

Evidence-based service delivery and development requires full range of interactions and connections with research.

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To help expand understanding of how research makes an impact Sarah Morton draws from her extensive research into how different types of evidence are used to develop and improve key services. Research might raise awareness of an issue, change people's knowledge or understanding of an issue, challenge attitudes, perceptions or ideas. Research use doesn't just mean an instrumental application of research to policy or practice. It means a whole range of interactions and connections between researchers, and those interested in research from policy, practice or members of the public.



Evidence-based policy and practice and knowledge mobilization are frequently used terms, but what are the key challenges in using research to develop and improve services for children and families? I was delighted to be asked to talk at The Factor—Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto to open up a discussion about what we mean by knowledge based approaches, what helps and hinders knowledge utilization, and what approaches we can take to enhance knowledge mobilization in different policy and practice settings.

I drew on my 12 years experiences of leading knowledge exchange at the [Centre for Research on Families and Relationships](#) based at the University of Edinburgh, with partners across Scottish Universities. This built on my experience of working in voluntary and statutory sectors on family and relationship issues, and more recently my PhD looked at [how research impact occurs](#), and how it can be assessed.

In my talk I addressed three key messages:

- What do we mean by research-utilisation?
- What is evidence for service and practice?
- Key ways of improving research use

What do we mean by research utilisation?

We often think that using research means creating a policy or practice change based on research findings, but research can be used in many ways. Drawing on work by Nutley et al [Using Research: How research can inform public services](#) research might raise awareness of an issue, change people's knowledge or understanding of an issue, challenge attitudes, perceptions or ideas – all of these are pre-requisites of policy or practice change. So research use doesn't just mean an instrumental application of research to policy or practice. It means a whole range of interactions and connections between researchers, and those interested in research from policy, practice or members of the public. Indeed the ESRC recognised in their review 'Taking Stock' that a main driver of impact was involvement of research users throughout the research cycle. This kind of interaction can enhance and enrich the research process too- bringing different perspectives and understandings to key issues and research approaches.

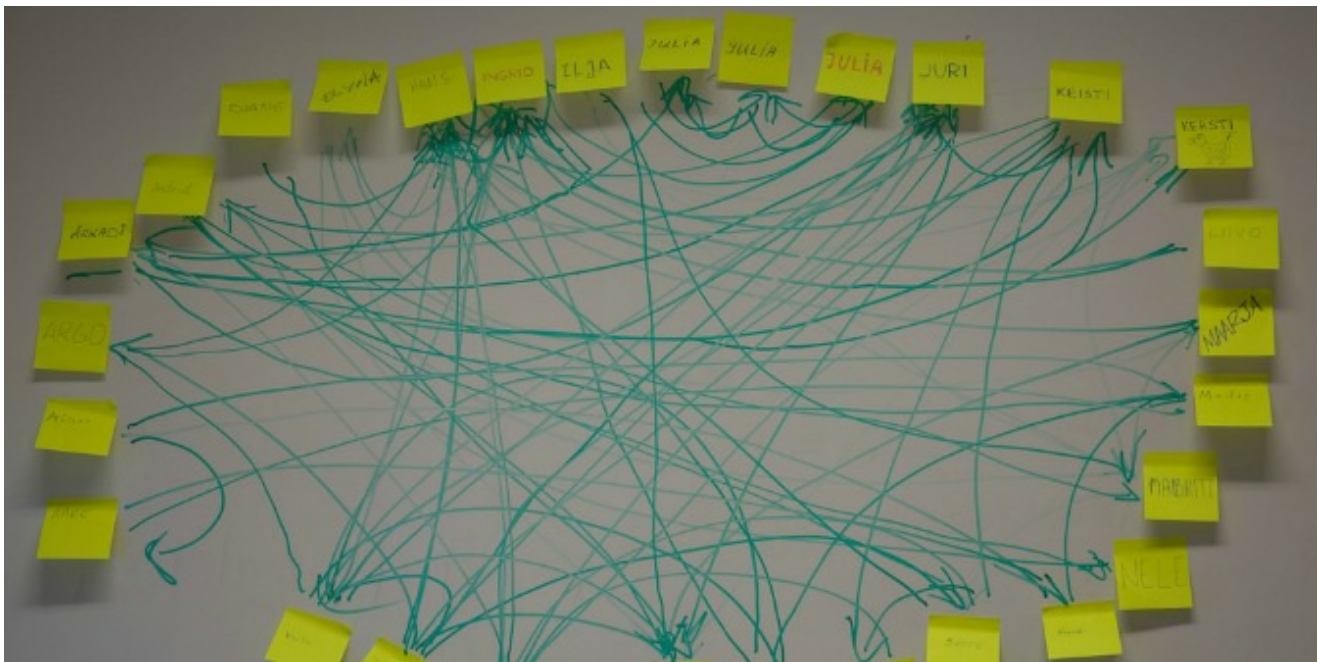


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What is evidence for service and practice?

The idea of evidence-based practice grew from the medical field, gaining currency particularly from the 1990's. The idea that practice and services should be evidence-based is now widely accepted, although definitions of what constitute evidence varies. Whilst citizen's and clients' views, administrative data and other evidence is valued, research evidence is seen to have a particular place [due to its neutrality](#).

However I have become concerned recently that we are narrowing our definition of evidence-based practice to mean solely that we are using programmes based on randomised controlled trials (RCTs), for example, parenting programmes. Whilst this kind of evidence-based practice has its place, it is also problematic. Usually the trials have taken place in different contexts and countries, and adopting them wholesale undermines the expertise of local practitioners and underplays the cultural differences between communities. We have recently worked with [Evaluation Support Scotland](#) to develop this.

It is more helpful to think about the various ways in which evidence might underpin service development:

- Our evidence: We have run this programme before and collected evidence to show that it worked for this group.
- Similar organisation evidence: Another organisation like us has run this programme before and collected evidence to show it would work (although not experimentally tested it).
- Broad research evidence: We've reviewed the research base and found strong evidence from research that the approach we are taking can work for the client group we are working with
- 'What works' evidence: This approach has been subject to randomised control trials (RCT) and we believe that our client group and context are similar enough for the same approach to work here.
- Innovation in the evidence-gap: Where there is no clear and appropriate evidence of what works for a particular client group, a programme can contribute to the evidence by experimenting and evaluating an approach that looks like it might work (from the available evidence).

A full version of this discussion is [available here](#):

Key ways of improving research use.

There is well documented discussion of the key challenges for research use (e.g. Walter et al 2003). In order to improve the way that research links with policy and practice we need:

1. Translation – research in easily accessible forms for all those who might use it (this might be different for different groups)
2. Networks of relationships between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners to ensure that research is discussed, new research agendas have joint ownership and the possibility for close partnerships [throughout the research cycle](#)
3. Learning organisations with strong leadership that recognise and understand [new knowledge, assimilate and combine it with existing knowledge](#) and translate knowledge into actions that will benefit the organisation.

We have a long way to go to develop these new ways of working that will enable researcher, policy-makers and practitioners to close the gap between knowledge and action. Organisations like The Factor—Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and CRFR are important in leading the way.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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