

## **The future of Evidence & Policy: moving forward from Valencia**

In celebrating the first ten years of *Evidence & Policy* we wanted to think expansively and creatively about how to move the field forward and identify ways in which *Evidence & Policy* can contribute to such an advance. To help with this mission, we held a two-day international meeting in Valencia, Spain, in October 2015. The meeting brought together members of the editorial team (Annette Boaz, David Gough, Kathryn Oliver and Sarah Morton), the editorial management board (Vivian Tseng and Julia Mortimer), the international editorial advisory board (Jack Spaapen and Jordi Molas Gallart), and colleagues from the US who share our interest in the use of research evidence (Cynthia Coburn, Larry Palinkas and Liz Farley Ripple).

We felt it was important to begin with an expansive discussion of the fields relating to evidence and policy. The journal seeks to attract contributions from authors considering the use of evidence in a wide range of policy fields, but also at different levels (encompassing policy and practice domains). Through the different sections (research, debate and practice) we also hope to encourage different types of stakeholders to contribute. This approach is well illustrated by the papers in this issue, which cover the topics of child welfare, drug policy, social work, health promotion, physical activity and obesity and include both research and practice papers. We have papers considering the role of evidence in policy (Van Toorn and Dowse) and others looking at evidence use by organizations, managers and front line staff (Pettman et al). The journal also takes a broad approach to what constitutes knowledge for policy and how this might be assessed. In this issue, the paper by Björk focuses on the use of the results of specific programmes that are explicitly defined as evidence-based, whereas Castellani and colleagues consider the diverse types of evidence used in physical activity policy making in Italy.

### **This issue**

The first paper in this issue considers the role of evidence in two policy debates in Australia. Set against the backdrop of a government commitment to evidence-based policy since the 2007 election, the paper addresses the use of evidence as a discursive tool in framing and representing policy problems. The paper explores the ways in which groups mobilize around the discourse of EBP and use it to validate and contest different perspectives. A key difference between the two examples explored in the paper was the extent to which the perspectives were contested. While *The War on Drugs* debate was highly polarized, the goal to end violence against children was shared by stakeholders. The analysis suggests that while evidence plays an important role in problem framing, it will have little influence in situations where there is frame conflict amongst different policy actors and communities. The analysis also suggests that although evidence makes certain courses of action appear valid or credible, what counts as quality evidence is different in policy and academic contexts. In this study, the authors suggest that quality in a policy context encompasses availability, practicality and appropriateness as well as the political and moral agendas of policy practitioners and communities.

The potential of systematic reviews as a source of evidence for policy and practice has been explored many times in previous issues of the journal. A second paper from Australia describes the development of a programme designed to build capacity for the use of systematic review evidence in policy work. The paper presents the findings of a study designed to investigate policy makers' perceptions of the programme (the Policy Liaison Initiative, a joint initiative of the Australasian Cochrane Centre and the Australian

Government Department of Health). Brennan and colleagues conclude that there is a need for closer cooperation between researchers and policy makers if systematic reviews are to be increasingly useful and used in practice.

The next paper considers fidelity of the implementation of an intervention, one of the core concepts in the literature on evidence-based interventions (Fixsen 2009). Using the example of the implementation of Motivational Interviewing in a Swedish social service agency, this paper draws on science and technology studies to explore the ways an intervention is translated into practice. The study concludes that the multiple uses of motivational interviewing identified can be interpreted as adjustments or translations in order to fit organizational goals, rationalities and constraints. The author concludes that focusing on fidelity may divert attention from the critical interplay between local context and the intervention. As Björk concludes, 'there might be good organizational reasons for "bad" treatment fidelity'. Another example of 'infidelity' in implementation is provided by Walton, who considers the application of complexity theory through a case study of the implementation and evaluation of a 'fruit in schools' programme in New Zealand. The study describes the impact of a change of government on the programme where the new regime retained one element of the intervention (the free fruit in schools), but not the infrastructure that supported it. The author concludes that programme framing and governance arrangements can provide the mechanisms for applying complexity theory within evaluation, programme and policy processes.

The next paper explores the use of scientific research in what is described as meta-policy. The study formed part of the REPOPA project ([www.repopa.eu](http://www.repopa.eu)), a five-year European research programme on policy making and research use in the field of physical activity. Focusing on an Italian case study, the author examined different sources of evidence and their interaction over a long policy trajectory, involving multiple stakeholders. The study explores the relationship between research evidence and contextual knowledge and knowledge transfer and exchange between the national and local levels. As with the first study in this issue (Van Toorn and Dowse), Castellani and colleagues found that key individuals' (described here as pivot people), interactions between individuals and individual-level factors played a critical role in the use of evidence.

This issue of the journal also features two practice papers, the first from Australia and the second from Canada. The first, by Pettman and colleagues, describes the implementation and evaluation of a national multi-level knowledge translation and exchange platform for community-based interventions tackling obesity in Australia. Known as CO-OPS, the platform delivers knowledge transfer and exchange activities with the explicit aim of boosting the reach, quality and effectiveness of community-based obesity prevention efforts. Evaluating complex multi-level knowledge transfer and exchange programmes involving activities such as networking, information exchange and capacity building is notoriously difficult. The details of the evaluation plan will be of use to others aiming to evaluate knowledge transfer and exchange interventions targeting community-based organisations and practitioners.

The second practice paper, from Canada, describes two initiatives run by the Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health that support evidence-informed decision making at practice and policy levels. The two initiatives: Evidence In-Sight and policy papers, each provide up-to-date, relevant evidence to support organizational decision making and to inform provincial policy development in the field of child and youth mental health. Notarianni and colleagues describe the ways in which these services are positioned to

overcome known barriers to the uptake of evidence, and ultimately work to enhance knowledge use. In particular, knowledge users are involved throughout the process and tailored evidence summaries are produced in a timely way.

### **Emerging themes**

*Evidence & Policy* was set up with three sections – research, debate and practice – to encourage different types of contributions from varying stakeholders in the use of evidence. This issue contains research and practice papers in which the themes chime with our discussions in Valencia. Themes continue to emerge from across the papers and sections, including in this issue the role of interactions in promoting research use (Van Toorn and Dowse and Brennan et al.), the role of evaluation in capturing learning on research impact (Pettman et al and Walton) and the use of evidence at different points of the policy process, such as framing problems (Van Toorn and Dowse) and developing interventions (Björk). The two practice papers show the value of providing space for those engaged in the practice of promoting research use (including its evaluation) to contribute to the debate about how we enhance the relationship between evidence, policy and practice.

The journal is multi-topic and multi-discipline and the editorial team tries to cover this range of domains through our own diverse areas of expertise and those of our international advisory board members. This approach has the advantage of connecting individuals and their ideas across different areas, but moving among so many domains is also challenging. Translating concepts, methods and approaches across fields can lead to a multiplicity of interpretations – sometimes useful, sometimes not. Thus, we are constantly forced to ask difficult questions: for instance, how do the concepts of implementation science, knowledge mobilization and research impact fit together? Thinking through this issue has made us consider the unique contribution of the journal in this space. We have summarized this contribution as the rigorous application of social science theory and methods to the understanding of the interactions between evidence (knowledge, research, expertise) and policy and practice.

### **Moving forward**

At our recent planning meeting in Valencia, we couldn't help feeling that those of us working on the use of evidence in policy and practice would benefit from spending more time together discussing our research, our methods and our learning. Many of us have been working on similar matters and motivated by similar concerns, but because we have been addressing different subject areas and drawing from different theoretical frames, we have not been able to sufficiently connect what we are learning and collectively grapple with the challenges faced in our work.

The journal should help us here, but we also discussed whether we should try to establish the other foundations that constitute a research 'field'. Should we establish regular international meetings and a professional association? We concluded, for now, that moving towards further 'institutionalisation' of our activities into a new field of research could lessen our current engagement with a broad variety of policy domains and geographic locations. We concluded that *Evidence & Policy* should remain broad in its scope, encouraging synergy across fields of practice and academic disciplines. There should be room within our journal for contributions from, for example, knowledge mobilization, implementation science and science and technology studies. We retain an ambition to draw together individuals from the different fields of study and practice to discuss overarching issues of evidence use.

In particular, our colleagues from the U.S. expressed an eagerness to further connect their work with the wider international community. With this goal in mind, the William T. Grant Foundation will be inviting a number of individuals from the evidence-use community outside the U.S. to join its next conference on the use of research evidence in April 2016 in Washington DC.

### **Promoting quality**

We also want to turn our attention to the quality of research in our field. We take a broad view of quality, which includes quality in reporting research, and we encourage contributors to prepare manuscripts that are fluent and accessible to our wide audience of policy makers, practitioners and academics. For the research section of *Evidence & Policy*, we wish to continue to attract high-quality, rigorous studies of evidence use. We are, for instance, looking for contributions that draw on existing social science theory to explore challenges to evidence use (such as the literature on learning). In this current issue of the journal, papers draw on a wide range of theory, including complexity theory (Walton) and theoretical developments in the field of science and technology studies (Björk). In addition, we are committed to methodological pluralism, to combining methods where this approach is fit for purpose, to avoid the dichotomizing inter-method strife between those advocating trials and hierarchies of evidence and those who don't. For example, in this issue, we have papers employing case studies, interviews and documentary analysis, and ethnographic approaches. We are interested in examples of methodological development (such as Castellani's work in this issue on citation networks). We would also like to offer a space for those working to co-create knowledge with stakeholders to share their findings. Studies that compare across fields and between different country contexts would also be of considerable interest to the journal.

We want to move on from the now well-known lists of barriers and facilitators to evidence use to a deeper understanding of the relationship between evidence, policy and practice. We would like to put behind us the notion that evidence-based policy was anything more than a rhetorical device. As a journal, we are now in a position to draw together the theories and empirical studies that have been conducted over the past 40 years, and identify the future research agenda for this community.

### **What can the journal do?**

Going forward, we hope to be more proactive in commissioning papers that help to take thinking in the field forward – for example, in considering the role of different methodological approaches to examining innovation in the use of research in policy and practice, including models of co-production of research. In particular, we hope to encourage potential authors in different countries to collaborate on comparative pieces where similar initiatives are being tested in different country contexts. The journal will continue to support methodological diversity, inter-disciplinarity and the development and use of theory.

We aim to make our expectations clearer in terms of reporting research (particularly with regards to the theory and data presented in papers). We are also considering more structured abstracts to improve the accessibility of our papers to readers and clarity about their contributions to the literature. In the coming months, we will be revisiting our guidelines for authors to ensure that this information reflects the direction of travel of the journal.

We also plan to celebrate early career researchers in this field through the launch of the Carol Weiss Prize. Carol Weiss was the first North American Editor of *Evidence & Policy* and her

seminal theoretical and empirical work on knowledge utilization continues to influence the field.

There is more we can do, with our authors, to promote the use of our papers. This is key to a journal committed to the use of evidence in policy and practice. We will seek to make better use of blogs and Twitter to promote our content. Our publishers, Policy Press, are keen to work closely with authors in this area and to look at our copy as a whole and the implications for promoting use.

Finally, we would love to hear from you. Our associate editor, Kathryn Oliver, has been working hard to make the *Evidence & Policy* twitter account a hub for the journal's community of readers and contributors. In addition, the Editors (Annette Boaz and David Gough) are always keen to hear directly from you via e-mail ([d.gough@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:d.gough@ioe.ac.uk); [a.boaz@sgul.kingston.ac.uk](mailto:a.boaz@sgul.kingston.ac.uk))

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