

What does it mean to 'use evidence'? Applying a broader understanding to inform the design of strategies to enable the use of evidence

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Four decades after Carol Weiss began to disentangle the instrumental, conceptual, and symbolic forms of research use (Weiss 1980), the challenge of researching the complexity of different forms of evidence use remains. This challenge is reflected in the research articles in this issue which grapple with how evidence is used in public policymaking and what strategies might enable it to be used more effectively. The content of this issue also underlines two points we made in the previous editorial (Smith et al. 2019): (i) that bringing different disciplinary lenses to investigate evidence use can provide new insights; and (ii) understanding the use of evidence within political and social contexts requires that attention be paid to issues of power and leadership.

In the first research article, Masood and colleagues report a systematic review of research use in the past decade of public health policy-making in countries with universal healthcare coverage. The review included quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods studies of the extent to which research is used in public health policy-making, the processes by which research is used, and the factors that constrain or enable the use of research. Masood and colleagues' review found many familiar cultural, economic, and political challenges for research use, but also less-commonly acknowledged challenges such as the dearth of capacity-building initiatives to develop policy-makers' and researchers' skills in collaborative working, and the absence of processes for adapting research knowledge to local decision-making contexts.

The second research article by Decieux reports a documentary analysis and expert interviews with national and international representatives about how knowledge is produced within an Expert Group of the European Commission, and how this knowledge is included as 'evidence' in subsequent decision-making. In contrast to the ideals of transdisciplinary knowledge production and use, Decieux finds that power relations and political considerations play a significant role in shaping the use (or non-use) of knowledge, yet decisions are often legitimised through reference to the involvement of experts in the process.

The third research article by Yanovitzky & Weber study uses content analysis to track the broader conceptual and symbolic use of evidence within social networks rather than simply its instrumental use by decision-makers. Drawing on excerpts from 224 congressional bills and 190 congressional committee hearings around the development of federal policies for obesity prevention in the United States of America from 2000 to 2014, the authors find that (similarly to Boswell's (2009) analysis of evidence and expertise in migration policy in the UK and Germany), policymakers' use of evidence is inherently political. Yanovitzky & Weber's findings also point to the limitations of not analysing evidence use over space and time, as policymakers' use of evidence varies in different policy fields and at different phases of the policymaking process.

The fourth research article by DuVal & Shah seeks to explain policy makers' actions where there is misalignment between the timeframes for decision-making and production of evidence about the safety and efficacy of anti-retroviral medication regimes. Drawing on interviews with 14 senior HIV policymakers in nine sub-Saharan African countries, the authors find that ease of implementation, coherence with existing service delivery, and a perceived momentum on the subcontinent towards a particular medication regime drove the development of policy rather than the pending safety and efficacy results of a clinical trial.

The fifth research article by Pettman and colleagues reports the evaluation in Australia of a national obesity prevention knowledge translation platform which incorporated informational, capacity-building, and interactive strategies. Acknowledging the limitations of observational data and the relatively short timeframe of the evaluation for detecting complex changes in evidence use, the authors nevertheless identify how access to a range of knowledge translation strategies can facilitate evidence use. These include tailored 'push' strategies for engagement of broad groups and more interactive 'exchange' strategies for more intensive development of evidence use in different groups of stakeholders.

The sixth research article addresses the issue of learning about evidence use over a longer time period. Connolly and colleagues assess how knowledge brokering has enabled or constrained efforts to facilitate the use of evidence in the Mental Health Improvement Outcomes Framework in Scotland. The research identifies the importance for knowledge brokering of familiar themes such as capacity-building and local champions, but also the complexity of identifying the networks within which knowledge brokering could be pursued. Importantly, Connolly and colleagues conclude that sustainable knowledge brokering requires ongoing maintenance of network relationships at both local and national levels.

In the final research article, Mols and colleagues target what they term a 'blind spot' in the evidence use literature by drawing on insights from social and organisational psychology about identity leadership to inform the focus of their interviews with Australian public sector workers and partnership leaders. Acknowledging the contribution of systems and knowledge brokering conceptualisations of knowledge use, Mols and colleagues nevertheless argue that these are inherently limited by their reliance on enhancing the quality of information that can be accessed and increasing the level of contact between knowledge producers, intermediaries, and users. Ultimately, the authors argue, the cultivation of a shared social identity is an under-utilised strategy for improving evidence use.

We end this issue with a Debate article by Fafard & Hoffman and a Practice article by Warren. Fafard & Hoffman reflect on the lack of proactive knowledge translation strategy design in public health policymaking. They argue that, to better enable knowledge translation in public health, greater attention should be paid to the make-up and breadth of policy makers and groups, the idiosyncrasies of different policy networks and systems, and the policy instruments (regulation, communication, taxation) that take precedence in different areas of public health. In the Practice article, Warren focuses on the emergence of evidence reviews in the energy and climate policy field, discussing the practical challenges of different types of evidence review commissioned by one government department in the United Kingdom and the potential to better inform policy making.

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