

A more interdisciplinary approach can help us understand why research evidence does or doesn't make it into policy



*Effective communication of research is often cited as being most important to gaining the attention of policymakers. This arguably underestimates the sheer complexity of the policymaking process, assuming a linear route from evidence to policy and practice. **Fiona Blyth and Carmen Huckel Schneider** explain why breaking down walls between different academic disciplines could enhance our understanding of why research evidence does – or doesn't – make it into policy, and also suggest questions that researchers might ask as a “gateway” to understanding these different approaches to evidence-informed policymaking.*

Researchers keen to see their findings impact on policy and practice are often told that better communication is the magic key to opening the door to the world of policy. The message is: if you can communicate your research well enough, policymakers will pay attention. While communication is no doubt important, the route from evidence to policy and practice is rarely this linear. Working as a knowledge broker involves stepping into the shoes of both researchers and policymakers, and it becomes crystal clear that the route from research to policy is a winding road with multiple twists, turns, red lights, and intersections.

Policymaking is a complex process, and we know that evidence is just one of many factors that come into play. Health disciplines have broadly embraced the concept of evidence-informed policymaking, and there is a growing body of literature that aims to better understand and enhance this process. But if you look outside the health disciplines, you discover that many other academic disciplines are keen to take up this challenge of increasing the use of evidence in decision-making, and each takes a quite different approach to that challenge. By thinking outside the box and breaking down the barriers between disciplines, we can gain important insights into understanding the complexity of policymaking, and where evidence fits in the process. After all, policymakers come from different disciplinary backgrounds – a fact that can, in itself, result in individuals interacting with evidence in different ways.

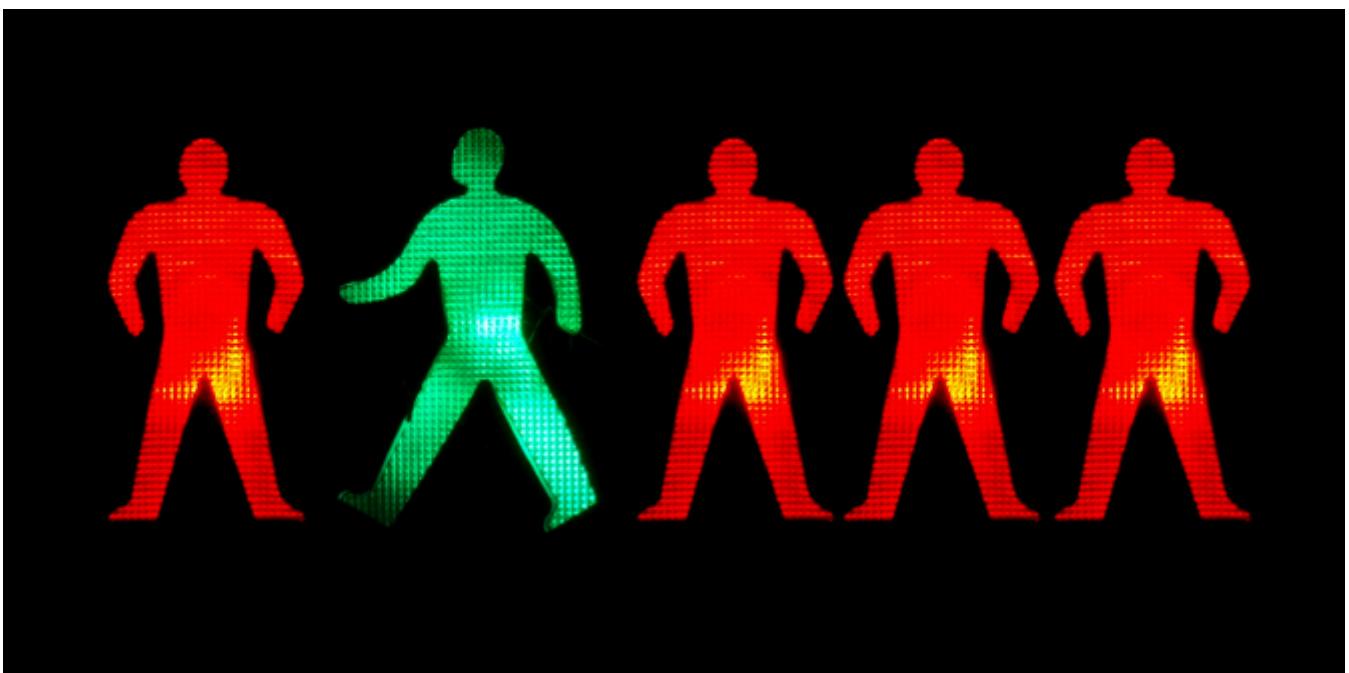


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Gaining insights from different disciplines

In **our research paper**, we explore some of the important contributions to evidence-informed policymaking drawn from four different disciplines, each with its own history and breadth of methodologies and approaches. While our exploration only touches on the surface of these disciplines, we pose some key questions that researchers might ask as a “gateway” to understanding these different approaches to evidence-informed policymaking.

Information processing and behavioural sciences: understanding how individuals make decisions is an important facet of grasping how evidence is used in policy, and this discipline has a central focus on human cognition and relationships. It seeks to understand how and why people make the decisions they do.

Suggested gateway question: *“In what ways might policymakers use evidence in their cognitive and group decision-making processes?”*

Theories of policymaking and the political sciences: this discipline is concerned with evidence about the policy process, looking at how and why certain policies come into being, and the role of institutions, individuals, and other organisations or networks in setting agendas and arriving at solutions. The research seeks to make sense of a highly complex policy environment made up of actors, relationships, ideas, and sets of core drivers.

Suggested gateway question: *“How do we understand the ways in which policy is being made?”*

Critical theory and political philosophy: this discipline is focused on who produces evidence, and how the evidence is interpreted and used. Key concepts are governance, democracy, representation, ethics, and power, and it provides insights into evidence-informed policymaking from both practical and ethical standpoints.

Suggested gateway question: *“What assumptions are being made about the value of evidence-informed policymaking, and at what point does that value reach its limit?”*

Intervention research and implementation science: this discipline looks at the impact of strategies applied in real-world settings to induce some form of change, and has a strong focus on finding the right study design to gain plausible explanations of what works in which contexts. It is focused on the generation and use of reliable knowledge that can inform what policy approach to take, what programmes to implement, and how to execute them.

Suggested gateway question: *“How can we know what is making a difference?”*

Developing frameworks

We need frameworks of evidence-informed policymaking, combining insights from several of these approaches. What is clear is that if we really want to understand how to make evidence most useful for policymakers, we need to understand the drivers – why they need the evidence. The gateway questions posed here could open the door to a deeper, rounder understanding of those drivers.

If we start with the issue that needs to be addressed and bring together the relevant insights, tools, and skills from all our disciplines to put on the table, we believe we may take a step closer to a true understanding of evidence-informed policymaking.

This blog post is based on the authors’ article, “Challenges of integrating evidence into health policy and planning: linking multiple disciplinary approaches”, published in Public Health Research & Practice (DOI: 10.17061/phrp2721719).

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