

Why 'knowledge transfer' is misconceived for applied social research

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'Knowledge transfer' has become established as shorthand for a wide variety of activities linking the production of academic knowledge to the potential use of such knowledge in non-academic environments. While welcoming the attention now being paid to non-academic applications of social research, we contend that terms such as knowledge transfer (and its subordinate sibling, knowledge translation) misrepresent the tasks that they seek to support. By articulating the complex and contested nature of applied social research, and then highlighting the social and contextual complexities of its use, we can see that other terms may serve us better. Following from this analysis, we suggest that 'knowledge interaction' might more appropriately describe the messy engagement of multiple players with diverse sources of knowledge, and that 'knowledge intermediation' might begin to articulate some of the managed processes by which knowledge interaction can be promoted. While it might be hard to shift the terminology of knowledge transfer in the short term, awareness of its shortcomings can enhance understanding about how social research can have wider impacts.

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A plethora of unsuitable terminology

We live in an era of evidence-based everything: what matters is what works. For a decade or more, significant efforts have been directed at improving the supply of research, stimulating demand for research, and bridging these two worlds.^{1,2} In health care especially, using evidence to support policy and practice has become a shibboleth of the highest order.

Alongside the terminology of 'evidence-based policy' and 'evidence-based practice', a parallel term, equally unsuited to the task, has assumed renewed prominence: knowledge transfer. Knowledge transfer has infused the academic literature, infiltrated the policy discourse, raised the aspirations of funding bodies, and entered the lexicon of universities' strategic visions.

However, we have come to realize that evidence-based policy and evidence-based practice are over-stated, hubristic even, and that more modest terminology, such as **evidence-informed or evidence-aware**, present a better fit with reality.^{2–4} So too, we should now realize that knowledge transfer, together with its nod towards aiding intelligibility, 'knowledge translation', misrepresent the task they seek to support. By articulating the nature of applied social research, and highlighting the

complexities of its use, we can see that other terms are to be preferred.

What is 'evidence' from applied social research?

For some, evidence for policy or practice is construed as the findings from research that distinguish effective interventions from the useless or harmful.^{1,2} Such a view has the advantage of fostering clear hierarchies of methodological rigour (with the primacy of the randomized trial) and allowing integration across studies to be regarded as a technical task largely free of values or judgement (systematic review and meta-analysis). **But this is a narrow conceptualization of evidence that ignores the many other sorts of knowledge that can inform decisions.**

As well as knowledge about what works we need, for example, knowledge about the scale, source and structuring of social problems; practical knowledge to support effective programme implementation in different contexts; and insights into the relationships between values and policy directions.⁵ Such diverse knowledge is likely to come from methodologically diverse studies, and variety here militates against neat encapsulations of findings or convergent syntheses across studies.

Moreover, research is needed not only to support and elaborate policy; much social research in academic settings plays a challenging rather than a supportive and instrumental role.^{6,7} Careful research can, for example, identify and question assumptions, challenge tacit knowledge, and probe 'taken for granted' aspects of problem framing and problem solutions. Indeed,

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some researchers may go further, adopting a critical stance in relation to government, society and institutions. More challenging still are research perspectives that seek a fundamental re-thinking of prevailing policy paradigms.^{6,7} Such challenging research, which is often strongly theoretical rather than purely empirical, may seek to destabilize established problem framings and current ways of thinking, perhaps proposing new principles for action for which researchers hope political support will follow. Thus, to methodological diversity can be added political engagement and a high degree of contestedness, not just of specific findings but of the basis and underpinnings of the research enterprise. From such observations, convergence of views on the messages from broad bodies of research begins to seem unrealistic.

What are the sources of such evidence?

Systematic knowledge is not simply the preserve of academic specialists. We should not privilege activities simply because of who participates or where they take place. We can reasonably consider as social research any investigation that increases the sum of knowledge about the social world, based on planned and systematic enquiry, and subsequently held open to external scrutiny.⁸ This covers any systematic process of empirical investigation and critical evaluation, theory building, analysis and codification.

Looked at in this way, social research can be seen to have no hard and fast boundaries. **What counts as social research moves beyond just those data produced by academic researchers to include, for example, local research and evaluation reports and the findings from audit.** Client and user experience can also enter the mix, through surveys or qualitative investigation. Stakeholder consultations, when systematically carried out, may also fall into the ambit of social research.⁹

While it might seem indulgent to broaden the view of social research to encompass such diversity, tight definitions for convenience are unsustainable. In seeking to learn and understand about policy and service delivery, people will rightly draw on whatever sources of knowledge seem capable of offering insight. Thus, while we can never neglect considerations of methodological quality which underpin the robustness of the insights drawn, we cannot tighten our definitions of evidence to exclude that which is hard to assess or challenging to integrate.

The unlikelihood of stable, acontextual knowledge

Of course, opening up definitions of knowledge to encompass such a broad spectrum of data poses serious challenges for the accumulation, aggregation and synthesis of findings. It is unclear who has the appropriate perspective to carry out such integrative tasks and drawing on diverse sources prompts new methodological challenges for transparent synthesis.⁹ Indeed any such integrative effort is likely to engage

with (and shape) pre-existing values and tacit knowledge, making repeatability of integrative conclusions uncertain.

Moreover, it is not just a question of which evidence should be included in any integration but also of whose evidence? **Knowledge and power are intimately co-constructed, with more powerful players better able to assert the standing and influence of their own knowledge.**^{10–12} Taken together, these arguments suggest that there are serious limits to the extent to which objective, stable and acontextual knowledge can be created from a broad spectrum of social research.

Terminology such as 'knowledge transfer' and 'knowledge translation', however, rather suggest otherwise. The metaphor invoked by these terms is, at best, one of gathering and integrating evidence from research, condensing this into convergent knowledge, and neatly packaging this knowledge for transfer elsewhere. More often, it simply implies the dissemination of relatively undigested findings from single studies. In other words, knowledge parcels for grateful recipients. Such a view belies the inherent and, we would argue, largely insurmountable challenges of doing so for any but the most simple and incontrovertible of findings. Moreover, if the challenges of delivering convergent knowledge are large, the subtlety and complexity of research use in context further militate against simple models of 'translate and transfer'.

Considering the complexities of research use

Much attention in the literature, and indeed in the policy and practice worlds themselves, has been focused on instrumental uses of research. Where research evidence has a concrete and demonstrable impact on the actions and choices of policy-makers and practitioners.^{1,2,7} **However, we know that, on the ground, research and other forms of knowledge are often used in more subtle, indirect and conceptual ways: bringing about changes in knowledge and understanding, or shifts in perceptions, attitudes and beliefs, perhaps altering the ways in which policy-makers and practitioners think about what they do, how they do it, and why.**^{2,7}

Research on how research outputs inform understanding and get used suggest that use is best characterized as a continual and iterative process, one that draws on diverse kinds of knowledge through many different channels and routes and involves more or less translation or indeed transformation along the way.² Interpersonal and social interactions are often seen as key to accessing and interpreting such research knowledge, whether among policy or practice colleagues, research intermediaries or more directly with researchers themselves.² **Thus knowledge use is an elaborate and dynamic process involving complex social processing and unpredictable integration with pre-existing knowledge or expertise. Such integration may require significant unlearning as part of the re-ordering of knowing.**¹³

Above all it is the context of use that emerges as essential to understanding when research will be used and in what ways. Research use is a highly contingent process.^{2,14} Whether and how new information gets assimilated is contingent on local priorities, cultures and systems of meaning. What makes sense in one setting can make a different sense in another. Moreover, contexts are dynamic: the likely interactions between new knowledge and shifting contexts defy ready predictability.

This interactive, iterative and contextual view of using research thus emphasizes social, dialogical and interpretative ways of knowing. Using research is seen as an ongoing, creative and unfolding process rather than any clearly delineated event. Such a model of how new knowledge is created through social interactions *in situ* again sits uneasily with the idea that research-based knowledge can be packaged and transferred to where it might be needed.

The roots of knowledge transfer

Notions of knowledge transfer are rooted in traditional rational-linear models of research use. Such models assume two communities – research producers and potential research users – and cast the problem as one of a lack of connect between these two communities. In such a conceptualization, three sorts of activities are envisaged: *knowledge push* from researchers to potential users; *knowledge pull* from these users; and *linkage and exchange* that seeks more productive and interactive engagement between the two.¹⁵ While the latter admits to the more iterative and social view of research use outlined above, the baseline assumption of two communities too easily leads to unsophisticated notions of knowledge and knowledge transfer.

Even when some of these problems are acknowledged, the accommodations often do not go far enough. For example, to reflect more interactive engagement, knowledge transfer is sometimes extended to 'knowledge transfer and exchange'.¹⁶ Such extensions begin to address interactivity, but do not address the role of context in knowledge creation and ignore the problematic nature of knowledge held by the respective parties.

Thus, when discussing how knowledge derived from social research can inform health services policy and delivery it is all too easy to default to simple rational-linear models, about connection between two communities, with all the restrictive assumptions contained therein. Knowledge transfer, as a short-hand term, has similar inadequacies and misrepresentational characteristics as evidence-based policy or evidence-based practice. Better terms are needed.

Better terminology

In the social world no single source of knowledge can be counted on to provide definitive answers. Findings and insights can sometimes be contradictory. In health care, such confusing messages from research abound, particularly as one moves away from biomedical research

and technology assessment. Reflexive approaches can accommodate such contestation and contradiction by seeing all evidence as partial, contingent and provisional. While such indeterminacy might be thought to undermine any privileged role for research, the more interactive and dialogical approaches suggested here can more readily accommodate these uncertainties.

Set against such understanding, terms such as knowledge transfer and knowledge translation misrepresent the uncertainties, complexities and contextually contingent ways in which knowledge is created and applied. While any term is likely to open itself up to fresh critique, we suggest that 'knowledge interaction' might more appropriately describe the messy engagement of multiple players with diverse sources of knowledge. We also suggest that 'knowledge intermediation' begins to articulate some of the managed processes by which knowledge interaction is promoted. Both of these terms, if combined with a suitably nuanced understanding of knowledge creation and use, could redress some of the misconceptions fostered by ideas of knowledge transfer.

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