PUBLIC HEALTH 128 (2014) 545–551

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

Public Health

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/puhe

Narrative Review

Beyond two communities – from research utilization and knowledge translation to co-production?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 16 May 2013
Received in revised form
10 February 2014
Accepted 10 February 2014
Available online 19 May 2014

Keywords:
Research/policy/practice relationships
Co-production
Knowledge exchange
Knowledge translation
'Two communities'

ABSTRACT

In recent public health discourse, the relations between researchers, policy makers, and professionals are often described as 'gaps', illustrating the (cultural) differences between these domains. Such descriptions seem to be part of a 'two communities'-logic: a perception that researchers and policy makers or professionals stem from strictly separated worlds, with distinctive logics, rationales and incentives. In this paper, the author will argue that this prevalent conceptual framework of 'two communities', whilst having been extremely helpful in theorizing the difficulties of connecting policy needs with research findings, bears several important limitations when analysing structural collaboratives between researchers and policy makers or professionals.

The paper outlines several problematic assumptions and neglected elements that are generally perceivable within this tradition, such as the analytical a priori separation of research, policy and practice domains and the overemphasis on both the heterogeneity between domains and the homogeneity within these domains. Inductively developed insights from the field of science and technology studies (STS) show that the boundaries between research and policy are often much more fluid (and largely rhetorical) than the two communities tradition seems to acknowledge. What needs to be analysed is not only how the boundaries can be bridged, but how – and at what moments – these boundaries are maintained, redrawn or re-established – and for what purposes.

This paper focuses on these questions by utilizing the alternative conceptual framework of coproduction. It draws on long term qualitative research to structural collaborations (the Dutch Academic Collaborative Centres for Public Health) to illustrate these points.
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In recent public health discourse, the relations between researchers, policy makers, and professionals are often described as 'gaps'. Such descriptions are meant to illustrate the (cultural) differences between these domains. Many researchers in public health policy and knowledge translation have conceptualized the relations between these domains in terms of a 'two communities'-logic: a perception of researchers and policy makers or professionals as stemming

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2014.02.004
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from strictly separated worlds, with distinctive logics, rationales and incentives.[1–3] Resulting from this, so the argument usually goes, is a 'lack of fit': information from research is often considered of little practical use, whereas policy questions are often rendered too general to be amendable to a 'scientifically investigable' question. From an understanding of researchers and policy makers as distinctive (cultural) groups, one of the main issues becomes to better connect these groups. Much literature in knowledge translation therefore focuses on the question of how the alleged 'gaps' between research and policy can be 'bridged'.

In this paper, the main argument is that this prevalent conceptual framework of 'two communities', whilst having been extremely helpful in theorizing the difficulties of connecting policy needs with research findings and investigating suitable strategies to translate knowledge to policy or practice domains, bears several important limitations when analysing structural collaboratives between researchers and policy makers or professionals.

Other disciplines, however, have a much longer tradition of work in which the conceptualization of research and policy (and in a similar way, research and practice) as distinctive worlds has been questioned. The interdisciplinary field of science and technology studies (STS) offers a rich tradition of theoretically challenging and empirically supported research that challenges the strict dichotomies that are dominating much public health scholarship on the relations between evidence, policy and practice. What such work has shown empirically is that – in contrast to the fundamental oppositions that are emphasized within the 'two communities' framework – the difference between what counts as a 'scientific' issue and what counts as a 'policy-affair' is not something that is given in advance, but rather actively negotiated in practice.[4] The field of STS provides an alternative conceptual framework which can be labelled as 'co-production'.[5] This alternative view on science/policy relations focuses on how natural and social orders, or science and policy, are being produced simultaneously and interactively. This perspective may have particular benefits when analysing structural forms of collaboration (e.g. multidisciplinary and multistakeholder advisory organizations, think tanks, intermediary organizations). In public health literature, the development of structural partnerships is increasingly seen as a promising way of exposing researchers, policy makers and professionals to each other's needs.[6–12] For such settings the co-production framework can have added value for both theorists and practitioners alike.

In this paper, a (necessarily brief) history of the 'two communities' tradition will be provided. The main characteristics and prevalence of this frame of thinking will be explained, and then the problematic aspects in studying structural collaborations will be discussed. Second, the co-production framework, what it means and what its core components are will further be outlined. The author will draw on his empirical research of a structural public health collaborative (the Dutch Academic Collaborative Centres for Public Health; in short: ACCs). In the conclusion, the theoretical and practical benefits this framework may allow are outlined.

A history of communities: the development of knowledge translation in public health

In very brief and reductive terms,[a] the development of knowledge translation literature in public health is characterized by three successive 'generations' of models: 1) rationalistic linear models presuming a one way process from research to policy or practice; 2) interactive and incremental models presuming dialogue (relationship models); 3) models aiming to more broadly incorporate the complex structures and contexts in which these dialogues are embedded (systems or network models).[13,14]

Unsurprisingly, however, the notion of 'knowledge translation' itself is surrounded by profound conceptual ambiguities.[39] Therefore, it is not my intension to try to give an all encompassing definition of the term (as these authors show that there are more than 100 terms that are equivalent – or closely related to – this notion). Rather, it suffices to say here that the concept of 'knowledge translation' is increasingly used to overcome the limitations of more linear concepts as 'knowledge transfer' and 'research utilization'.[40,41] Some authors point out that the concept of knowledge translation recognizes that two-way exchanges between researchers and policy makers/practitioners are required. However, as will become clear, recognizing two-way exchanges is still very different from a perspective of co-production.

In terms of the development of this strand of literature, one can thus identify three basic sets of models. Rationalistic linear models mainly focus on describing a one-way process where researchers produce new knowledge, which then gets disseminated to end users and finally is incorporated in policy and practice.[15] Research use is seen as instrumental from this perspective.[16,17] Relationship models recognize the interactive character of the relationship between science and policy. These models recognize that knowledge needs to be 'translated' if it is to be made useful. Models falling into this general category usually presume (and promote) dialogues, or types of 'linkage and exchange', between researchers and policy makers.[6] Systems or network models try to incorporate the 'mediating structures' in which science-policy interactions are embedded, shaped, and organized.[15]

This development from linear models to relationship and systems models clearly shows the large progress that has been made in recent decades in terms of theorizing research-policy-practice relationships. However, there are some fundamental aspects that remain unaddressed, even in these latter models – aspects that become more pressing when trying to understand structural collaborative formats between researchers, policy makers and professionals. It is striking that in all models, the basic underlying notion of research and policy as distinct worlds, as two communities, remains notable. This basic assumption forms the starting point not only of the older linear models, but also lies at the heart of the more interactive models focusing on knowledge exchange and/or knowledge translation. Lin & Gibson (2003) argue that the 'two communities construct' remains dominant whenever the following assumptions continue: 'that the researcher and

[a] A similar argument has been made much more substantially in Refs. 13 and 14.

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