argues that statistical realities are constructed, a challenge is to ask the question of whether other academics examining the same social issue using Economics of Conventions would consistently reach the same conclusions?

These criticisms could simply be said to reflect the dominant positivist paradigm. A counter argument which could be advanced by positivists would be to draw from philosophy of mathematics and the school of constructivism. Under constructivism it is necessary to find or 'construct' a mathematical object to prove that it exists. However, even then it could be said that constructivism is not static or located, i.e. it changes with place and time, and reflects the thought processes of those involved. It can also be said to exist in a reflexive relationship in that there is a bidirectional relationship between cause and effect and self-reference such that any claim of objectivity is still false.

Therefore, a more useful approach may be to overcome the limitations through strong inductive reasoning where compelling propositions are posited that lead to the most probable conclusion. As mentioned earlier, it is accepted that evaluative conclusions reached by evaluators will remain by their nature, contestable.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

As the paper has attempted to show, the approach and process of social cost benefit analysis is not a simple case of counting physical objects and putting them on a set of scales. Unlike the physical world, the evaluator using CBA or SCBA must make decisions about the very nature of the social 'object' or social problem they wish to evaluate, i.e. what is the object/problem, what is to be counted, and how?

By adopting an Economics of Convention approach we have an answer and we are better placed to explore social issues and associated moral judgements. However, we cannot escape the political nature of the evaluative process:

“Politicians use statistics in the same way that a drunk uses lamp-posts – for support rather than illumination” (Lang, 1900).

Lang's observation identifies the common mistrust of politicians using statistics; not to inform policy making, but to legitimise policy decisions already reached by other means. As Desrosières (1998) more recently confirms, the genesis and history of statistics is tightly interwoven with that of modern political-economy: “As the etymology of the word shows, statistics is connected with the construction of the state, with its unification and administration” (p. 8). Desrosières outlines how both statistics and political economy emerged from the enlightenment where scientific method led to a belief in the 'objectification' of the social. Inevitably, that which must be recorded for statistical analysis and used by policy makers, must first be defined. Therefore, the social construction and definition of 'social problems' and use of statistical measures is therefore of great importance. Concepts such as 'unemployment' for example, and the belief that 'it is a problem' are social conventions which emerged as a result of

industrialisation and modern employment relations (Desrosières, 1998). As we move into a world where rapid advancements in technology threaten the jobs of many we are, again, starting to discuss those ‘displaced’ from the workplace. If we continue with such technology-based automation we will, through convention, ‘need’ to find employment for those displaced and dislocated. However, there are questions as to why this needs to be the case, especially as we are seeing ever growing examples from agriculture to family carers, where undertaking ‘non-economic’ but environmentally and socially positive activities – such as setting aside productive land to increase biodiversity in the case of agriculture (and fisheries) and providing care for those who are unable to work in the case of those societies with a growing ageing population. Whilst these conventions are deeply rooted, there are activities at the margins of ‘the established way of thinking’ that are gaining significant attention. There are those within the broad community of climate change activists who are pushing for formal recognition of a ‘climate emergency’ as a way of dramatically altering the policy landscape internationally. A further example of the potential for challenges to existing conventions is to be found in the significant experiment in Finland to determine the consequences of providing Universal Basic Income (UBI). This has revealed that the ‘gift’ of an unearned ‘liveable’ sum per month that was not dependent upon the recipient being in or out of work, proved to be revealing in rejecting traditional economic assumptions about the reduction in incentivisation to work and an increased incentivisation to be slovenly (Howgego, 2019). This research suggests we may need to re-think the nature of ‘work’, and therefore, how to evaluate it.

Other thinkers within policy evaluation have argued that evaluation should focus on understanding the meaning stakeholders ascribe in their use of language (Bezzi,

2006). The evaluator should, according to Bezzi, not seek an 'objective' truth, but just the 'truth' surrounding the evaluand (those individuals who are the subject of evaluation). For example, this could require taking a more qualitative approach to evaluation to better understand different stakeholder's worldviews and values.

However, within political, practitioner and academic discourse it has been argued that no framework exists to explore the nature of policy 'success' in a comprehensive way (Marsh & McConnell, 2010). There have, nevertheless, been attempts to develop a framework that is at least credible for making such judgements. Hurteau *et al* (2009) argued that for an evaluation to be considered credible, judgements made by programme evaluations must be not only legitimate but justified. Hurteau *et al* drew their conclusions from a meta-analysis of 40 programme evaluations. They found that only fifty per cent of these programme evaluations generated judgements, and that although they seemed legitimate, they were rarely justified. They also suggest that perhaps a reason for judgements not being presented in written reports is that it would not serve the purposes of those running the programme, i.e. a critical judgement would undermine the self-interest of those running the programme<sup>5</sup>. This is a very compelling argument, and it links well with the idea of 'dysfunctional bureaucracy' advanced by Mieczkowski (1991)<sup>6</sup>. Mieczkowski argued that dysfunctional bureaucracy occurs when there is the creation and growth of a self-serving elite who recruit new members, not on the basis of their functional excellence, but based on their usefulness to other bureaucrats. This raises some interesting questions when looking at programme

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<sup>5</sup> More importantly, it would also challenge the policy behind the programme which was implemented by a democratically elected government, thereby challenging the validity of democracy as the basis for policy-making. It might also block future employment/contracts on evaluation programmes.

<sup>6</sup> Max Weber writing in 1922 similarly argued that bureaucracy had the potential to become corrupt and almost an oligarchy.

evaluations conducted by external reviewers: who is conducting the evaluation? What is their relationship to the organisation/policy/individuals being evaluated? If the evaluation was funded, who funded it? Have they made a judgement? If not, why not?<sup>7</sup>

More recently, attempts have been made to develop a more heuristic<sup>8</sup> approach for practitioners and academics to utilise when approaching the question of whether a particular public policy or programme is, or was, successful (Marsh & McConnell, 2010). Marsh & McConnell note that previous works, such as Bovens *et al* (2006), have distinguished between two approaches: a rationalist, positivist approach versus an argumentative, interpretative or constructivist approach. Thus, they seek to develop a middle ground drawing on Bovens *et al* (2001) to argue that success is defined within three dimensions: process, programmatic and political. This is demonstrated in Table 3.1 which shows what Marsh & McConnell (2010) argue to be dimensions, indicators and evidence of ‘policy success’:

**Table 3.1 Dimensions of policy success**

Dimension	Indicators	Evidence
<b>Process</b>	Legitimacy in the formation of choices: that is, produced through due processes of constitutional and quasi-constitutional procedures and values of democracy, deliberation and accountability.	Legislative record, executive minutes, absence of legal challenges, absence of procedural challenge (for example, Ombudsmen), absence of significant criticisms from stakeholders.
	Passage of legislation: was the legislation passed with no, or few, amendments?	Analysis of legislative process, using legislative records, including identification of amendments and analysis of legislative voting patterns.
	Political sustainability: did the policy have the support of a sufficient coalition?	Analysis of support from ministers, stakeholders, especially interest groups, media, public opinion.
	Innovation and influence: was the policy based on new ideas or policy instruments, or did it involve the adoption of policy from elsewhere (policy transfer/diffusion)?	Government statements and reports (for example, White/Green Papers), academic and practitioner conferences, interest group reports, think tank reports, media news and commentary,

<sup>7</sup> However, it should be noted that to make a judgement about the success of an intervention is to accept it on its own terms, i.e. to accept its conventional assumptions.

<sup>8</sup> Pertaining to or based on experimentation or trial-and-error methods.

		identification of similarities between legislation and that in other jurisdictions and that in other jurisdictions identification of form and content of cross-jurisdictional meetings/visits by politicians and/or public servants.
<b>Programmatic</b>	Operational: was it implemented as per objectives?	Internal programme/policy evaluation, external evaluation (for example, legislative committee reports, audit reports), review by stakeholders, absence of critical ports in media (including professional journals).
	Outcome: did it achieve the intended outcomes?	Internal programme/policy evaluation, external evaluation (for example, legislative committee reports, audit reports), review by stakeholders, absence of critical ports in media (including professional journals).
	Resource: was it an efficient use of resources?	Internal efficiency evaluations, external audit reports/assessments, absence of critical media reports.
	Actor/interest: did the policy/implementation benefit a particular class, interest group, appliance, political party, gender, race, religion, territorial community, institution, ideology, etc?	Party political speeches and press releases, legislative debates, legislative committee reports, ministerial briefings, interest group and other stakeholder speeches/press releases/reports, think tank reports, media commentary.
<b>Political</b>	Government popularity: is the policy politically popular? Did it help government's re-election/election chances? Did it help secure or boost its credibility?	Opinion polls, both in relation to particular policy and government popularity, election results, media commentary.

Source: Marsh & McConnell, 2010. p. 571.

Marsh & McConnell set out a comprehensive range of ways to define what can be meant by 'policy success' beyond narrowly defined quantitative measures. They also present some potentially useful indicators and supporting qualitative evidence that would be required to make such judgements. Table 3.2, also developed by Marsh & McConnell (2010), suggests the important choices that need to be made during the process of assessing policy success.

**Table 3.2. Critical choices to be made in assessing policy success**

1. Form of political success	Which form or forms of success is/are being assessed? Process? Programmatic? Political?
2. Timeframe	What time period(s) is/are being assessed? Short-term? Medium-term? Long-term?
3. Interests	In relation to whose interest is success being assessed, for example, target group? Stakeholders? Institution? Interest group? Individual? Collective?
4. Reference points	What is the standard by which success is being judged? Compared to intentions? Compared to policy domain criteria, for example, efficiency and effectiveness? Compared to the past? Compared to ethical or moral principles? Compared to another jurisdiction?

5. Information	Is there sufficient and credible information to assess the extent of success?
6. Policy isolation	With what degree of certainty and credibility is it possible to isolate and assess the impact of a policy from other factors such as other policies or media influences?
7. Conflict and ambiguity	<p>What significance should be given to conflicts and ambiguities, and how should they be weighted in the overall judgement of success? For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Process vs. programmatic vs. political success</li> <li>- Short-term vs. long-term</li> <li>- Interests benefiting vs. interests losing</li> <li>- One reference point vs. another, for example, moral principles vs. stated intentions</li> <li>- Availability of information vs. lack of information</li> <li>- Certainty in isolating the 'policy effect' vs. uncertainty in being able to do so</li> <li>- One formal objective vs. another formal objective</li> <li>- One informal objective vs. another informal objective</li> <li>- One formal objective vs. another informal objective</li> <li>- Unintended consequences vs. actual or intended consequences</li> <li>- Foreseeable shocks vs. unforeseeable shocks.</li> </ul>

Source: Marsh & McConnell, 2010. p. 580.

These models provide a broad outline that could allow an evaluator to define what it means for a policy to be 'successful'. As other authors have suggested, however, the nature of 'success' remains highly contestable. Marsh & McConnell (2010) also note, there are significant methodological difficulties posed by a lack of information and attempting to identify the causal chain of the policy compared to other overlapping policies, exogenous influences and economic forces, etc. Therefore, any attempt at making a judgement regarding 'success' or 'failure' is inherently normative.

Through an evaluation of the approaches taken to assess and evaluate significant propositional policies or projects/programmes, this paper has sought to set out an argument for greater attention to the nuance and subtlety that often is missing from those espousing the orthodox views as represented in economics and political science and philosophy. At the time of writing, the UK is currently embarking on a new review of HS2 – the hugely expensive high-speed rail project that has already commenced. This is further evidence of the growing unease with which activities such as major projects and programmes are proposed, appraised and evaluated, along with similarly

important policies. The release of data on the internet coinciding with the rise of social media has given voice to those whose previous ability to express themselves was either through the ballot box or, in extreme, by taking to the street. What we are seeing is that we, as individuals, in our communities that sit within our societies and economies (and note the use of the plural form) are not satisfied with being merely numbers then represented in statistics bandied around by politicians.

Where does this get us? In this paper's context of the world of policy, project and programme evaluation an obvious conclusion would be the use of qualitative research to support evaluation. This is not to say that no such work is being done, but the questions of by whom, using what principles and process and for what reason need to be better understood. In the case of the public sector in accountable democracies this is increasingly critical as the opaque world of public sector projects and programmes is becoming ever more transparent and visible – as the cases of both HS2 in the UK and Caltrain in the US show. Since taxpayers will ultimately fund the majority of public sector projects, politicians play a key role in allocating what project is done where and when, we (individually and collectively) need to better understand the conventions and underlying principles on which decisions are made and evaluations conducted.

However, such meaning will always continue to be constructed, communicated and be contested. There are positive developments – better tools – such as the use of Social Return on Investment (SROI) Frameworks<sup>9</sup>, but these of themselves do not overcome this challenge. Whether we will find ways and means to allow alignment and agreement remains unanswered, but the fragmentation and division we are seeing

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<sup>9</sup> See for example the work done by Social Value UK: <http://www.socialvalueuk.org/resources/sroi-guide/>

around the world would indicate that we are a long way from this nirvana. Perhaps Bezzi (2006) is correct in suggesting that the evaluator should, not seek an 'objective' truth, but just the 'truth' surrounding those who are the subject of evaluation and the focus of policy. Would this bring harmony and utopia or conflict and dystopia is an open question that the future will answer, but this appears to be a future that is far away from the end of the first fifth of the twenty first century.

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