49. Beyond 'Dialogues of the Deaf': Re-imagining policing and security research for policy and practice

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University-based researchers occupy a narrow ledge of legitimacy, striving for acceptance of their published research by academic peers and producing research that has an applied impact on the 'real world'. Too much professional emphasis on one objective, to the detriment of the other, risks ridicule from either the academic or the policy/practice communities. Professor Bammer's framework for the development of the I2S discipline shares these fundamental dilemmas of a scholar seeking to promote the value and legitimacy of their work outside the university research sector—namely attempting to balance the scientific imperative to do good discipline-based work with the desire to make a difference in the 'real world'.

It would be reasonable to presume that this is not a zero-sum game, and that Professor Bammer could achieve both objectives. Surely the key objectives of the Integration and Implementation Sciences (I2S) would be attractive to policy and practice communities? Moreover, the programmatic vision of marking out a new disciplinary territory and enhanced standing for interdisciplinarity is attractive for the academy, bearing in mind the challenges and hostility faced by researchers who embrace methodological pluralism and whose research traverses the boundaries of discipline silos.

The timing for the 'birth' of such a new discipline would seem right. Rarely does a day pass without politicians, policy makers and practitioners peddling the virtues of evidence-based policy and evidence-led practice. But as researchers working in the field of public policy have pointed out, this commitment to science is more often than not hollow rhetoric or, worse still, 'evidence' may be viewed cynically as a malleable tool to be selectively invoked or ignored to suit preconceived political objectives.[2] That the world of ideas and knowledge is inherently 'political' would be no surprise to the father of science, Galileo, who was famously tried for heresy for his scientific theorising that the Earth was not the centre of the universe. Nor would this reality be a surprise to Professor

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Bammer, whose pioneering work in the 1990s on the diamorphine trial (better known as the Heroin Trial) was scuppered by the 'Tough on Drugs' policy of the then Prime Minister, John Howard, and scepticism towards harm minimisation.[3] This ultimately manifested in the refusal to give *any* serious weight to the feasibility studies undertaken by Professor Bammer and her colleagues at The Australian National University and the Australian Institute of Criminology. To Australia's enduring shame, the work done by Professor Bammer and her team of colleagues in the mid-1990s was recognised only overseas, informing trials undertaken in Switzerland and the Netherlands, where researchers and policy makers were searching for a rigorous scientific and policy basis to roll out alternatives to criminalisation and decriminalisation strategies. This experience may be viewed as a salutary lesson of international policy transfer or as another depressing illustration of the highly politicised nature of 'knowledge production' in sensitive areas like drug law and policy.

Knowledge Synthesis: Virtuous Cycles or the Dialogue of the Deaf

The I2S idea of synthesising disciplinary and stakeholder knowledge seems like an uncontroversial 'good' in terms of producing research relevant to policy and practice. Such knowledge synthesis would maximise the potential of research to inform policy and practice, in turn stimulating further relevant research questions. But realising this 'virtuous cycle' confronts significant cultural barriers on both sides of the research and policy/practice divide.

Indeed, interactions between research and policy/practice communities can be so fraught that one UK commentator working in the field of police research once described it as the 'dialogue of the deaf'—a description highlighting the different epistemological and normative universes that these communities inhabit.[4] The commentator parodied this dialogue of the deaf as follows.

Academic: Why do the police ignore research findings? Police: Why don't researchers produce useable knowledge?

Academic: Why do the police always reject any study that is critical of what they do? Police: Why do researchers always show the police in a bad light?

Academic: Why don't police officers even read research reports? Police: Why can't researchers write in plain English?

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3   The background and impact of the Heroin Trial are explored in Bronitt and McSherry (2010).
4   McDonald (1987 paper commissioned by the Police Foundation of England and Wales, cited in Bradley 2005).

Academic: Why are the police so bloody defensive? Police: Why are researchers so bloody virtuous?

Academic: Why are the police unwilling to examine their own organisational performance? Police: Why are researchers unwilling to produce information that a practical person exercising power can use to change a limited aspect of the organisation instead of theoretical and explanatory structures of no use to the problem solver?

Academic: Why do the police insist that they know better, when the researchers are the experts in knowledge construction? Police: Why do researchers write recipes when they can't even cook?

In recounting these observations made 30 years ago, David Bradley, a distinguished police researcher, identified the continuing cultural gulf between university-based and policy-driven research communities in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States.

In this short commentary on Professor Bammer's book, I wish to reflect further on these 'intercultural differences', which (if not remedied) constitute insurmountable barriers to the development of I2S in 'hot topic' fields like policing and security.[5] In exploring these challenges, I will make specific reference to my own experiences as an academic lawyer and socio-legal researcher working on sensitive policing and security topics over the past two decades. I will particularly draw on my experience in my current role as Director of the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence in Policing and Security, a centre of research excellence that also has an overt policy and applied focus, with regular engagement with high-level police and government stakeholders.

Intercultural Challenge #1: Understanding the intrinsic difficulty of doing good research

As Professor Bammer identified, researchers confront infinite unknowns though have finite research capability and capacity. Also there are political and administrative barriers to knowledge synthesis, integration and implementation. In my own research of covert policing, terrorism and national security, for example, I have encountered particularly acute sensitivities and reluctance to engage with academic research. When engagement and cooperation do occur, practice and policy communities demand 'focused' research from the academic. The stakeholder clients—the police executives and policy makers—urge academics to do research for a purpose (that is, purposes that they value). But in an era of 'New Public Management', research focuses on establishing to

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5   Bradley (2005).

Treasury officials and political paymasters the 'effectiveness' of 'X' program or intervention.[6] The stakeholders, however, have limited grasp of what measures, beyond those most easily identified, should be used to determine effectiveness.[7]

Effectiveness is neither self-evident nor universally understood in the same way across policy domains. Indeed, in the field of law-enforcement research, effectiveness is a highly normative question determined by what roles police should legitimately perform in society and what objectives are being pursued. The current tendency in stakeholder groups is to view effectiveness measures in unproblematic terms, focusing on crime rates, drug seizures or conviction rates; however, simply measuring police performance by its success in 'locking up bad guys' or 'taking drugs off the streets' is distorting. In relation to the former, it overlooks the key role that police play in diversionary justice (ensuring that, in appropriate cases, offenders are diverted away from rather than into the system), as well as their critical function in preventing miscarriages of justice (for example, averting situations where an innocent person is wrongfully convicted). In relation to drug law enforcement, a recent research study by the Australian Institute of Criminology has proposed developing a broader set of impact measures for drug law enforcement that extends beyond reducing drug crime and drug-related crime, to include measures such as reducing organised crime, improving public health and improving public amenity.[8]

Research to measure effectiveness in a more empirical and normatively sound way is more complex and costly than simply quantifying rates of enforcement activity—the number of wiretaps issued, arrests made, charges laid and convictions secured cannot serve as an effective performance measure or a proxy for success. Convincing the stakeholders of this fact, however, remains an uphill struggle!

Intercultural Challenge #2: Accepting equivocal research findings

Policy and practice communities demand answers based on the 'best available evidence'. Their need for certainty means that stakeholder communities struggle with equivocation about research findings and conflicting interpretations of data. Research may show what does not work, but cannot establish what actually does work. Yet the idea of accepting the 'least worst' solution, which is often what the research supports, does not fit with the organisational commitment to international 'best practice' standards. From this perspective, equivocation risks serious and irreversible harm (either to the environment or to people)

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6   The rise of New Public Management and its implications for policing are explored in Bronitt and Legrand (2012).

7   Bronitt and Legrand (2012).

8   Willis et al. (2011).

or chronic policy paralysis. Indeed, policy and practice communities will not wait for certainty, and in some domains it is now established that scientific uncertainty should not preclude action. Indeed, this is exemplified by the rise of the precautionary principle in policy circles in areas as diverse as protection of the environment, human health and national security.[9] While the precautionary principle may be a legitimate interim strategy until states of scientific uncertainty are remedied, significant reforms to policy and practice introduced under the precautionary rubric invariably entrench themselves and will be difficult to reverse notwithstanding the emergence of fresh counterevidence. When applied in this way, the precautionary principle may sideline research in some fields or divert the stakeholder's scarce research resources into sources of knowledge that are less equivocal (such as consultancy research). This must be resisted. Clearly the obligation is on stakeholders and researchers to understand the limitations and equivocal nature of research, and nevertheless remain committed to shared enterprise generating the best *available* evidence.

Intercultural Challenge #3: Government preference for consultancy-driven policy

There is no doubt that, in Australia and elsewhere, much policy is consultancy-driven rather than evidence-led. In Australia, consultancy expertise has flourished following the downsizing of policy and research capacity within government in the early years of the Howard Government. Robert Cornall AO, Secretary of the Attorney-General's Department, in his valedictory speech in 2008, reflected on the rise of consultancy within government, expressing scepticism about the value for money offered by many of these service providers. He acknowledged that consultants bring expertise and experience (some being former government employees) and have the capacity to deliver timely responses; however, in Cornall's view:

> Sometimes, engaging a consultant is a management cop out. It can seem to be an appealing solution to flick pass a difficult and ill-conceived project to a consultant. This can give the temporary impression that some progress is being made and the unsatisfactory result can be blamed on the consultant.[10]

It is clearly harder to disavow academics and censor independent research in this way. But even more problematic is the timeliness issue: academic timelines, spread over years, simply cannot meet the imperatives of the policy cycle and short-term-ism inherent within a typical three-year political horizon for policy development and implementation.

Having identified some intercultural barriers, what are some of the key enablers for I2S?

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9   See, generally, Fisher et al. (2006).
10   Cornall (2008).

The Way Forward: Embedding policy and practice in research

A key strategy for bridging the intercultural gap, in my experience, is the placement of policy officials and senior practitioners within university research centres. This happens rarely in Australia, or indeed anywhere else. Indeed, the traffic between the policy/practice and research communities is largely one way, with secondments from the university sector into government or industry being more common. There is a long history of renowned scientists, economists, social scientists and legal scholars chairing ad-hoc reviews and inquiries for government. But the reverse is not true. While the modern 'engaged' university hosts numerous specialised policy and practice research centres, and may have even developed partnerships to deliver specialised programs of professional development and training for senior public servants, secondments of senior policy makers and practitioners are a rarity. Indeed, the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence in Policing and Security is one of a handful of centres that hosts full-time secondments from senior police and government officials to work with researchers on defined projects. The success of these programs is yet to be formally evaluated, though there is scepticism from some academics and stakeholders about the feasibility (and relatively high cost) of these ventures. It is clear that different agencies and researchers value such initiatives differently! In my view, however, the success of I2S depends on embedding policy and practice perspectives into the research enterprise; not only does this lead to more relevant research, it also increases the sophistication of policy and practice engagement with research. Over time, there is a greater appreciation of the value of university-based research, its rigour and validity, compared with other sources of organisational knowledge production, such as consultancies.

This leads to my final observation about risk. I2S involves an academic willingness to accept risk—to commit to a new discipline, to address new perspectives, to engage with policy and practice, and to embrace uncertainty. These factors are critical to the success of I2S. (The flipside of risk acceptance is the risk aversion preoccupying many who work in policy and practice communities, and operating as a significant barrier to I2S!) Professor Bammer recognises the important role played by 'untied research funding', which can be used to foster creative thinking around contemporary research topics. But there are high levels of risk here for the policy and practice communities: high levels of trust are needed for stakeholders to commit to a 'blank research page' in advance and, worse still, to accept that this involves some 'blank-cheque' commitment to funding such research directly or in-kind. The New Public Management and Treasury models of accountability demand proof of an efficient use of public

resources and these models do not sit comfortably with uncertainty; project aims must be defined, milestones agreed and key performance indicators quantified and achieved. Demonstrating a 'return on investment' is a pervasive part of the modern stakeholder and, increasingly, researcher lexicons.

While this environment suits short-term, consultancy-driven projects, it operates as a straitjacket for the research as well as the policy and practice communities. Too quickly, stakeholders learn that 'contractualising' research curbs flexibility and prevents research efforts being redirected to address more pressing questions or emerging issues. Due to the timelines of national competitive funding schemes, programs of research have been agreed years in advance. These long timelines have numerous risks for both stakeholders and researchers. The first is the risk of ever-diminishing stakeholder support as the project grows stale, or when government changes or the internal organisational research champions move on. Another challenge flowing from the premature development of research programs is that the data needed to answer the research questions do not exist or cannot be released to researchers.

Who is to blame for such failures? Who is accountable for the substantial costs incurred in projects that subsequently discover that the research question posed is simply unanswerable? From the individual academic perspective, failures such as these can be professionally devastating, especially for early career scholars; with an emphasis from within universities and funding agencies on measurable outputs (such as publications), there is little scope for these failures to be seen as simply one of the 'costs of doing research'. I2S must develop systems to support early involvement of senior policy makers and practitioners in the development of research; feasibility research must be funded separately, and the inherent risk of failure must be understood within both the academic and the stakeholder communities. Secondments of practitioners and policy makers into research centres play a critical role during the development phase (and not merely during the operational phase) of the research project.

This brings me to my final observation about I2S and the Development Drive. The challenge for Professor Bammer and colleagues who support this initiative (including myself) is to not only promote the value of I2S to the research community, but also to educate the stakeholder communities about its potential pay-offs, as well as pitfalls. This is no mean feat, but clearly a challenge worth undertaking.

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Brief Biography

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