# A Broken Process – The Swedish Health Care System Asks for Expert Advice

Stefan Svallfors[1], Erica Falkenström[2] & Anna T. Höglund[3]

## Abstract

This paper analyses the process in which expert reports on health care governance are commissioned, produced and received in a Swedish setting. Based on an empirical analysis of interviews with commissioners and producers of such reports, the paper argues that the typical process in which expert reports on health governance come about is fraught with quite deficient ways of producing expert knowledge. The analysis contributes to the literature on the role of expertise in governance and policymaking. In contrast to most other analyses in this field, the paper focuses not on the content of expert reports nor on their political uptake but on the process in which they are produced.

[1]*Corresponding author:* **Stefan Svallfors** is professor of sociology at the Institute for Futures Studies, Stockholm, Sweden. His current research deals with public policy governance and with policy professionals, that is, actors in politics who are neither elected politicians nor public administrators. His latest book is Politics for Hire. The World and Work of Policy Professionals (Edward Elgar, 2020).
E-mail: stefan.svallfors@iffs.se

[2]**Erica Falkenström** is a senior researcher at the Institute for Futures Studies, Stockholm, and associated researcher at the Centre for Research Ethics & Bioethics, Uppsala University, Sweden. Her current research concerns organizational ethics in public sector governance. Her latest book is På spaning efter etik. Etisk kompetens och ansvarstagande för ledning och styrning av hälso- och sjukvården [In Search for Ethics. Ethical Competence and Responsibility in Health Care Governance] (Appell, 2018).

[3]**Anna T. Höglund** is professor of care ethics and gender studies at the Centre for Research Ethics & Bioethics, Uppsala University, Sweden. She has worked extensively on the question of ethical competence for health care practitioners. Related research areas are moral distress in clinical settings and prioritization in health care. She has also published substantially on the topic of gender and ethics.

## Introduction

Health care constitutes a substantial part of public expenditure and investment in all OECD countries and is a major concern among their populations (Immergut et al. 2021). However, difficult management and governance problems beset health care systems in virtually all these countries. To rectify these problems, the health care systems regularly commission expert reports that deal with such issues in order to provide useful policy advice about reforms of the health care sector. The question we raise in this paper is how such expert reports actually come about and to what extent this process approximates what might be thought of as an ideal one. An "ideal" process should here primarily be thought of as one that is likely to produce valid, reliable and useful knowledge for the problem at hand, and that can be used to enlighten decision-making that affects public policies (Ahlbäck Öberg and Öberg 2012). Hence, the issues we raise in this paper have implications beyond the particular case at hand since commissioning and production of expert reports take place in virtually all policy settings.

We analyse the process in which expert reports are commissioned, produced and received in a Swedish setting. Sweden is traditionally conceived of as a highly expert-driven polity, in which politically neutral expert advice plays an important role in politics and policymaking (Steinmo 2012). It is therefore of interest to analyse the structure and content of expert advice in a major public policy field in this particular country. The governance of the Swedish health care sector is quite complex, with the central government setting laws and

regulations, while financing and much of the actual service delivery is provided by the 21 regional authorities, which have independent taxation powers (Blomqvist and Winblad 2021). Furthermore, in the last decades, the private delivery of publicly financed health care has grown substantially in many regions, adding to governance complexity (Svallfors and Tyllström 2017).

Based on our empirical analysis of interviews with commissioners and producers of such reports, we argue that the typical process in which expert reports on health governance come about is fraught with quite deficient ways of producing, acquiring and using knowledge. Our analysis contributes to a sprawling literature on the role of expertise in governance and policymaking, as described in a later section. In contrast to most other analyses in this field, our paper focuses not on the specific content of expert reports but on the process with which they are produced and received.

We start off with a stylized picture of the ideal process through which to acquire and use knowledge in public organizations. This idealized picture serves as an "ideal type" in the Weberian sense, in highlighting aspects and practices that are already present in advanced knowledge production. But it is also used as an implicit normative model for how such a process ought to work. The model is then used in the empirical analysis as a comparative reference point to the actual commissioning, production and reception of expert reports. We close the paper by summarizing our results and discussing whether current practices could be improved and how likely it is that such improvement will come about.

## Expertise and Policy Advice

The uses of expertise in policy advice and policymaking is a diverse and far-ranging research field. Important topics include how experts are selected and used in the policy process, what constitutes expertise in various policy domains and settings, what roles experts play in relation to elected politicians and public administrators, and how their knowledge is used by public organizations (for a distinct summary, see Christensen 2021).

A related research strand deals with "evidence-based policymaking", or more modestly, "evidence-informed policymaking" (Head 2010, 2015, Orton et al. 2011). This research direction is highly normative and part of a broad movement arguing for evidence-based practice, modelled on evidence-based medicine (Simons and Schniedermann 2021). These researchers argue for the possibility to found not only clinical practice but also decisions on policies and management on systematic evidence and comparisons to come up with yardsticks and "best practices". Others remain more sceptical, pointing out the ironic lack of evidence for the claim that "evidence-based policies" actually produce better results than alternatives (Simons and Schniedermann 2021, French 2019). Furthermore, as pointed out by several authors, many claims made by the evidence-based movement seem to underestimate the highly political nature of policy-making. This political aspect creates difficulties that are typically not present in clinical practice (from where the evidence-base movement stems) (Hawkins and Parkhurst 2016, Botterilla and Hindmoor 2012).

Of particular interest for the current paper are studies that deal with expert commissions of various kinds. Such research has pointed out that commissions are just as often appointed for legitimizing and symbolic purposes as for their cognitive problem-solving capacities (for example, Hunter and Boswell 2015, Rowe and McAllister 2006). Research has also included studies of the political and administrative control of expert commissions (for example, Hesstvedt and Christensen 2021), and their varied and limited impact on policy processes (for example, Inwood and Johns 2016). Still other research has focussed on how expert knowledge is processed in policy decisions and suggested ways in which this could be improved (for example, Hunter and Boswell 2015).

Our contribution has a different focus from the bulk of previous research in this field. We focus not primarily on how expert knowledge is used by policy makers or what impact such knowledge has on their decisions. Nor do we mainly study who the experts are who produce

expert knowledge or how and why they are appointed and controlled. Instead, we focus on how policy-relevant expert knowledge – in the form of expert reports that are commissioned by policy-makers – is actually produced. What kind of knowledge passes as stemming from expertise, and how is this knowledge actually produced? This is something that seems to have received less attention than many other aspects of expert commissions in the public policy field. For example, in the wide-ranging debate on the pros and cons of "evidence-based policymaking" it seems to be taken for granted that the evidence in question comes from academic research. But academic research rarely enters the policy process in unprocessed form. In order to become potentially useful for policymaking it needs to be reframed and translated for a policy audience, and it is only in this form that it actually becomes "expert advice" rather than simply research. We leave it as an open question exactly what implications our empirical analysis has for other settings and policy fields, although we suspect similar findings would occur in many other cases where expert knowledge is sought and received.

Our strategy is akin to the one espoused by philosophers engaged in judging "process reliabilism" (Sayer 2020). However, in contrast to them, we focus not on the methods (such as qualitative vs. quantitative methods, or the use of quasi-experimental designs) by which results are produced but on the process in which the expert knowledge is produced. With "process" we understand the whole sequence in which an expert report comes about, from commissioning, over production, to reception. With "production" we understand the whole part of the process from the commissioning of the report until the final text is delivered to the commissioners. An essential component is what kind of feedback that is provided to experts in various stages of the process. Hence, we do not claim to know exactly what kind of knowledge and arguments the Swedish health care system would need in order to address various governance problems. Rather, we ask how likely it is that answers to these complex questions may be found through the process in which expert reports are typically produced.

## Knowledge Acquisition From Experts – The Ideal Type

As an analytical tool we use an ideal-typical model for knowledge production. Our intention with this model is not to argue that it is a proximate picture of how information and knowledge are *actually* used in organizational settings. We argue instead that there is in fact an implicit *normative* model of how knowledge is best produced and evaluated that is present not only in academic research but in any setting where advanced specialized knowledge production takes place. What we then ask in our empirical analysis is to what extent the features of this model are present in the production of expert reports on health care governance. In this regard, it should be seen as an immanent critique using the implicit conceptions and assumptions that lie behind the commissioning and production of expert reports.

We propose that this ideal-typical model is one which stylizes elements of the production of expert knowledge that are *actually present* in the most advanced and productive processes in existing organizations and settings. This includes but is not restricted to the ideals of academic research (Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist 2016). In this regard, it is used as an ideal type in the Weberian sense, in representing an accentuation of certain elements already present in empirical reality, thus creating a stylized image that can be used as a comparative vantage point from which to gauge actually existing phenomena (Weber 1949 [1903-1917]: 90).

The first stage of such an idealized process is to decide which questions one wants the experts to analyse, and judge who would be the best suited to answer these questions. This includes having *an adequate understanding of the problem* at hand. But it also includes a thorough *canvassing of relevant expertise* for addressing the problem, and then *recruitment of experts based on their merits*. "Merits" and "expertise" should here be understood in a field-relative sense, as pointing to skills and capabilities that would be particularly suited to the problems at hand.

During the production of expert reports (or any other intellectual problem-solving endeavour), it would be imperative to provide *systematic and critical feedback* to the experts.

Any team will have its limits in terms of intellectual capacity and variation of domain-relevant cognitive frames, and it is therefore important that the critical feedback does not reproduce ideas and perspectives that are already present in the team but rather ones that can actually challenge and question what they have achieved. Such rounds of feedback, which may include both external review and review from the commissioners, form the basis for *gradual improvement and re-specification of the problem* until the final product is delivered.

In the final stage, the results that have been produced are received by the commissioning organization. At this stage, it is important that there is *adequate receiver capacity*, in the sense of a potential to properly evaluate findings and interpret how the experts' advice could be translated into organizational practice. Adequate receiver capacity hence ties in with commissioning capacity, in that the organization that asks for expert advice should have the capacity to know what they are asking for, to collaborate with the experts to adjust the project as it moves along, and finally, to judge whether the results they receive are of good quality and understand how they may be productively used.

There are a couple of points that need to be emphasized regarding this idealized picture. The first is that although the normative model has considerable similarities with the ideal form of academic research (Sahlin and Eriksson-Zetterquist 2016), we are in no way proposing that academic research should be used as the standard with which to gauge other domains. We would rather argue that the elements for adequate knowledge production that we have stylized are present in *any* domain that involves advanced expertise. Just to give one example, what is known in the programming world as "Agile Development" is at its core an adaptation of key elements in the model we have just presented (Manifesto for Agile Software Development - agilemanifesto.org). Such ideas and approaches are often extended to cover project organization more broadly (Forsgren, Humble, and Kim 2018, Antman 2015).

Related to this, it should also be emphasized that we are not proposing a rehashing of the rationalist model for knowledge acquisition and usage. The rationalist model is a top-down, one-way-flow process in which problems and questions are specified beforehand, experts are asked to provide answers to these questions, and commissioners evaluate the answers that have been provided and, based on this evaluation, decide on action (or on the acquisition of further expert knowledge). Organizational research has decisively shown that this is typically not how organizations acquire and use information and knowledge, and has explained why this is the case (Feldman and March 1981). In contrast to the rationalist model, ours is a much more iterative and collaborative model in which the original problem-setting is gradually modified and improved through critical feedback until a satisfactory solution is achieved or until no further improvement of the final product is possible.

As will become obvious in our analysis, however, existing practices in the commissioning and production of expert reports for health care governance differ substantially both from the rationalist model *and* from our ideal-typical model. It is instead typically a much more diffuse, interest-driven and sub-optimal process, to which we now turn.

## Data and Methods

Our primary data in this paper come from a set of interviews with commissioners and producers of expert reports. It is only by asking people who were directly involved in commissioning and producing these reports that we can gain insight about what actually took place. Few if any traces of this process will appear in the finalized, polished and published reports.

Our interview sample stem from a larger project on the commissioning, production and usage of expert reports in health care governance in Sweden. It includes 106 expert reports on Swedish health care governance, covering three decades from the early 1990s until the present. The inclusion criteria for reports are that they (a) deal with health care governance (that is, questions related to the overall macro-steering of the health care system) and/or management (that is, questions related to the administration of health care organizations) and (b) were

commissioned by the health care system in a broad sense (including the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, the National Board of Health and Welfare, the Swedish Agency for Health and Care Services Analysis, the Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions [SALAR], Region Stockholm, and Region Norrbotten). The sample includes various types of reports, such as public commissions, research reports, consultancy reports, and reports produced by government officials. They include both extensive government commission reports, which are commissioned by the government through a highly structured process, and reports that are commissioned on an ad-hoc basis by various national and regional authorities. The reports deal with various topics, ranging from broad overviews to more targeted and specific governance issues. We have included all reports that we were able to find that fall under the inclusion criteria, but there is no reason to assume that we have been able to locate every report. We are confident that the bulk of reports are included and that all important and influential reports are present in the sample.

The interview sample covers different types of reports, including four major government commission reports. No sampling frame of experts and commissioners were constructed but we depended on our qualitative judgement about who would be the most interesting participants to include. These judgements were based on strategic considerations (that the interviews should cover different types of reports, come from different time periods, and include the most influential and substantial reports).[1] The interviews covered the background and commissioning of the report, the process in which it was produced, how it was received and what consequences (if any) the report may have had. In the final part of the interview, interviewees were asked about their general perception of the production and usage of reports in this field. Altogether, 27 interviews, covering a sum total of 18 reports, were conducted, transcribed and coded for pertinent themes.[2] Among the interviewees, 16 were men and 11 were women, while 10 were commissioners and 17 producers.[3]

The transcripts of the interviews were manually coded according to the sequence we outlined in our "ideal model", covering the topics "Initiative", "Problem description", "Recruitment", "Feedback", and "Reception". This exercise resulted in a structured excerpt document from which all quotes in the paper were taken.[4]

## Initiative and Recruitment

When it comes to the commissioning of expert reports, the ideal model emphasizes an adequate understanding of the problem at hand, canvassing of relevant expertise and recruitment based on merit. The typical process in which Swedish expert reports on health care governance are commissioned is very different.

To begin with, many of the reports are commissioned without any clearly defined problem in mind. Such reports were supposed to "provide an overview", "clarify the current state of…" or fulfil some other less than clearly defined aims and purposes. With such vague aspirations it is often hard to judge whether the report has fulfilled its purposes or not. An expert on a regional commission describes the mission:

> The mission was really, shall we say, to define the role of primary care in the system. /…/
>
> *Were there any wishes or presumptions besides those you have now described that the commissioner wanted to include or not include?*
>
> No. If you make a joke, you could say it like this: "What the hell should we do? Help us, bring us something!" (IP9, p 4)

An expert on a government commission concurs:

> The directives are fairly general, one has to say. Sort of a certain description of how others have described the problems that you have seen primarily in the consumer's choice systems. But there were also some other things that we were asked to do, and it was posed at a fairly general level and it was to a large degree left to us to try to interpret.

> *What was it really that they wished to have, did you find out anything…?*
>
> No, we never got any answer. I think that perhaps they didn't really know what they wanted an answer to, if I should say what I believe. Really. (IP27, p 3)

What is striking here is the extent to which the hired expert is unsure about exactly what the report is supposed to achieve. What is the specific problem the report is intended to solve? How should it be defined and in what directions should the report move? In many cases, such seemingly fundamental factors are not clearly spelled out, and as a result it becomes quite difficult to say whether the report actually achieved its aims.

A general and prevalent demand is that the expert reports should contribute to increased efficiency in the health care system. As stated in the directives to a major public commission on health care governance: "The commission should analyse how the health care system may utilize professional resources in a more appropriate and efficient way. The analysis should illuminate existing problems of efficiency and areas for development" (SOU 2016: 2, p 55). Here, as in most instances, "efficiency" is never defined in any precise way. The experts' elucidations most often consist of vague statements, such as "efficiency, that is what you get out of the resources you put in, so to speak" (IP10, p 4), or "what you may do to make care more efficient, to get more care for the money, simply" (IP11, p 7). Hence, even a focus on "efficiency" does not often clarify the exact intents and purposes of the report in question.

To the extent that more specific issues are addressed in the reports, such issues often focus on policy *solutions* rather than policy problems. Reports are commissioned in order to evaluate the extent to which particular policy solutions have been implemented, or to help implement them (locating hurdles, proposing strategies, etc). A prominent example in the current Swedish context is the implementation of a "national system of knowledge management", in which an elaborate expert system for decision support is set up (Falkenström and Svallfors 2022). Several public commissions have been given the directives to "support the design of a national coherent system for knowledge-based care where the work of the state and of the care principals reinforce one another and together create conditions for the best available knowledge to be used in all encounters with patients" (SOU 2020:36, p 46).

The lack of specificity regarding the problems the reports should tackle is thus replaced with a great degree of specificity regarding the solutions to be implemented. Here, commissioning organizations tend to spell out exactly what solutions are in focus, and which other experts, commissions and organizations the recruited experts should refer to and collaborate with.

In sum, the problem-setting phase of the commissioning of expert reports is rather blurry, often involving little more than vaguely defined descriptions, and more often focused on policy solutions and their implementation than on sharply defined problems in need of elucidation.

Another way that the typical process departs from the ideal is that the recruitment of experts is rarely if ever based on any real canvassing of relevant expertise. It is strikingly often based on personal networks, where people who are known and trusted are recruited to the task by commissioning organizations or intermediaries:

> And then we hired, to work with us, how should I put it, someone that is an experienced super-investigator, one who does not only investigate but who problematizes what they investigate /…/ we knew of her, I can't say we knew her, but we knew of her. (IP2, p 4)

The level of personalization sometimes reaches almost parodic levels, as in this description of how an expert ended up collaborating with an old friend:

> "Maybe you should talk to Kenneth Persson[5]," I said. "Yes," she said, "I already did that and he thought this was a good idea," and well, Kenneth Persson, he is an old colleague of mine, we used to work at [the same] university college a long time ago. So she had already mentally kind of built her idea about this constellation and then this constellation happens to, and this was unknown to her, include two old buddies. (IP12, p 1)

There is rarely any real systematic canvassing of relevant expertise involved. Experts are hired because they are known to the commissioning organization beforehand and because they have done similar work in the past. It is hard to tell from the interviews whether this practice is followed because there is no time to do real canvassing or because commissioning organizations put a lot of faith in their own networks. Regardless, it amounts to a recruitment process quite far removed from the "ideal" model.

What is apparent in such informal and personalized recruitments is that status, honour and trust seem to form the basis for decisions to hire a specific expert rather than any obvious merit. Experts are recruited based on their reputation for being reliable, honest and/or well-connected rather than for their intellectual merits:

> Well, I suppose it is based on past achievements in a way and that you see that… Often you have a deliberation, there are these three or four people that could kind of do something in this field, and then you think and discuss some pros and cons, what have they done previously and what you kind of think you could get the most out of. (IP13, p 3)

> He worked with her in a different public commission before, and she is a previous colleague of mine. So, well, we had a lot of trust in her, quite simply. (IP27, p 6)

Similar or even more personalized and less explicit and structured recruitment processes are reported in many other cases. We could metaphorically think of such a recruitment process as based on an "implicit Rolodex", a mental map in which relevant experts are included and from which commissioners draw when thinking about how to staff the projects. This "implicit Rolodex" seems to be used even in the highly structured setting of the Government Offices. Judging from our interviews, appointments to head government commissions are in practice often guided by personal trust and networks, although the process of appointing a public commissioner is in theory a highly formalized one involving all departments in the Government Offices. And after the head of the public commission has been decided, the recruitment of the secretariat for the commission follows similar patterns as for other reports:

> Every commission sort of looks up their own secretariat, so after that there have been requests and so on, absolutely, that kind of happens very easily, that it is a rather small pool of people making the rounds. (IP27, p 18)

An extreme deviation from merit-based recruitment is when experts recruit themselves, or rather look around for financial and organizational support for a report they wish to do on a specific topic. In such cases, it is hard even to think of independent commissioning of a report, since it is instead experts seeking commissioners. "It was just as much Fredrik Nilsson who was very active in his wish to produce such a report and was looking for financing" (IP1, p 2) is a description of a typical self-recruitment. Here, the respective roles of commissioning organizations and experts become blurry.

With such personalized and informal recruitment processes it is perhaps unsurprising that experts tend to represent a fairly narrow segment of academic disciplines. More than 50% of academics involved in the production of the expert reports specialize in business studies or economics (including the sub-discipline health economics). Around 10% come from political science (including public administration), 25% have their academic background in medicine, while major social science disciplines such as psychology and sociology constitute less than 5% of the academic experts in our sample (Höglund, Falkenström, and Svallfors 2022: Figure 2).

## Critical Feedback

Our ideal model includes systematic and critical feedback and gradual improvement as key elements. How much of this is present in current practices? Comparatively little, it turns out. Most experts state that they actually received very little intellectual feedback in the course of writing their report. And commissioners agree that neither they nor anyone else provided much critical feedback on drafts or ideas:

> *Did you have the opportunity at some point in the process to present parts of the results or text, in order to receive feedback?*
>
> No. Or yes, perhaps we had that opportunity, but if so we didn't use it. (IP12, p 7)
>
> ---
>
> No, we tried to have a bigger conference, sort of a hearing. We had one occasion…
>
> *In the course of the work I meant.*
>
> Yes, in the course of the work, before it was finished, I see. Eeh, well I suppose that didn't happen. (IP14, p 9)

It is curious to find that even academic experts, who are trained and used to giving and receiving critical feedback in all stages of scientific production, make such little use of it when they are hired as experts. Critical feedback from peers is in general considered one of the hallmarks of advanced knowledge production and it is striking how feeble this aspect is in the cases we analysed.

Many reports had reference groups attached to the work and team. However, such reference groups most often represented affected interests, in the form of representatives from organizations that were deemed to have a particular interest in the report and its findings. This is at least partly an effect of the solutions-oriented approach of many report directives: if the mission is to help implement a particular policy solution, it is imperative to include all affected interests early in the process.

It was much rarer to find reference groups that were composed to provide broad and critical feedback from intellectual peers and that represented cognitive rather than organizational diversity. Hence, most often, experts seem to learn little that affected the intellectual content of their reports from their reference groups:

> In all honesty I can say that the report would not have looked very different if we hadn't had any reference group. (IP16, p 5)

Perhaps partly as a result of the composition and role of the reference groups, reports sometimes sought the lowest common denominator among the affected interests in order to obtain broad support. This then resulted in a false consensus, in which all interests could agree on the rather bland contents of the report while remaining deeply divided concerning more important matters:

> We are supposed to come to common ground where everyone agrees, where everyone can sign on and sign off on the report. /…/ The report is very very watered down and contains few concrete proposals for action /…/ There are some good examples; we make clear the existing dilemmas, but we really leave no concrete proposals because it becomes too sensitive. (IP14, pp 2, 9, 10)

In sum, the feedback provided to experts while producing their reports is typically very distant from our ideal model, which emphasized critical feedback and gradual adjustment and improvement. In the absence of such feedback, experts and their teams become completely reliant on their own intellectual acumen and cognitive diversity, and as we illustrated in the previous section, the composition of experts, due to the process in which they are typically recruited, tends to be fairly narrow and homogeneous.

## Reception

When it comes to the reception of the reports, there is considerable variation in how the reports are formally delivered to the commissioning organizations. Official public commissions are delivered to the government department in question following a standard protocol. Other reports are simply sent to the commissioning organization without much fanfare. Also, when it comes to public announcements and presentations, there is much variation among the reports. Some experts use their own networks and preferred venues to get their findings out, while others are content to deliver according to the contract and little more.

Sometimes it seems that experts are able to independently raise public interest in their report, while the interest from those who commissioned the report in the first place remains lukewarm:

> So when we came into this, the interest was very great, so we gave it to them and then we made the big launch in [the political branch fair] Almedalen when the book was finished.
>
> *So first you had a presentation for the politicians, is that so, when it was finished?*
>
> Well, we never really presented it to the politicians because they were very busy…
>
> *With other things, I see…*
>
> …but I know they read it.
>
> *So you launched it in Almedalen, is that so?*
>
> Yes. We launched it in Almedalen. That is, publicly. (IP2, p 9)

In most cases, however, it is rarely obvious to the experts what happens to their reports once they are delivered. In the case of public commissions (SOU), their secretariats are dissolved as soon as their final report is delivered, and the involved experts are seldom invited to follow the future course of their reports. In less structured processes, it is often even less clear to the experts how their reports are used in practice, or what further comments and responses they have elicited. All in all, there seems to be a striking paucity of feedback to experts on what happens to their reports after they have been delivered:

> *Do you know what happened to the report once it was finished?*
>
> Not really, and that is a bit sad /…/what happened to the report after it was finished, I, strictly speaking, know nothing about.
>
> *Do you know anything about what use the commissioner or other actors may have had for the report? You don't know?*
>
> No. Quite simply: No. (IP12, p 10-11)

Curiously, most experts do not seem to expect to receive much feedback on their final product. They seem fairly content with delivering their report and make little effort to find out how their expertise is actually used in practice and what obstacles the conclusions of their reports encounter. It is as if there was no alternative to the current order:

> We as a secretariat have no… or ex-secretariat, our employment ends as soon as we have delivered, and then we have sort of no insight about what happens.
>
> *What do you think about that, that the process looks like this when in the case of government commissions?*
>
> Well, I don't see how it could be different, that is the practice we have in Sweden, that these are independent commissions that are temporary public authorities that cease to exist, and so on. (IP27, p 13)

The end results of the reports are also affected by the fact that receiver capacity seems to be quite uneven among commissioning organizations. Experts are often left with the feeling that perhaps their message has not been properly understood, or that capacity for translating the contents of the reports into adequate action is missing:

> I could wish that politicians were more interested in how things become rather than how they wish them to be. There is primarily an interest from policy-makers to launch a reform and say "this is how it is going to be", or make an agreement where you get a press release, and less interest in "how does this work in practice", did you achieve the results… (IP6, p 17)
>
> ---
>
> We can produce a report and so on, but for the person sitting there, the policy-maker or whoever, it is this thing, do they understand the report?
>
> *Is it some kind of receiver capacity, or…?*

> Yes, or do they have the time to read it, how much information flows in their…if you think about all the e-mails they receive, how do they sort out everything that rains over them? (IP25, p 17).

Such a lack of receiver capacity is sometimes attributed to a lack of interest, sometimes to a shortage of time, and sometimes to sheer lack of intellectual acumen:

> I suppose it is not always the sharpest knives in the drawer when we talk about county politicians. /…/ We had a lot to do with them but we were not very encouraged by those discussions. (IP11, p 13)

Sometimes the lack of receiver capacity comes back full circle to lacking commissioning capacity, in that some experts are left with the feeling that the commissioning organization did not have a clear idea about what questions they wanted answers to, or even what the basic purpose was in commissioning a specific report:

> What is missing is a well-thought-out picture of what it is that they want to achieve regarding health care, as ultimately responsible for the governance of the state. And they vacillate a little and seek some form of target and I think our commission is sort of an example of the fact that they do not really know where they are going and how things should be joined together…or even why. (IP27, p 19)

In sum, the reception phase of the expert reports comes across as no less problematic than the other phases of their production. One of the experts turns the issue around to our own project in summarizing what is currently wrong:

> It is a very important project that you're doing, for the simple reason that very much is produced and much less consumed, and that means that we produce a lot of knowledge that stays local with the persons that worked with this and a handful of close people who had the stamina to read it. /…/ It is not only about origin and dissemination but above all about reception. (IP7, p 16)

## Conclusion

How should valid and useful knowledge be produced in expert reports, and how is it actually produced in the case of health care governance in Sweden? We started with an idealized picture of how the process of acquisition of expert knowledge should be conceived. This picture was idealized in a double sense. First, in a Weberian "ideal-typical" manner, it highlights and stylizes elements of knowledge acquisition that already exist in advanced organizations and settings. Second, it is used as a yardstick to contrast an optimal way of producing commissioned expert knowledge with the actual way this happens in a specific context.

This stylized model emphasized as the key factors in successful knowledge acquisition (1) having an adequate understanding of the problem; (2) canvassing of relevant expertise; (3) recruiting experts based on their merits; (4) providing systematic and critical feedback; (5) striving for gradual improvement and re-specification of the problem; and (6) having or building adequate receiver capacity.

It should of course come as little surprise that the real world of commissioned work concerning Swedish health care governance does not resemble this idealized picture. It is after all an ideal type and we should not expect reality to mimic this. Constraints of time, cognitive attention, and political expediency all affect how real-world processes of knowledge production play out. But that said, the extent to which practice differs from the ideal is still striking. In fact, the process is so far removed from the ideal state that we think it has to be characterized as *broken*. We would even argue that any adequate and useable knowledge that emerges from such a process materializes *in spite of* the typical process and not *because* of it.

Regarding the initiative to commission the reports, we find that this was a quite blurry phase. The directions given by the commissioning organization were often quite vague and along the lines of "providing an overview" rather than addressing defined problems. To the extent that specificity was found in the commissioning of reports, it concerned particular policy solutions rather than clearly defined problems. The recruitment of experts was often conducted in a fairly close and closed circle of colleagues and other trusted acquaintances, and

there was rarely any real canvassing of relevant expertise in the field. The real initiative sometimes came from the commissioned experts themselves rather than from a commissioning agency.

The process of production of expert reports also deviated sharply from the ideal type. The experts rarely received systematic critical feedback on their work along the way. Appointed "reference groups" or "expert groups" most often represented affected organized interests rather than intellectual capacity and cognitive diversity. Hence, the intellectual feedback provided to the experts was typically feeble and unsystematic, and very far from a structured peer review.

The reception of the report was often vague to the point of non-existent. The reports were often delivered without much fanfare or acknowledgement. The experts could rarely discern the medium-term or even short-term effects of the reports, and little was provided in terms of feedback to the experts about what happened to the reports once they were delivered. This is probably linked to the fact that receiver capacity – the ability to understand, absorb and productively use what is in the reports – seems to be quite weak in many cases.

The requirement for any learning process that may result in gradual improvement is that participants receive cues from the environment on what they have achieved and have an opportunity to learn these cues (Kahneman and Klein 2009: 520, cf. Bolger and Wright 1994). In the case of expert reports, such feedback can come in the course of their project or as reactions to the final result. In the absence of feedback at any stage, it is very hard indeed for anyone to learn anything at all from what they do. In this respect, the process we have traced is fundamentally deficient, even though some experts probably (hopefully) manage to find feedback from sources other than the ones provided by the commissioning organization.

Two caveats should be noted. First, we are not suggesting that every single report in our sample failed in every single aspect against our proposed ideal. There are indeed a few examples of reports where problem definitions are clear, or where recruitment is based on canvassing and merits, systematic feedback is provided, or reception was clear and competent. But these are exceptions rather than typical, and furthermore, we did not find a single report which approximates our ideal model in every respect. Second, we are not proposing that the expert reports we have uncovered are necessarily representative of those in other policy domains in Sweden, nor that all official government commission reports are typically produced in a similar manner. We have no data for such a claim, and further research is needed to determine whether the process in our case differs from or is similar to other policy domains and other expert reports.

In relation to the sprawling and diffuse research field on expertise, "evidence-based policy" and knowledge use which were our points of departure, we would like to see our main contribution as follows. In contrast to most research in this field, we focused on the actual process by which expert knowledge is constructed. We have shown that, at least in this particular case, this process is so far removed from what we presented as an ideal model that it may be questioned whether adequate knowledge will appear as a result. Sometimes it seems to be taken for granted in the literature that expert knowledge is produced in a way that minimizes error and maximizes validity, and that the real question concerns the uptake of this expertise in the policy process. This should not be taken for granted; even academically based experts may actually use very little of their standard academic practices once they enter the role of expert consultants.

This means that expert knowledge is often, or at least sometimes, produced in circumstances that actually undermine its claims to credibility. The legitimacy conferred on experts largely rests on the methods and processes through which they achieve knowledge. Trust in research and expert knowledge is not, or at least should not be, based on a belief in the infallibility of certain individuals. It is rather from a particular mode of knowledge production, including certain elements of problem setting, critical feedback, and competent reception, that trust in knowledge and expertise should grow. When these elements are missing, there is little sense in giving any special status to what is presented as research and expert knowledge.

In principle, things could, with a measure of effort, be improved in the case we have just examined. Experts could be recruited to ensure a broad and deep cognitive reservoir. Critical feedback could be provided by external review and by organizing reference groups in a different manner. Commissioning and receiving capacity could be amended so that commissioning organizations know what they are asking for, and why, and understand how to use the resulting findings. The ideal state will never be reached, but more attention to its elements could move existing practices quite substantially in the direction of providing potentially useful expert advice.

Such suggestions for improvement may come across as utterly naïve. So many expert reports, in Sweden as well as elsewhere, are commissioned more as symbolic or legitimizing measures than as true problem-solving ventures (cf. Hunter and Boswell 2015 and works cited therein). Although we concentrate on the production of commissioned expert knowledge from the point of view of providing useful advice for the substantive policy process, we are fully aware that the commissioning and production of expert reports also have other aspects and rationales.

In any case, any changes that would enhance the process in which expert knowledge for health care governance is produced would have to be based on a genuine will to improve the current state. But actors could well instead be driven by the "structural promises" delivered in the process, that is, by the access to individual and organizational resources that open up as a result of attachment to particular policy instruments and policy ideas (Simons and Voß 2018: 20-21). They may be more interested in receiving fees, legitimating decisions, bettering their organization's position, or simply enjoying status and power, than in any genuine intellectual qualities. If so, we should not expect the processes for producing expert knowledge to improve anytime soon.

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## Notes

[1] All interviews relate to reports that were published after 2006, both since we estimated that including earlier reports would have entailed too much recall error and because we expected many of those involved in earlier reports were retired and would therefore be hard to reach for interviews. Among the interviewees we did approach, we were unable to reach four (two because of retirement, two non-responses). One single person declined to be interviewed (because of time constraints). Two scheduled interviews were cancelled because of illness. We do not think that any of these non-responses affect our results.

[2] All interviews took place under informed consent and included no sensitive personal data since we only asked about a specific professional experience. All recordings and transcriptions are kept on a secure server. All interviewees are anonymized in reporting. Hence, we cannot provide more detailed information about interviewees in direct relation to quotes in the paper.

[3] As will become obvious in the analysis, the distinction between commissioner and producer is sometimes somewhat blurry. We base the exact distinction on whether they have been actively involved in producing text for the report or not.

[4] In Swedish, available from authors on request.

[5] All personal names in the quotes are fictitious.