

17. Introduction

In 2005, Dr Peter Shergold, then one of Australia's most powerful public servants, eloquently expressed his frustrations about research input into government policy making:¹

Not infrequently I talk to academics who tell me that they work in the area of public policy. It awakens my interest. Often I am rudely disappointed. They may be researching in areas that are at the forefront of policy debate—health, welfare, early childhood development, education, employment—but they appear uncomfortable when asked directly what policy changes they would implement. This is seen, I discern, as a matter for others—less talented others—to ascertain from a proper consideration of their research findings. Practical policy which affects people's lives seems to be regarded as a trade skill, sullied by the dirt and grime of political compromise.

Other academics have very clear policy prescriptions, often argued forcefully and sometimes propounded with a level of polemical certainty. While I am engaged by many of their ideas, and somewhat disquieted by the single-mindedness of their underlying philosophical conviction, I discover that my questions about possible compromise positions are met with a strong gaze into the mid-distance. A second-best outcome, I realise, is not good enough.

The art that I find so beguiling—developing policy iteratively, moulded by an environment of political contest and organisational advocacy, responsive to unexpected opportunity, stymied by unforeseen barriers and shaped by financial exigency—is an uncomfortable discipline for the purist.

Peter Shergold's remarks vividly illustrate the challenge for those seeking to bridge the so-called 'know–do gap'. The point is not that researchers should be seeking to directly implement policy or practice change based on their investigations; indeed that is not their role (nor should it be).² But researchers must take a more realistic position when it comes to considering the policy and practice implications of their findings. Neither avoiding the issue nor taking

1 Shergold (2005). At the time, Peter Shergold was Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet of the Australian Federal Government.

2 Of course, researchers may change roles and become policy makers or work for business or a non-government organisation in order to have a more active role in implementing their research findings.

a narrow idealistic position is tenable. I argue that a focus on research *support* is a productive way to think about the issues. For researchers, this involves performing at least four important functions—namely

1. making available what is known, including what has worked and has not worked, so that policy makers and practitioners can develop effective actions
2. providing a digest of remaining unknowns to help policy makers and practitioners take these into account in their decision making, as well as to reduce, or at least be better prepared for, unintended consequences of their initiatives
3. providing critique of current and proposed policy and practice
4. providing new ideas for policy and practice.

It is worth noting that most of what is considered in this domain is relevant to all research, not just integrative applied research. Nevertheless, integrative applied research that is comprehensive, of high quality and impartial would be expected to be more useful and influential than other kinds of research.³

It is useful to think about the policy and practice worlds that are tasked with improving complex social and environmental problems as being divided into three major arenas: government, business and civil society (which each have policy and practice arms). The chapters in this domain do not deal with the process of bringing about change, but instead concentrate on the practical issues of identifying key players and procedures that may be amenable to research support, along with ways in which support may be provided. As the following chapters illustrate, there are numerous possibilities. One example is that some teams will decide to engage as closely as they can with those responsible for action, while others will keep their distance, apart from communicating the results of their investigations. Taking another example, some teams will undertake a calculated assessment of the options for producing change in the problem they are addressing⁴ and then choose one on which to focus their research. Others will start with research they are interested in and consider the relevance for policy makers and practitioners only once findings are available. Most integrative applied research teams make decisions like these implicitly, often based on narrow understanding and little consideration of the full range of options. The purpose of the third domain of integrative applied research is to help teams make their appraisals explicit and better informed, underpinned by understanding of how government, business and civil society operate and how research can exert influence.

3 This issue is not explored further here, but does warrant fleshing out in future.

4 For instance: is a change in government policy or law essential? Would a new commercial product be viable and effective? Is individual behavioural change required? Should a particular community sector be mobilised?

Nevertheless, researchers must also bear in mind that bringing about change is an imperfect art (as Peter Shergold's remarks point out) and this capriciousness includes the outcomes of providing integrated research support. Even though researchers may have a clear view of what they are setting out to achieve, there is no sure-fire recipe for success and the determining factors are generally beyond the researchers' control. For example, whether or not research findings are influential can depend on budget priorities, political 'heat' (caused by advocacy groups or opposition parties) and competing demands for actions other than those the researchers are interested in. This level of uncertainty and chance is not something with which most researchers are comfortable. Furthermore, change is not an ordered process, but instead requires those who choose to provide support in highly engaged ways to be responsive to opportunities as they arise. Again this is at odds with the way most researchers operate. The considerations for integrative applied research teams about how to position themselves are far from straightforward.

As with the two previous domains, the starting point here is that there is no one best way to achieve the goals within this domain. Instead, the aim is to highlight different options for providing integrated research support and their associated benefits and costs. In this domain, the five-question framework becomes the following.

1. What is the integrated research support aiming to achieve and who is intended to benefit? (For what and for whom?)
2. Which aspects of policy and practice are targeted by the provision of integrated research support? (Which aspects of policy and practice?)
3. How is integrated research support provided, by whom and when? (How?)
4. What circumstances might influence the provision of integrated research support for policy and practice change? (Context?)
5. What is the result of the provision of integrated research support? (Outcome?)

Each question is discussed in turn to provide more detail about the I2S structure and to give an indication of the classes of concepts and methods that are encompassed within it, as well as the tasks required of the I2S Development Drive. A summary of the broad categories of concepts and methods covered by each question, along with the chapters in which they are discussed, is presented in Figure 17.1. Dealing in detail with both policy and practice, as well as each of government, business and civil society, is unwieldy, hence the examples in the following five chapters focus mostly on the interaction with government policy making.

Disciplining Interdisciplinarity

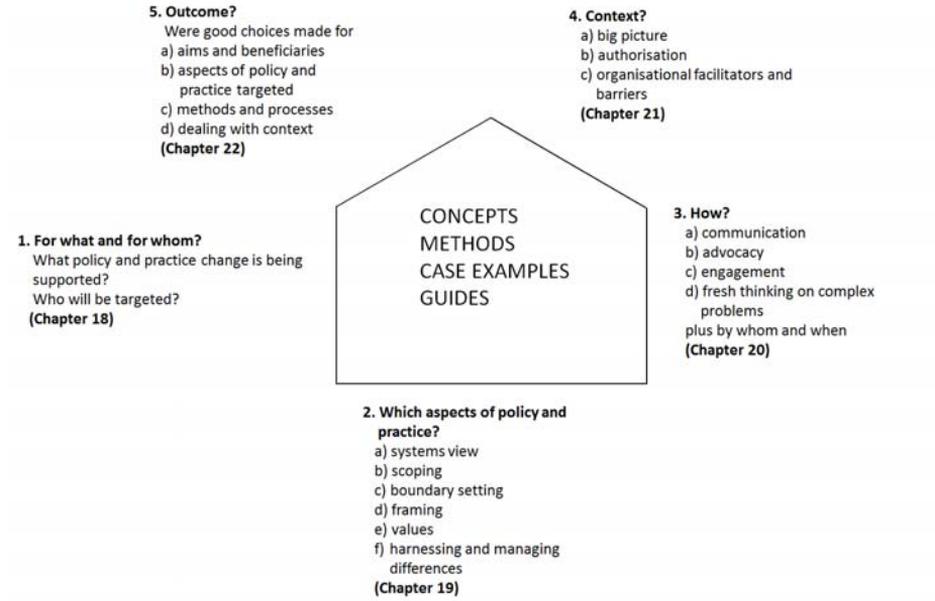


Figure 17.1 The Storeroom for Providing Integrated Research Support for Policy and Practice Change, Listing the Key Categories of Concepts and Methods

Source: Author's illustration.

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