



## Debate: So near and yet so far—bridging the research–practice divide

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## Debate: So near and yet so far—bridging the research–practice divide

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Many public services have taken up the call to become more evidence based in their policy and practice by using research to inform and improve their services. However, multiple studies across a number of different public sector disciplines have indicated that, despite the increasing recognition of the value of research, practice does not tend to be guided by research evidence. Taking policing as an example, this article highlights a key reason for this and proposes a way forward that may have positive implications for wider public services.

### The research to practice paradox

There are academics who are committed to working not only on creating knowledge but also working with policy-makers and practitioners to get research into practice. They are engaged in, for example, action research, participatory research, collaborative networks and improvement science approaches to this end. Indeed, research into practice has been the subject of important research studies in its own right with the emergence of implementation science, the results from which are not always systematically applied by academics themselves.

Part of the problem also lies with the practitioner and public sector organizations more widely. In policing, for example, the systematic integration of research into policing practice appears to be lagging behind other professions. This can be attributed to police officers being more inclined to place their faith in their own professional expertise rather than research for informing their practice (Stanko & Dawson, 2016): policing being seen as a craft of practical wisdom with no room for science (Fleming & Rhodes, 2017). Furthermore, policing practitioners often find themselves without the time, capability, capacity, or organizational support to directly implement the research into practice (Lum & Koper, 2017), even when they are inclined to do so; these factors are not unique to policing.

### Practitioner–academic partnerships

The development of practitioner–academic partnerships at the institutional level, rather than the individual level, has some success towards narrowing this gap with examples of productive partnerships in local government and health. Such collaborations take an approach to knowledge production, where ‘knowledge is developed in the context of application’ (Bartunek, 2011, p. 555). This recognizes and

respects the skills and values of each partner while also challenging each about assumptions, evidence-base, and practices. The rationale being that, from the outset, the research will be academically rigorous but will also have relevancy to practice and will garner more buy in and take up from the practitioners, especially if the intended benefits to practice are articulated from the start (Nutley et al., 2007).

There are examples of successful police–academic partnerships within UK policing (for example the Centre for Policing Research and Learning at The Open University and the N8 Police Research Partnership) that generate research evidence through such an approach and which are able to showcase the impact of this co-produced research on policy and practice through innovative and creative ways. However, as a whole, the systematic integration of research evidence into policing practice still has some way to go.

To enable the benefits of co-produced research to be realized, the collaborative approach to knowledge production should extend to the translation and implementation of research into practice and develop into both research and knowledge mobilization partnerships. Police–academic partnerships need to engage in what Graham et al. (2018) refer to as ‘integrated knowledge translation’: engaging the users of research in the different phases of its production so as to build up users’ capacity and capability to be both intelligent consumers and customers of research. But also, importantly, engaging both the academics and the practitioners in the design and delivery of the actual implementation of research-informed solutions in practice. It is about building research and knowledge mobilization partnerships around the processes and products of knowledge production *and* their mobilization into practice, while taking into account both the individual characteristics of researchers and practitioners, as well as the institutional and organizational forces governing both sets of partners (Tkachenko et al., 2017).

Research attention in this area has thus far usefully focused on factors impacting on the development and sustainability of such partnerships (for example Rojek et al., 2015) but it would be helpful to have more sophisticated evaluation of whether and how such partnership approaches, encompassing both knowledge production and mobilization, might impact on the reduction of the research–practice gap (Graham et al., 2018; Saunders et al., 2020). This would involve evaluating the impact of the research on practice itself and testing the effectiveness of

different knowledge mobilization interventions in a policing context. The translation effort needs to be better understood and the successes and failures from this work shared widely across the public sector.

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