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Comments on the paper by Almeida & Báscolo

This paper seeks to conduct “*a critical review of the theoretical literature on the relationship between the production of scientific knowledge and its use in policy formulation and implementation*”. Its “*initial hypothesis is that there is an excessive formalization of instruments and pragmatic simplification in the proposals designed to draw the two fields (research and policy) closer, while the importance of formulating and developing analytical and explanatory frameworks that perhaps offer more promise in this process is underestimated*”; and even “*relegated to secondary importance*”.

Certainly the paper does provide a useful review of the available literature on the subject. Unfortunately however, it does not really do what it says it will do. It essentially provides a descriptive review of what the current state of knowledge is with respect to the problems of knowledge transfer, some of the principal barriers to effective transfer, and the use of evidence by policymakers. It looks at literature that discusses the processes likely to be involved, and at literature that details the importance of understanding the dynamics of the researcher/policy-maker interaction. It also reviews studies that make recommendations as to how to go about trying to accomplish successful transfer. Finally the paper recognizes the possible importance of knowledge in at least improving the debate surrounding policymaking – even though it may encourage a greater degree of uncertainty and “chaos” in the dialogue.

However, the paper does not really say much about the alleged “*excessive formalization of instruments and pragmatic simplification in the proposals designed to bring these two fields (research and policy) closer*”. Neither does it tell us about the types of theoretical avenues that may need to be further explored. It repeats the assertions already made in the literature being reviewed and acknowledges, as they do, that much of the theoretical discussion is “still in its infancy”.

The authors suggest that the current theoretical deficiencies may be linked to the “submissive, a-theoretical conception of political science” – prevalent in the USA. in the 1960s and 70s – as public policy analyses sought to produce “practical” knowledge. Certainly the push for things more “practical” and “useful” was strong (and in many instances the legitimacy of the position must be conceded in the face of the presence of

many useless esoteric theoretical discussions at that time).

The reluctance of many academics to recognize the importance of operational research as well as their early (and in many instances, continuing) inability to translate their theoretical debates into language understandable and appreciated by the policymaker has also contributed to some of the early theoretical sterility. The real contribution of this paper could then have been to identify some of the more critical theoretical avenues and issues that require further exploration. For example, the authors note that some have identified “*both barriers and factors that promote and facilitate the use of research results in policy in each of the analytical categories suggested by Walt & Gilson*”. They then go on to state that “*little headway has been made on proposals to surmount these barriers; the question is whether simply surmounting them will solve the impasses or whether this approach (although necessary) is really sufficient to promote greater use of research in policy formulation and implementation*”. It could be argued that a “straw man” has been set up here as, presumably, progress on surmounting the barriers would go a long way to addressing the issues! It would have been more helpful to go further than a re-statement of the challenge, and to begin a discussion that identifies useful lines of theoretical enquiry.

As a result of these difficulties – the paper tends to be a bit repetitive, and it is not always easy to grasp its main objectives; there could indeed be several. Also, one should not have to wait until page 5 for an indication of the paper’s objective.