

# Editorial: new evidence and policy research, well-established themes

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*Evidence & Policy* exists to explore a general question: what is the link between the production of evidence and its use in policy and practice? This question is necessarily broad and interpreted in different ways by a wide variety of approaches. As such, it is difficult to provide a short and simple overall narrative of the articles that we publish in each issue or to extend that narrative to multiple issues. This is one reason why we are changing how we approach Editorials: with the exception of guest-edited Special Issues, we will no longer try to introduce each issue of *Evidence & Policy* and will instead publish an annual Editorial, in which we introduce the first issue of the year and take stock of how these relate to insights over the past year.

## Relating new research to well-established concerns

As such, in this editorial, we not only introduce the first issue of 2021 but also relate it to key insights over 2020 as a whole. Although we focus only on one year, our aim is to demonstrate how to connect new work to established themes or concerns.

To provide some structure to this summary, we ask of each article: what problem do the authors identify, how does their research help address it, and what issues remain?

### What problem do the authors identify?

In this issue, we find a range of problems or research questions, from narrow technical issues on methods to expansive accounts of entire fields. Practical problems include:

1. *To facilitate the use of evidence*
  - How knowledge brokers can help facilitate the use of knowledge in policy and practice (Waring et al, 2021)
  - How knowledge brokers operate in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), in a context where global north countries tend to dominate evidence, theories and frameworks (Norton et al, 2021)
  - How academic-practitioner partnerships can be maintained and expanded (Bacon et al, 2021).
  - How to solve the ‘transdisciplinary problems’ that arise when researchers and practitioners collaborate to address ‘wicked’ policy problems (Neely et al, 2021).
2. *To improve and demonstrate the impact of research*
  - How social science and humanities scholars can demonstrate their impact on policy and practice (Aiello et al, 2021).
  - How to provide rapid evidence synthesis to meet research demands (in healthcare) (Chambers et al, 2021).
  - What to do when the evidence suggests that a new policy or initiative does not improve policy outcomes (Woolham et al, 2021).
3. *To understand the capacity to use knowledge*

- To understand how practitioners use different types of - ‘empirical, technical and practical’- knowledge in their daily work (Brynnner and Terje, 2021).
- How to identify ‘individual and organisational capacity for evidence use’ (Asgharzadeh et al, 2021).

Wider philosophical problems include how to *understand* the promotion of evidence use in policy and practice. In this issue, Sheldrick et al (2021) explore the now-classic distinction between the pursuit of research:

1. To promote the idea of universal best practice, to facilitate the ‘wide-scale implementation’ of very similar interventions
2. To promote the tailoring of interventions to specific contexts, by supporting expert judgement, which is also informed by stakeholder and user knowledge.

### **How does Evidence & Policy research help?**

Most articles in Evidence & Policy seek to move beyond critique and offer some practical solutions to the challenges they raise. The latest issue suggests that we can improve the use of evidence in policy and practice by:

1. *Improving roles, practices, and tools, and reflecting on progress*
  - clarifying the role of key actors, such as by categorising different ‘epistemic communities’ and identifying the multiple types of required knowledge brokerage to help those communities interact (Waring et al, 2021)
  - making sure that knowledge brokers maintain close and frequent contact with research producers and users, such as by being ‘embedded’ in practice, which allows them to tailor evidence to context and influence practitioner receptiveness to research (Norton et al, 2021).
  - providing a realistic assessment of academic-practitioner partnerships, identifying not only their value but also the factors that cause their ‘fragility’ (Bacon et al, 2021).
  - using general insights from ‘systems thinking’ and specific models (such as ‘collaborative conceptual modelling’) to help ‘translate’ insights between participants (Neely et al, 2021).
2. *Comparing success stories with impact problems*
  - identifying the strategies that aid social science and humanities impact, including the production of an impact strategy, including stakeholders and end-users in research activities, coordinating researcher and user activity, and encouraging the use of research in public deliberation (Aiello et al, 2021)
  - identifying the available evidence, engaging as early and often as possible with stakeholders, and being flexible to adapt to the ways of working in policy and practice (Chambers et al, 2021).
  - highlighting the great potential for policymakers to adopt policies despite the absence of supportive evidence (Woolham et al, 2021).
3. *Gauging research use capacity and relating it to practitioner knowledge*
  - identifying the need to understand how ‘practice wisdom’ relates to the use of empirical and technical research (Brynnner and Terje, 2021).

- assessing the research tools that we use to identify evidence-use capacity (Asgharzadeh, et al, 2021).

In addition, we should make sure we regularly step back and reflect on the purpose of research in a wider political and policymaking context, to avoid an overly technocratic or rationalistic approach to evidence use (Sheldrick et al, 2021).

### **What issues remain?**

In most cases, authors identify the current limits to progress, some of which relate to a tendency for their research to not represent the norm. Knowledge brokerage is difficult because it requires many strategies and skills that may not yet be possessed by single actors (Waring et al, 2021). Although we can identify some good practice and success, there is a major lack of a supportive structure for routine knowledge brokering (Norton et al, 2021). Partnerships between academics and practitioners are possible, but different cultures and uncertainty about funding always cause them to be fragile (Bacon et al, 2021). Indeed, it may even be difficult to secure the participation of practitioners in the workshops and training necessary for ‘translation’ exercises (Neely et al, 2021).

As such, we can conceptualise how practitioners relate new knowledge to their existing knowledge, but know little of this relationship in most cases (Brynnner and Terje, 2021). Nor do we have the statistical tools to provide an accurate measure of evidence use capacity (Asgharzadeh, et al, 2021). In that context, demonstrating impact is possible, but few organisations yet take the approach described by Aiello et al (2021). Rapid evidence synthesis is useful, but it is difficult to tell how widespread are useful models (Chambers et al, 2021).

In some cases, the additional problem may be a tendency not to reflect enough on how these specific issues relate to a wider purpose (Sheldrick et al, 2021). Or, studies may restate the important maxim that ‘the evidence’ is contested and does not simply win the day in policymaking (Woolham et al, 2021).

### **Connecting this issue to previous work**

There are many ways to connect each article, such as by focusing on the research problem, object of analysis (such as a type of policy sector or profession), or method of study. Examples include:

- *Understanding practitioners and practice-based knowledge.* Brynnner and Terje’s (2021) ethnographic approach is comparable to the ethnographic study of behavioural insight teams (Ball & Feitsma, 2020), while its focus on practitioner knowledge was also explored by Andrews et al (2020).
- *The politics of evidence in policy* Reflecting Sheldrick et al’s (2021) call to reflect more on the wider political and policymaking context in which policy is used, Yingling and Mallinson (2020) explicitly consider political factors shaping evidence use in US states, while Rose et al (2020) explore how evidence is used in the deeply political context of the UK parliament. Several other studies of the role that evidence has played in particular decisions, or for particular issues, also highlighted how politics and evidence are constantly interacting. This included DuVal and Shah’s (2020) qualitative study of the factors behind HIV policy decision-making in nine African countries, and Paul and

Pafinger's (2020) innovative citizen science study of policy discourses and decisions around the HPV vaccine in Austria.

- *Contrasting democratic engagement with evidence-based policy.* Continuing the focus on politics but from a more democratic perspective, Pallet (2020) used an ethnographic study of a UK government-funded public participation in science programme to consider the advantages and disadvantages of categorising public participation as a source of evidence-based policy (as opposed to presenting participation as a democratic act which is distinct from evidence-based policy). In a similar vein, both Smith-Merry (2020) and Mazanderani et al (2020) consider potential tensions between claims that are presented as 'evidence-based' and those that are presented as experiential.
- *Reflecting on collaboration.* Several articles explore their experiences of knowledge brokerage and translation, including Melville-Richards et al (2020) on shared ideas, van der Graaf et al (2020) on FUSE (to translate public health research), and Tindal (2020) on what motivates academics to engage.
- *Researching the potential for online technology.* Woolham et al's (2021) concern about low understanding of the evidence on e-health is shared by Asthana et al (2020).

**References** (note: we only include references to the articles that do not appear in the new issue)

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