

39. I2S Needs Theory as Well as a Toolkit

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I feel closely connected with Integration and Implementation Sciences (I2S), having been both an observer and a recipient of its early development and subsequent evolution to this point. Working with Gabriele Bammer since 1996, I have been strongly engaged with and influenced by her work—and my research in the area of drug policy attests to this. The Drug Policy Modelling Program (DPMP) is a program of research and practice aimed at improving Australian illicit drug policy. Research is conducted to address gaps in the evidence base, provide tools for policy makers to better use research evidence and to study how policy actually gets made. As one of five Chief Investigators for DPMP, Gabriele has focused on the ways in which I2S can inform the various components of DPMP. To a large extent, the DPMP work is involved in the third domain of I2S: policy and practice change. In addition, we have concentrated on synthesis of knowledge. Various types of knowledge synthesis have been used: working in multidisciplinary teams to bring different disciplines to bear on the problem at hand; strong engagement with stakeholders—both government decision makers and active drug users—in defining and scoping particular research questions; and the use of participatory computer modelling. In this commentary, I discuss two aspects of I2S: 1) the focus on practice rather than theory, and 2) the role of researchers as advocates for change.

Focus on Practice Rather than Theory

I strongly concur with the challenges of working at integration and implementation; somehow integrative applied research is seen as non-mainstream, unusual, and it does sit uncomfortably on occasion with the academic community. For example, I2S suggests to me that the most important outcomes are good processes with stakeholders that lead to policy or practice change. This is not the kind of metric used by universities, which is most commonly publication in a high-impact peer-reviewed international journal.

¹ Alison Ritter was invited as 'leader of an innovative research program that has been influenced by, and fostered the development of, I2S. Your observations on this history will be very pertinent. Even more important, however, will be your remarks on how you think I2S might assist DPMP [Drug Policy Modelling Program] (and its subsequent manifestations) in future, as well as which concepts and methods would have been useful in the development of DPMP to this stage, had they been available.'

An important feature of I2S is that it offers a systematic approach to practice that goes beyond 'intuition' (Chapter 31). There is little doubt that a systematic specialist skill set is required for this fledgling discipline. Integrative applied researchers have been working from their own intuition until now. I2S provides a systematic, structured approach to integrative research practices. How will researchers receive I2S? Unfortunately, it is possible that those researchers already operating (with intuition) in this manner may actually dismiss it as 'obvious' or 'trite'. Those who do not have innate integrative applied research skills may find it overwhelming, as it requires a good dose of reflective practice on behalf of the researcher. Within the DPMP multidisciplinary team, there have been mixed reactions: some researchers understand it immediately; others see it as an overly structured approach to something they are doing anyway; and others have commented that components of the approach appear in other literatures (for example, management literature, operations research literature and the systems literature). These sets of reactions are unlikely to be unique. Thus, I suspect that one of the paradoxes for I2S is that those people—researchers and practitioners—who understand the intent, approach and benefits of I2S are likely to be those people who intuitively work in this particular way. Those who do not intuitively work at the edge of integration and implementation may find I2S challenging. A key test for I2S is therefore to distinguish itself in its uniqueness and to demonstrate the benefits of this particular approach over and above existing approaches. In this context, I believe the theoretical underpinnings of I2S are essential.

The book provides a practice-based, accessible toolkit; however, I am disconcerted by the absence of theory. Perhaps I2S is an approach to practice and not a theory, but then a strong rationale is lacking. That is, how will the practice of I2S make a difference to solving complex social problems? What would happen if you did not engage in synthesis, managing unknowns and focusing on change? How were these three domains chosen, if not derived from some theory about integrative applied research? The grand vision, the passion and the significant conceptual advance that Gabriele Bammer offers us with this approach seem hidden behind a tightly constructed set of domains, systematic questions and a storehouse.

In I2S becoming a discipline it is critical for it to demonstrate value. For example, in relation to uncertainty (Domain 2) it remains to be demonstrated how considering and managing diverse unknowns and all of the complexity that entails would produce better integration or implementation for any one specific project or more generally in terms of a body of knowledge. There is little doubt that managing uncertainty is a major challenge for all sciences and what I2S offers is a comprehensive way of thinking about how to approach this from multiple perspectives. In this sense, managing unknowns as a stand-alone

component of I2S has enormous value. So this then raises the question about whether I2S must be dealt with as a whole discipline or whether researchers and practitioners can cherry-pick the components that are most helpful or useful to them at that point in time. A comprehensive research endeavour is required to establish whether the outcomes are different when the entire I2S toolkit is used versus selected components.

There appear to be two audiences for I2S: those who will engage with the theory of integrative applied research; and those who are, or want to, practise it. This book is clearly written for the latter; however, the former audience also deserves attention. This audience of thinkers, leaders, and ideas people are the ones who will carry the proposed discipline of I2S forward in academic circles. This is unlikely to be done by the practitioners. I would prefer a stronger vision of I2S; a description of the logical arguments and processes used to derive the central tenets, three domains and five elements; and how I2S supersedes what has come before.

Role of Scholars as Advocates for Change

The relevance of research to public policy is receiving more and more attention.² This greater focus on the direct, instrumental use of research to improve society is demonstrated in the focus on dissemination, ‘bridging the gap’ and translational research.³ But the divide between the world of research (scholarship) and the world of policy is vast. Research generates new knowledge; the way in which that knowledge is disseminated, translated and taken up to address complex social problems is not necessarily obvious. Indeed, it is not even crafted as a core ingredient in the research process—despite more recent attempts by research funding bodies to address dissemination and impact, as noted above.

This divide is played out in terms of researcher stance: the neutral, dispassionate conveyor of ‘fact’ versus the passionate advocate. For the former, the role of a researcher is to provide objective, independent evidence. For the latter, evidence is presented in a way to achieve the desired outcome—using analogy and metaphor; framing the issues in the media; engagement in political lobbying; and building coalitions of support. This dichotomy has been noted by a number of commentators.⁴ One resolution is to argue that the proper role of researchers is not to operate as advocates at all, and that advocacy can be taken up by others, but should not pollute the integrity, independence and objectivity of either the research itself or the individual researcher. Others, such as Chapman,⁵

2 For example, Brownson et al. (2006); Edwards (2005); Nutley et al. (2007).

3 For example, Hanney et al. (2003); Lomas (1997); Stone et al. (2001).

4 For example, Chapman (2001).

5 Chapman (2007).

have argued for ethical advocacy—advocacy that does not undermine research integrity but is effective in influencing policy or public opinion. This still leaves an impasse between passive delivery of scientific evidence and convincing persuasion.

I believe that I2S provides a significant new solution to this impasse. While the book suggests three strategies—communication, advocacy and engagement (Chapter 20)—that align with effective dissemination to generate impact and change, I2S itself actually transforms this impasse. Put simply, by making ‘integrated research support for policy and practice change’ the third domain, I2S places the dilemma at the front and centre and implies that rather than divorcing policy and practice change from the scientific endeavour, I2S integrates it as core business. Thus I2S is premised on public relevance and accountability beyond the research world. But I would argue that the I2S contribution is actually much larger than the simple inclusion of this domain. The solution to the impasse provided by I2S is in the process or way of working, which dissolves the researcher–advocacy delineation/impasse.

I2S suggests to me that the issue at stake is not the stance of the researcher; rather, it is inherent in the process of working within the I2S framework. Working within the I2S framework means

- participatory processes that are inclusive of stakeholders from the start and explicitly identify the beneficiaries of the work
- dealing with values, value congruence, boundaries and scoping
- dealing with unknowns within the research process
- being a member of a scholarly discipline.

Each of these aspects in and of itself resolves the research–advocacy dilemma. Some brief comments on each of these are made in the context of a case example: research on the legal status of cannabis (legalisation, decriminalisation or prohibition). Such a sensitive and potentially politically charged project conducted within the I2S frame would commence with inclusion of stakeholders including groups advocating for law reform as well as those advocating for prohibition. These participatory processes have the potential to both explicate the value stance and decrease the likelihood of the research results being dismissed by the communities of practice to which they pertain. If lawmakers are to be one of the beneficiaries of the work, then their identification from the start, including the types of research questions that will inform them, will lead to uptake and dissemination without explicit advocacy. The research team will have discussed values inherent within the team, implied within the research approach and will have ensured congruence. The definition of the scope and boundaries to the research (for example, including population health effects

of changing the legal status of cannabis) will ensure that the research results are considered within the appropriate frame of reference as defined by the scoping exercise. This leaves, then, little opportunity for manipulation of the findings, taking them out of context or making assumptions not bounded by the approach.

Dealing with unknowns is a crucial element in managing the research–advocacy divide. One reason much advocacy is problematic is the potential to misuse or misinterpret the limitations inherent in any piece of research. An explicit and comprehensive approach to uncertainty within the research process significantly ameliorates the likelihood that this will occur. One uncertainty in the cannabis example is the extent to which a change in the legal status of cannabis will change the likelihood of cannabis use by young people (does its illegality actually deter use, and will law reform result in greater numbers of cannabis users?). Addressing the uncertainties around this within the research project provides a level of rigour unusual in research of this type.

Finally, being a member of a scholarly discipline is vital to ensure research integrity. As noted in Chapter 26, ‘there is also a broader issue about integrative applied research being true to itself and not becoming an uncritical handmaiden to policy makers and practitioners’. In a sensitive area such as cannabis law reform, ensuring the integrity of the research is absolutely essential. I2S offers a disciplinary home for such research, which provides access to peer review, comprehensive tools and methodological approaches, differentiating scholarly criticism from political criticism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I2S has an enormous amount to offer over and above a toolkit. For example, it provides a way to transform the researcher–advocacy divide; however, it would be strengthened with presentation of a strong theoretical underpinning. In addition, it requires significant time and willingness to work within the I2S approach. Whether a research team can afford to do all of the things implied by I2S whilst actually engaging in the research may be problematic.

I2S positioned within the academy gives greater strength to research integrity when juxtaposed against making change happen in the real world. But it is not clear whether universities will actually appreciate and encompass this unique and groundbreaking approach that has the potential to challenge traditional ways of thinking and doing research.

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Brief Biography

Alison Ritter is a Professor at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, and is the Director of a major drug policy research program, the Drug Policy Modelling Program (<www.dpmp.unsw.edu.au>). The goal of the work is to advance illicit drug policy through improving the evidence base, developing new policy decision-making tools and understanding policy processes. The program crosses multiple disciplines and engages scholars from psychology, criminology, public policy, mathematics and medicine, to name a few. The focus is on translating research into policy. She is widely published, and is the Vice-President of the Alcohol and other Drug Council of Australia, and President of the International Society for the Study of Drug Policy.

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