

Assessing the contribution of research to policy and practice: a case study

Liz Kerrins
Children's Research Centre
Trinity College Dublin



Developing a framework to identify the non-academic impact of social research

- Project aim: To support the development of a framework to identify the non-academic impact of social research, using Children's Research Centre reports as case studies
- Objectives include investigating how and why interactions between researchers and audiences may or may not lead to research use
- Interested in researching a cost-effective, useable framework for identifying and describing impact
- Funded by Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences
- Close to completion

What do we mean by 'impact'

- Research use in policy, practice, services
 1. Conceptual use/'enlightenment' model (Weiss, 1980) – evidence 'creeps' into policy cumulatively
- Research can raise awareness, change perceptions of problems and solutions
- Challenge for impact assessment is that it is not easy to observe or evidence & can take time to emerge

Instrumental use

2. Instrumental use/‘knowledge push’ model (Weiss, 1980)

- Direct use of research- broad agreement that it can be hard to achieve
 - Evaluation indicators include adoption of research recommendations and acting on the implications of research
- enlightenment model may be too pessimistic about short-term impact and instrumental too naive – we looked for evidence of both

Other uses of research

- There are other uses to be mindful of
 - Political/tactical
 - Imposed (Weiss et al, 2008) – funding related

Methodology

- Literature review on impact assessment
 - Informed development of methodology & methods
 - Plenty of literature on effective research dissemination and barriers and enablers to research use; relative dearth of frameworks to identify and describe research impact, especially in social sciences

Methodology

- But learning from other disciplines, esp. health sciences
- Linear v complex/messy models of research use

Methodology

- Forward looking - starts with study, focusing on how research outputs and findings are accessed and used by non-academic audiences. Argument for backward looking starting with the research users and their use of research, but complex
- Case study approach (very common)
- Illustrative of impact; not representative of other studies or programme of work

Payback Framework

- Used in evaluating non-academic impact of social research, e.g.,
- Critiqued for being too linear a model
- Learning from model of research use in (Chaskin and Rosenfeld, 2008)
 - Focus on process as important to outcome
 - Focus on socio-political context
 - Researcher role/power

Methods

- Study visits (HERG, ESRC, Edinburgh University)
- Building a 'publications' portfolio' to assess 'knowledge flow' (Wooding et al, 2004)
Citations and characteristics of citing papers. Used Google, Google Scholar, Web of Knowledge, Scopus
- Tracking media activity
- Tracking activity – dissemination, engagement

Methods

- Semi-structured interviews with PIs most common qualitative method – used to get information on activity and impact
- Extended to interviews with research commissioners/funder, other key users
- Schedule informed by Payback (relevant categories & indicators) and Chaskin and Rosenfeld
- Questions related to direct and indirect theories of research use

Picking projects for case studies

- Projects where anecdotally, it seems that there has been success approach taken in other studies (Wooding et al, 2004) - trade-off between the risk of biases and the risk of ending up with case studies where few outcomes had occurred
- Used 'clean' research - no previous Irish research on children's experiences of domestic violence or outcomes from intercountry adoption
- Commissioned work - should have some chance of impact as it is 'a lever for outcomes' (Wooding et al, 2004)

Use of payback categories

- Knowledge production
- Research targeting and capacity building
- Informing policy
- Service and practice outcomes

Case study 1: Listen to Me

- Commissioned by Mayo Women's Service
- To research the impact of domestic violence on children in order to meet identified service needs
- Local context of poor understanding of impact of DV on children and poor availability of services to support them
- Wider context of inadequate understanding

Some outcomes from LTM

- First study of effects of DV on children in Ireland – adding to knowledge base
- Provided evidence base for Mayo Children's Initiative – necessary for funding
- Supported development of an action plan for the Initiative
- Cited in parliament debates and political speeches
- Used extensively by the Initiative in Mayo in training/workshops with those practitioners identified in the study as requiring education – teachers and Gardai

Some outcomes from LTM

- *The impact of exposure to domestic violence on children and young people: A review of the literature*, Child Abuse & Neglect, Volume 32, Issue 8, August 2008 ranked top of the ten most downloaded articles from the Elsevier Child Abuse and Neglect Journal website in the second quarter of 2009
- This article, and *Child Abuse Review, Vol 16, Issue 5*, were used in journal articles/policy reports outside of Ireland
- Not all citations previously identified by PI – exercise valuable
- Cited in parliament debates and political speeches

Case study 2 – Study on Intercountry Adoption Outcomes

- Commissioned by The Adoption Board
- Context = Hague Convention and Rep of Ireland as country with high levels of intercountry adoptions
- Child outcomes and services
- Qualitative and quantitative – young people's voices new
- 3 outputs: Full report; executive summary, 1 journal article
- Dissemination: conferences (academic & professional); posting of free hard copies

Some outcomes from ICA study

- First Irish study – valuable baseline data, supports further research
- Research used in psychology courses in TCD and social work course in University of British Columbia
- Cited in parliament debates and political speeches
- Whether or not it has changed negative views of ICA unknown
- Used by some practitioners in preparing parents for adoption
- Very mixed views on influence of report on Adoption Bill to implement Hague Convention

Did dissemination and engagement activities support research use?

- Focus groups with parents informed problem definition in both ICA study and Listen to Me – viewed
- Research available to commissioner for use throughout research process – supported thinking of commissioners

Factors supporting research use

- Reputations of researchers
- Public events
- Clarity of publications – exec summary
- Perceived need for the research
- Many factors identified that influenced research use in policy development

Conclusions

Practical issues in assessment

- Need effective monitoring by researchers
- Scale and practicality – large surveys v interviews
- Where do you look for the social impact arising from research – need good understanding of desired outcomes from the beginning
- How to best move beyond output & activity/proxy indicators – may not always be fire when smoke!

Practical issues

- Need for good monitoring of activity, and of incidences of research contribution
- Not always easy to understand and trace dissemination if commissioner undertakes it
- Researcher and research user memory
- Outcomes may not be evident yet
- Possible bias

Conclusions

Children's Lives

- Power of children's voices and experiences – qualitative understandings in evidence hierarchy?
- What has been the effect of CRC research on children's lives? Difficult to say

Overall – early days for both studies but both perceived as useful