Social Policy & Society 3:4, 375–384 Printed in the United Kingdom
© 2004 Cambridge University Press DOI:10.1017/S1474746404002003

Research, Policy and Practice – Worlds Apart?

Louise Locock* and Annette Boaz**

**DIPEx Research Group, Department of Primary Health Care, University of Oxford*
E-mail: louise.locock@dphpc.ox.ac.uk

***ESRC Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice Queen Mary, University of London*

The relationship between research, policy and practice remains a contested area. This article explores pressures for researchers to make their work more useful and relevant to policy and practice, and for practitioners to undertake research. Whilst there are clearly areas of mutual interest and benefit, we argue that the research, policy and practice communities also have distinct traditions, skills and obligations which should be recognised and valued rather than artificially suppressed. Narrow conceptions of research utility constrain the debate about what each community has to offer and how best to communicate with each other across borders.

Introduction

The relationship between research, policy and practice remains a contested area. This article explores pressures for researchers to make their work more useful and relevant to policy and practice, and for practitioners to undertake research. Our aim is to stimulate further discussion by questioning what is meant by 'useful' by different groups, and why. Our concern is that a somewhat narrow conception of utility is beginning to dominate the discussion, and that this has potentially serious implications for the research community. We would like to encourage a debate in which the distinct traditions and skills of the research, policy and practice communities are acknowledged and valued, rather than one in which research is made subordinate to the interests of policy makers. This entails a broader understanding of research utility.

The article is a personal reflection on our own experience of doing policy and practice-related research. We were further inspired to put our views in writing by discussion at an ESRC Evidence Network seminar on 'Increasing Research Impact: Evidence from across the Public Sector', held at St Andrew's University in November 2002. We are grateful to the organisers and participants for helping us develop our ideas; the views expressed of course remain our own responsibility.

The policy makers' view

Remarks in a speech by British Secretary of State for Education, Charles Clarke, about the purpose and value of universities recently ignited a new round of debate in Britain on this perennial topic. Addressing an audience at University College Worcester, Clarke was critical of a 'medieval concept of the university as a community of scholars unfettered by the difficulties and problems of the wider society'. As reported in *The Times Higher*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746404002003 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Education Supplement (16 May 2003), a spokesperson from the Department for Education and Skills elaborated upon what Clarke had meant:

> He is basically saying that universities exist to enable the British economy and society to deal with the challenges posed by the increasingly rapid process of global change.

Clarke's critique was in this case aimed at university teaching and the justification for funding it from public resources. However, research activities are also frequently criticised for not being 'relevant' or 'useful', and the evidence-based policy movement has played a considerable role in enhancing the status of policy-relevant research findings, especially in the social sciences. Evidence-based movements are founded on the principle of raising awareness of research findings that could improve services or decision making, and ensuring that these findings are acted upon. In short, the aim is to improve research impact. This in turn has generated another layer of research and debate concerned with *how* best to improve research impact.

A persistent concern has been the distance between researchers on the one hand and policy makers and practitioners on the other hand. This concern was at the heart of a speech by David Blunkett, Clarke's predecessor as Secretary of State, to the Economic and Social Research Council (Blunkett, 2000).

> It is disappointing that some of the most gifted and creative researchers seem to have turned away from policy-related issues, preferring to work on questions of little interest to those outside the research community. There is a danger of too much concentration on the micro level – what is the point of research which becomes narrower and narrower, with small groups of people responding to each other's writing in esoteric journals, read only by themselves and relevant only to themselves? This is a dangerous turning which we must try and address. (Section 21)

> To have a practical influence conclusions from research must be realistic and achievable. What policy makers find most frustrating and least useful are, at one extreme, a refusal to venture out from behind the safety of the data and the methodology to draw out any policy implications at all; and, at the other extreme, recommendations which may represent the ideal but take no account whatever of issues of costs, achievability, the interaction with other priorities and possible unintended consequences; or conclusions which are just not sufficiently backed up by the evidence. This is ivory-towerism at its worst. (Section 49)

Whilst Blunkett is also careful to criticise political and civil service colleagues for their own weaknesses in paying attention to research findings, the underlying question is clearly directed primarily at researchers: 'can the social science community have a major influence in improving government or is it destined to be ever more detached from and irrelevant to the real debates which affect people's life chances?' (Section 2).

Social scientists are only too well aware of the pitfalls of dry-as-dust exchanges in 'esoteric journals'. Any academic who has read Kingsley Amis's satire of university life, *Lucky Jim*, will have experienced a moment of painful recognition when Jim reflects on the title of his first (as yet unpublished) article, 'The economic influence of the development of shipbuilding techniques, 1450 to 1485':

> It was a perfect title, in that it crystallized the article's niggling mindlessness, its funereal parade of yawn-enforcing facts, the pseudo-light it threw upon non-problems. (Amis, 1954: 14)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746404002003 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Few of us would aspire to that – and one might note that as *Lucky Jim* was written 50 years ago this is hardly the new problem Blunkett seems to suggest. But the idea that research only has any point if it is directly harnessed to government needs is a cause for deep concern for many policy researchers. In Box 1, the story of the hot air balloonist provides an alternative way of seeing the tensions between communities.

Box 1 The hot air balloonist

A man in a hot air balloon realised he was lost. He reduced altitude and spotted a woman below. He came lower and shouted, 'Excuse me, can you help? I promised a friend I would meet him an hour ago, but I don't know where I am'. The woman below replied, 'You're in a hot air balloon hovering approximately 30 feet above the ground. You're between 40 and 41 degrees north latitude and between 59 and 60 degrees west longitude'. 'You must be a researcher', said the balloonist. 'I am', replied the woman, 'How did you know?' 'Well', answered the balloonist, 'everything you told me is technically correct, but I've no idea what to make of your information, and the fact is I'm still lost. Frankly, you've not been much help at all. If anything, you've delayed my trip'. The woman below responded, 'You must be a manager'. 'I am', replied the balloonist, 'but how did you know?' 'Well', said the woman, 'you don't know where you are or where you're going. You have no map, and no compass. You have risen to where you are due to a large quantity of hot air. You made a promise, which you've no idea how to keep, and you expect people beneath you to solve your problems. The fact is you are in exactly the same position you were in before we met, but now, somehow, it's my fault'.

At the risk of caricature, researchers stand on one side of the divide, frustrated that their findings are ignored, misunderstood or misused. Meanwhile, potential research users on the opposite side argue much academic research is inaccessible, unintelligible or irrelevant to their needs. Researchers are under pressure to come down from their supposed ivory tower and respond more effectively to the messy real world needs of their research users.

Clearly, researchers on the one hand and policy makers and practitioners on the other do have interests and needs in common, but they also have their own equally legitimate objectives and traditions which need to be recognised. We would argue that seeking to overlook these differences or to suppress them artificially by blurring the boundaries between research and policy is neither healthy nor desirable and will prove damaging in the long term. So how can we formulate the relationship in a way which respects difference as well as promoting collaboration where appropriate?

A tale of two communities – or several?

Caplan's (1979) 'two-communities theory' has been an influential conceptualisation of the separateness of research and policy-making. We take 'community' to mean any set of social relationships operating within certain boundaries or territories. This encompasses both symbolic understandings of community, where the boundaries are metaphorical and normative, as well as the physical, geographical territories used below as a device to explore symbolic communities.[1]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746404002003 Published online by Cambridge University Press

But where does the practice community fit in this model? So far the relationship has been presented as a simple dichotomy, which assumes that the interests of policy makers and practitioners are identical; note, for example, how the ministerial statements above refer variously to 'society', 'policy makers', 'government' and 'people's life chances', implying their interests are common and that research is failing them all equally.

However, it may be more useful to identify several different communities of interest, sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting. Policy makers might like to believe practitioners want the same as them, but practitioners themselves may want very different things from research, and may view research which serves government interests with suspicion.

The concept of community also risks downplaying divergent interests within each group – civil servants versus ministers amongst the policy makers, for example, or managers versus professionals within welfare services. Furthermore, there are other groups with a legitimate interest in research evidence and its application, including service users and citizens/tax-payers, which may be different again to those of both policy makers and practitioners. For the moment, however, we focus on the three communities of research, policy and practice.

Worlds apart?

The use of a geographical metaphor to explore cultural difference and puzzlement is a time-honoured tradition. As with Gulliver's Travels, it can also shed light on how odd our own customs and values would appear to a notional outsider. We feel it has much to offer in the new context of the evidence-based policy and practice movement and the pressure to produce 'useful' research.

Research, policy and practice can be imagined as neighbouring island states, separated by narrow stretches of water. Each island state is home to a range of different people, but bound together by a common language, norms, tradition and ritual. Citizens of each state have to meet certain obligations to their community; failure to meet these requirements could result in loss of citizenship, and therefore expecting people to act in breach of their obligations would be unreasonable.

Each state has different and complementary raw materials and skills, which it is to their mutual benefit to share. How do these islands live in peace and work co-operatively together, without losing their cultural identity? People who can span the boundary and build bridges will be essential. There will be senior diplomats, who can negotiate and maintain peace, represent their community's interest to the others, and identify opportunities to develop alliances and exchange. Traders may travel across the islands, exploring new markets and looking for ways of selling raw materials and refined products in both directions. Linguists and translators will be hard at work supporting these endeavours, helping the different communities to understand the language of the others and perhaps to learn to speak it themselves without the aid of translation. Some people may choose to settle for a while on another island, bringing some of their skills directly to their new community.

However, those working in these boundary spanning roles are likely to remain a minority, clustered around the shore. Most people will remain far inland, carrying out

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746404002003 Published online by Cambridge University Press

their normal tasks to support their own community. They will not bother to learn a new language or travel abroad, and indeed it might distract them from the task in hand. The fruits of their labours may well spread to the neighbouring islands through the merchants, the diplomats and the bridge builders, but they themselves remain firmly within their own cultural tradition. Some of their efforts will only ever be for local benefit.

Community relations: co-operation or convergence?

What are the practical implications for research of viewing the communities in this way?[2] A number of strategies have been examined to bring researchers closer to practitioners and policy makers, including physical co-location, formal and informal partnerships, which allow researchers to test out research findings and encourage collaborative reflection, and encouraging practitioners to carry out their own research rather than relying on academics. Researchers who choose to engage in joint working with colleagues 'across the water' in the worlds of policy and practice, whether as programme evaluators or invited experts, benefit from learning how things are in that other world. The last thing different communities want is to be constantly engaged in border skirmishes and wars of words, brought on by a lack of understanding of our neighbours' traditions and practices.

A recent review of the evidence (Walter *et al*., 2003) suggests some increase in research impact arising from strategies aimed at bringing researchers, policy makers and practitioners closer together, but notes that differences in culture, goals, information needs, timescales, reward systems and language remain substantial barriers. For example, researchers have an obligation to their community to meet Research Assessment Exercise targets and to satisfy peer reviewers that their methods are rigorous and appropriate, whilst practitioners may have a duty to stay within budget or meet government targets. Their respective reward systems are based on very different requirements.

Whilst we would not disagree with the broad aim of improving research impact, there is a danger that recommendations for bringing communities closer together will be misinterpreted as meaning that everyone has to work in this boundary-spanning capacity and that research not conducted in this way will be discredited and undervalued. Similarly, there is a risk that practitioners who just carry on doing their job and do not engage in research will be regarded as in some way 'second class'.

Three particular concerns arise in response to this growing interest in convergence: firstly, that the role of academics as a source of critical reflection on past, current and future social change might be undermined. Secondly, a focus on research that meets government priorities at *all* times would mean a very restricted research agenda. Finally, not all researchers are, or need to be, suited to highly applied research and often find themselves encouraged into uncomfortable roles as facilitators of organisational and policy change. Similarly, how interested are practitioners and policy makers in becoming researchers? We address each of these in turn.

A distinct contribution of academic research through time has been critical reflection, facilitated by a certain distance from the concerns of policy and practice. The ability to root policy in social, political and historical contexts is of potentially great value in learning

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746404002003 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from past policy programmes and avoiding reinvention. The space to reflect and discuss trends and ideas is a luxury available to few policy makers. Sometimes it is useful to be separated from problems by a stretch of water.

Researchers left to their own devices will often set off down avenues of enquiry that seem initially to have little relevance to policy and practice. Sometimes this remains the case and the contribution of the research is in terms of its addition to the body of knowledge or theory development. Sometimes researchers who are 'off message' pursuing 'blue skies' research will in fact generate findings of value to policy and practice. As Hammersely (2000: 169) suggests, allowing this to happen 'requires sustained work over a long period, not short bursts of activity geared to political and practical priorities'. A recent example is the application of pioneering research on game theory at University College London to the design of a new style of auction for mobile phone licenses, which raised £22 billion for the UK Treasury in 2000. A triumph for quiet progress in the hinterlands?

As noted earlier, there are other constituencies whose needs may not be served by a narrow conception of research utility driven by either government or professional priorities. An example might be long-standing research findings of low take-up rates for means-tested benefits (e.g. Oorschott, 2002). This is undoubtedly policy-relevant research of profound importance for benefit recipients and wider society, but not exactly useful in the short term to a government committed to a policy of greater targeting. Caplan (1979: 468) argues:

> While the potential for improving utilization at this level of social problem solving is great, such arrangements will be unlikely to succeed if premised on the technological conception of knowledge use which now dominates utilization theory, research, and action.

In a recent review, Innvær *et al*. (2002: 242) report that health policy makers 'find it easier to use evidence they have had a chance to influence' – but is this desirable? The authors note that:

> The 'two-communities' thesis sheds light on an important possible paradox . . . The factors that facilitate use of research may not necessarily be factors that researchers should seek to enhance. If what is required for research is that researchers do what the policy maker wants them to do, then research may fail to fulfil one of its most important functions, namely to be objective, reliable and unbiased.

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges in promoting integration and partnerships is the skills and inclination gap. Increasingly policy evaluations take intrepid researchers into new realms of activity requiring a broad range of skills and competencies. For example, they may be asked for advice on organisational development issues, such as change management, developing partnerships and involving service users (Boaz and Hayden, 2002). The skills required for organisational development and research implementation are quite different to those required for research, and while a few skilled individuals may be able to do both, we must beware of inexpert intervention causing more problems than it solves. Specialist support from professional boundary spanners in communicating research to policy makers and practitioners would be a valuable resource for researchers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746404002003 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While it looks impractical and undesirable to turn all researchers into practitioners and policy makers, it has been argued that the only way to promote the use of research is to take the contrary imperial route and convert everyone else into researchers. Stenhouse (1979), Hargreaves (1996) and Fox (2003) argue that practice-based research will promote the better translation of findings into practice. Fox argues that the separation and specialism of the research process militates against research use. Stenhouse and Hargreaves both suggest that research designed and carried out by teachers is more likely to be taken up into classroom practice. In response, the Teacher Training Agency is actively promoting teacher involvement in research. While the promotion of practice-based research is laudable, we would promote caution on a number of grounds. Firstly, this is an ambitious goal for such a small and relatively marginal community. It relies on a questionable assumption about the interest other communities would have in becoming researchers. While we know little about practitioner attitudes to involvement in research, we know even less about the reality of policy-maker interest in participating in research. Evaluations of initiatives designed to promote new models of research will provide valuable insights into the practicability of this strategy.

Secondly, quite apart from the fact that this strategy is unlikely to be attractive to many practitioners and policy makers or to match their skills, it also risks undervaluing the importance of their practice-based knowledge as something separate from research. Hammersley (2000: 170–171), responding especially to Hargreaves (1996), argues that in education much recent research on the nature of teaching:

> has emphasised the extent to which it is practical rather than technical in character; in brief, that it is a matter of making judgements rather than following rules . . . This line of argument throws doubt on the idea that teaching can be *based* on research knowledge. It implies that it necessarily depends on experience, wisdom, local knowledge and judgement. And it seems likely that it is precisely the practical character of teaching, as much as any failing on the part of researchers, which is the main source of the yawning gap between theory and practice that Hargreaves bemoans.

Not all knowledge has to be turned into research to be of use. Finally, this approach risks devaluing the skills acquired and nurtured by professional researchers. As with other professions, researchers bring substantial training and experience to bear on the process of designing and conducting research. Although medicine is often seen as an example of successful involvement of practitioners (in this case doctors) in research, Altman (1994: 283) is critical of the fact that doctors 'feel compelled for career reasons to carry out research that they are ill equipped to perform, and nobody stops them'. The result is research 'that is seriously flawed through use of inappropriate designs, unrepresentative samples, small samples, incorrect methods of analysis, and faulty interpretation'. The inspiration behind the evidence-based medicine movement was precisely to distinguish high quality sources of evidence and ensure these were the foundation for practice.

Of course, none of this should suggest that interest in research should not be supported and nurtured. Developing better practice in gathering input from a wide variety of stakeholders continues to receive considerable attention within the research community (Hanley *et al*., 2000). It is more a question of playing to people's strengths and resisting

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746404002003 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the imposition of a new dogma that research use will only improve if practitioners do the research.

A treaty for future co-operation

Researchers perhaps tend to an unrealistic view of the importance of their world *vis-à-vis* policy and practice. Research is, after all, just one piece of a rather complicated jigsaw (with pieces missing and no box!). The idea of the researcher 'on top' directly influencing policy decisions or 'on tap' as the policy maker's right-hand adviser have been largely discredited through the work of Carol Weiss and others (Weiss and Bucuvalas, 1980; Young *et al*., 2002). The worlds of policy and practice are fraught with competing internal interests, particularly with regard to the short-term priorities of politicians. Furthermore other communities have powerful lobbies at work influencing the policy agenda. There is still scope for researchers to get a better grasp of 'policy geography' and their own place within it.

Gaining a better understanding of the landscape may help us to exploit our resources better in future. For example, in addition to scope for independence, reflection and distance, researchers can also trade on the quality of their products. The research community has generated standards, procedures and checklists to promote the production of high-quality, transparent products. These processes aim to make research a robust and reliable source of knowledge. This is not to say that there are not issues about the quality of the research produced for 'export' that need to be addressed if we really want to trade on this strength (Hargreaves, 1996). The challenge of promoting quality also has implications for the ways in which we invest in the skills and capacity of the next generation of researchers.

It may also be time to think again about promoting boundary spanning roles. The growing numbers of social researchers within government may well offer an opportunity to think again about the need for research findings to be 'translated' for policy users. Other audiences may well benefit from facilitated sessions, focusing on specific pieces of research, offered by organisations such as Research in Practice (www.rip.org.uk). Not all this work needs to be done by every researcher.

A vision for the future might include:

- An active, well-trained 'diplomatic' corps acting on behalf of the research community in the world of policy and practice.
- Increased 'travel' for all those with an interest in seeing 'the other side' through secondments and placements, for researchers, policy makers and practitioners.
- A reinvigorated civic pride amongst researchers in what researchers have to offer, coupled with an investment in ensuring continuing improvement in research products.
- Embracing opportunities for collaborative working with policy makers and practitioners.
- An appreciation of diversity *within* research, with space for policy research and evaluations, theoretical and conceptual research and blue skies research – Research Assessment Exercise, please take note.
- Valuing all the different types of knowledge that impact upon policy and practice (such as practitioner knowledge) and learning to appreciate their relative strengths and weaknesses.
- Encouragement of migration for those with an adventurous nature.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746404002003 Published online by Cambridge University Press

As a research community we have the potential to provide our neighbours with a good deal of support in their endeavours: our difference and our distance are often our strengths. We have the potential to embark upon a wide range of (useful) research that serves the broader, 'global agenda' and is not tightly defined by one set of (ever-changing) policy priorities. This is perhaps the moment for researchers to take up the challenge of closer engagement while at the same time celebrating what the research community has to offer as a world somewhat apart from policy and practice.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the following for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article: Professor Jane Lewis, University of Oxford; Dr Sandra Nutley, University of St Andrew's; Professor Jan Pahl, University of Kent; Bill Solesbury, Queen Mary, University of London; the editor and the anonymous referees.

Notes

1 Communities can of course foster 'borders, dichotomies and exclusions' (Young, 1990: 301) and suppress internal difference in pursuit of homogeneity. Lister proposes an 'alternative, pluralist conception of community', which 'instead of obscuring diversity, division and difference ..... would place them centre stage' in an attempt to acknowledge and reconcile difference (1997: 84).

2 Although we are primarily concerned with the research community's relationship with the other two communities, the analogy could equally be extended to the relationship between policy and practice.

References

Altman, D.G. (1994), 'The scandal of poor medical research', *British Medical Journal*, 308, 283–284.

Amis, K. (1954), *Lucky Jim*, London: Penguin (reprinted in Penguin Classics, 2000).

Boaz, A. and Hayden, C. (2002), 'Pro-active evaluators: enabling research to be useful, useable and used', *Evaluation*, 8, 4, 440–453.

Blunkett, D. (2000), 'Influence or irrelevance: can social science improve government?', Speech to a meeting convened by the Economic and Social Research Council, 2 February 2000.

Caplan, N. (1979), 'The two-communities theory and knowledge utilisation', *American Behavioural Scientist*, 22, 3, 459–470.

Fox, N. (2003), 'Practice-based evidence: towards collaborative and transgressive research', *Sociology*, 37, 1, 81–102.

Hammersley, M. (2000), 'Evidence-based practice in education and the contribution of educational research', in L. Trinder and S. Reynolds (eds), *Evidence-based Practice: A Critical Appraisal*, Oxford: Blackwell Science.

Hanley, B., Bradburn, J., Gorin, S., Barnes, M., Evans, C., Goodare, H., Kelson, M., Kent, A., Oliver, S., and Wallcraft, J. (2000), *Involving Consumers in Research and Development in the NHS: Briefing Notes For Researchers*, Eastleigh: Consumers in NHS Research Support Unit.

Hargreaves, D.H. (1996), *Teaching as a research based profession: possibilities and prospects*, Teacher Training Agency, Portland House, Stag Place, London SW1E 5TJ (Teacher Training Agency Annual Lecture).

Innvær, S., Vist, G., Trommald, M., and Oxman, A. (2002), 'Health policy-makers' perceptions of their use of evidence: a systematic review', *Journal of Health Services Research and Policy*, 7, 4, 239–244.

Lister, R. (1997), *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746404002003 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Oorschot, W. van (2002), 'Targeting welfare: on the functions and dysfunctions of means-testing in social policy', in P. Townsend and D. Gordon (eds), *World Poverty: New Policies to Defeat an Old Enemy*, Bristol: The Policy Press, pp. 171–193.

Stenhouse, L. (1979), 'Using research means doing research', in H. Dahl *et al*. (eds), *Spotlight on Educational Research*, Oslo: Oslo University Press.

Walter, I., Nutley, S., and Davies, H. (2003), 'Research impact: a cross-sector literature review', Research Unit for Research Utilisation, Dept. of Management, St. Andrew's University, St Andrew's.

Weiss, C.H. and Bucuvalas, M.J. (1980), *Social Science Research and Decision Making*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Young, I.M. (1990), 'The ideal of community and the politics of difference', in L.J. Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism*, New York: Routledge.

Young, K., Ashby, D., Boaz, A., and Grayson, L. (2002), 'Social science and the evidence based policy movement', *Social Policy and Politics*, 1, 3, 215–224.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746404002003 Published online by Cambridge University Press