44. Building Integration and Implementation Sciences: Five areas for development

L. David Brown[1]

I have worked at the intersections of research and practice for most of my career. My dissertation focused on efforts to understand and improve the functioning of a boarding school as a system for developing its students. I have worked on action research projects for organisation development in a variety of organisations and contexts. Over the past 30 years I have been particularly concerned with civil society initiatives to foster social transformations for poor and marginalised groups.[2] In addition to organisation building, those initiatives have often involved cross-organisation and cross-sector initiatives for problem solving at local, national and transnational levels. While I have held academic positions for most of my career, I have been strongly influenced by concerns for impacts on policy and practice as well as by interests in theory and research development.

When Gabriele Bammer and I first met more than a decade ago, we began talking about Integration and Implementation Sciences (I2S) almost immediately. I am convinced that she is correct that many emerging policy and practice challenges demand the insights of multiple disciplines and perspectives. In her visits to the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, we have had a lot of opportunities to explore the implications of engagements among researchers and practitioners.[3] I am delighted that she has developed such a comprehensive and systematic approach to I2S as a field.

I want to comment briefly from my perspective on what I see as particular strengths of her proposal. Then I will suggest some areas that I think merit further development. Finally I will reflect on more general implications.

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1   David Brown was invited as a senior scholar 'who has made significant contributions to thinking about practice–research engagement'.
2   Brown (1989).
3   Brown et al. (2003).

Strengths of the I2S Proposal

The book makes an important contribution by articulating the need for a more developed field of knowledge about integration and implementation. The need for systematic approaches to I2S has gradually become more apparent over the past couple of decades, as reflected, for example, in the emergence of academic outlets like the *Action Research Journal* and researcher handbooks of methods for working across theory–practice boundaries.[4] This book makes a strong case for more systematic investment in developing a new field of theory, research and practice.

Gabriele's identification of three domains to be illuminated by the emerging field is also an important contribution. Many of us have been quite aware of the challenges of two of those domains: 'synthesising disciplinary and stakeholder knowledge' and providing 'support for policy and practice change'. But her emphasis on the importance of 'understanding and managing diverse unknowns' is new to me. I am persuaded that more attention to unknowns and their management will be very important to future (I2S) theory and practice.

I am also impressed with Gabriele's proposed I2S Development Drive as a strategy for launching and building the field. In my experience, it is common for people concerned with I2S issues to focus on the immediate processes and issues of work on particular problem areas. They are less likely to think about the long-term, large-scale implications of their experiences for developing a new field. Building storehouses of concepts, methods and cases, creating useful syntheses for managing unknowns and providing integrated support for changing policies and practices are tasks of very substantial scope. Framing these tasks as a Big-Science project makes a lot of sense. Getting support for that approach will require compelling arguments for the critical importance of enhancing I2S capacities for large-scale problem-solving—and we have increasing evidence that those capacities are badly needed.

Areas for Further Development

The book covers a great deal of ground. Gabriele has articulated a very broad range of issues and possibilities in this analysis and readers will differ about which areas deserve more attention. I think at least five areas will need more discussion and debate if I2S is going to realise its potential as a new field.

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4   Reason and Bradbury (2008).

First, the field will need to further develop *integration and implementation theory*, as some other commentaries have noted. The growing experience with multi- and trans-disciplinary research in areas like ecology preservation, peace building or rights-based development may provide contexts for theory development. Existing research and theory about bringing together diverse groups for joint action, such as public–private partnerships,[5] may provide perspectives and propositions that are relevant for I2S theory. 'There is nothing more practical than a good theory',[6] and that dictum may be especially true for I2S. The accumulation of concepts, methods and cases contemplated by the Development Drive will provide great resources for concept and theory development, and the Drive should also emphasise producing a framework that will guide I2S users.

Second, in my experience of practice–research engagement, the challenges of *recognising and dealing with value differences* have been central. Some value differences are grounded in disciplines: economists, anthropologists, doctors, lawyers and political scientists (to name a few) are trained to frame inquiry and analysis in different ways and may value different ends and means. Other value differences grow from different realms of practice: policy makers, business executives, labour leaders, consumer advocates, environmental activists and journalists often emphasise different value perspectives on the same problem. When practice changes interact with differences in values and ideologies, stakeholders in I2S projects may have dramatically different understandings of issues and radically different interpretations of appropriate actions and outcomes.[7] The term 'values' appears four times in the table of contents in association with the 'which knowledge' questions. Those discussions focus on how values may shape the relevance of knowledge, unknowns or change supports. But the encounter among disciplines and between research and practice often raises fundamental value questions that require negotiating values and ideologies to create shared visions to support joint work. Managing value differences and building consensus across disciplinary and research/practice boundaries will be central in the future development of I2S.

A third theme that has pervaded my experience with integrating research and practice to solve complex social problems has been *managing issues of power and politics*. Changes in policy and practice often affect the distribution of resources, status, costs and benefits, creating winners and losers who have significant stakes in supporting or resisting those changes. Much of the discussion of I2S is appropriately framed in terms of the technical and intellectual challenges of articulating and developing the field. The terms 'power' and 'politics' do not appear in the table of contents, but I predict that they will be central elements

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5   Bryson et al. (2006).
6   Lewin (1952).
7   Brown and Tandon (1983).

of the experience of most I2S practitioners and theorists. The challenges of managing power and politics are particularly acute when the parties come from different social positions: research across countries on efforts to build cooperative problem solving across sectors and levels of society suggest that managing power differences is a critical issue.[8] So I believe that as the I2S field grapples with the realities of integrating and implementing across diverse disciplines and stakeholders, it will pay increasing attention to concepts, tools and capacities for constructively managing power differences and political controversies.

Fourth, as a long-term student of organisations, I believe that *building institutional contexts* to support effective work across disciplines or the research–practice divide will be central to I2S as a field. To the extent that universities are dominated by disciplines that emphasise discipline development rather than interdisciplinary work to solve practice problems, universities may become increasingly irrelevant to integration and implementation.[9] The Development Drive may also explore how to build institutional arrangements that support I2S. Some of the most interesting integrative work in international development, for example, is currently emerging from think tanks and consulting firms that are not tied closely to universities, in part because many university reward systems do not recognise contributions to policy and practice changes. Within universities, professional schools that regard practice constituencies as important stakeholders may be less vulnerable to this problem than faculties that respond primarily to research disciplines, but even professional schools are pressing their faculties to publish in 'A journals' that are often uninterested in practice problems. So the institutional location of I2S will be important to how the field develops.

Finally, the evolution of I2S as a field will depend substantially on how and with whom it defines its *bases of legitimacy and standards of accountability*. Legitimacy can be grounded in normative, legal, technical, political, cognitive or associational terms with a wide range of stakeholders; accountability refers to answering expectations established with more specific stakeholders, such as those affected by or affecting particular research or practice programs.[10] Legitimacy and accountability have become important concerns in many arenas, in part because of the widespread failures of accountability in many sectors. By what standards can we assess the legitimacy and accountability of I2S? What will be the measures of its success? My own view is that the intersection of research and practice under some circumstances can catalyse revolutions in both theory and practice—the kind of knowledge epitomised by Pasteur's work

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8   Brown and Ashman (1996); Weber (2003).
9   Gibbons et al. (1994).
10   Brown (2008).

in developing the germ theory of disease and the practice of pasteurising milk.[11] At its best, I2S practitioners might catalyse better theory and research, as well as better practices and policies at the same time, though we would probably be happy with valuable contributions to one or the other. In any case, it will be important to develop ideas about indicators of I2S performance as a basis for assessing its impacts and enabling its accountability to immediate stakeholders, for building its legitimacy with wider publics, and for catalysing ongoing learning in the field.

Conclusion

I have suggested a lot of areas for further work—in addition to the imposing array of tasks that Gabriele has already articulated for establishing I2S as an independent field. We face an intimidating constellation of complex problems on a planet with increasingly constrained resources. A catastrophic meltdown of our civilisation seems a real possibility given the complexity of the problems, the shortage of resources, the runaway concentrations of wealth and power in small elites, and the dysfunctional nature of many national and global governmental institutions. I2S is not a panacea—but I believe it could make a significant difference to our ability to manage planetary problems if we had the foresight and the political will to invest in it. Gabriele in this volume has greatly expanded our foresight about the possibilities; whether we can amass the political will required to give substance to her visionary analysis is another question.

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11 Stokes (1997).

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Brief Biography

L. David Brown is semi-retired as a Senior Research Fellow at Harvard University's Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, where earlier he coordinated international programs and lectured at the Kennedy School of Government. Prior to coming to Harvard, he was President of the Institute for Development Research, a think tank for civil society research and consultation, and a Professor of organisational behaviour at Boston University and Case Western Reserve University. He has been particularly interested in action research that strengthens civil society contributions to sustainable development and social transformation. He has worked on issues of civil society capacity building, cooperation across organisational and sectoral boundaries, the legitimacy and accountability of civil society organisations, and the role of civil society actors in transnational advocacy and institution building.