

Identifying Perspectives on the Implementation Research-Practice Gap

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Event Summary

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Introduction

Implementation science (IS) is comprised of two equally important components: 1) implementation research, the aim of which is to find the best approaches for moving evidence into practice; and 2) implementation practice, which utilizes and adapts these approaches in particular practice settings and contexts to achieve sustainable outcomes and a goal of implementation (Ramaswamy et al., 2019). A bi-directional relationship between implementation research and practice is required to continually strengthen implementation principles derived from practice and validated by research.

This bi-directional relationship has proven much more difficult to achieve than anticipated. Both implementation researchers and practitioners have written about potential causes and solutions (Beidas et al., 2022; Moore & Khan., 2022; Geng et al., 2018), but the implementation research-to-practice gap persists. The Society for Implementation Research Collaboration (SIRC) is uniquely positioned to help advance the conversation as it is an organization that welcomes a full range of partners involved in implementation: researchers, practitioners, intermediaries, trainees, funders, etc. Nevertheless, SIRC feels the implementation research-to-practice gap the same as it is felt in the broader implementation science community. As such, members of SIRC's Practitioner Network of Expertise have organized a series of events to bring implementation researchers and practitioners together to explore this gap from different perspectives and advance the conversation around potential strategies to address the gap in collaboration with one another.

About the Event

"Identifying Perspectives on the Implementation Research-Practice Gap" was an interactive event held to collect perspectives from implementation practitioners, researchers, and trainees about (1) the implementation research-practice gap and (2) how to improve collaboration between implementation researchers and practitioners. In this level-setting session, implementation practitioners, researchers, and trainees were asked to describe the different ways the research-to-practice gap shows up in their work. They were also asked to reflect on what values and considerations we need to keep at the forefront while we explore paths to close the implementation research-to-practice gap. The event included thirty-two participants: eight trainees, six researchers, seventeen practitioners, and one lead facilitator. Several participating trainees, researchers, and practitioners also provided facilitation of one or more breakout discussions.

Throughout the event, participants contributed insights directly in conversation, through the Zoom chat function, and anonymously through Padlet boards used in the breakout discussions. Some discussion groups were affinity-based (i.e., implementation practitioner, researcher, or

trainee) and some discussions had mixed participants. After the event, participants' comments from the large-group and breakout discussions were organized by groups (mixed or affinity) and matched to the specific questions asked in each group. Themes were identified by the authors of this report. This thematic analysis helped to make sense of various experiences of the implementation research-to-practice gap and collect ideas for how to move the conversation forward (see below). We invite feedback on these themes and directions from anyone reviewing this report. Please submit feedback and respond to others' comments using [here](#).

How the implementation research-to-practice gap shows up in our work

Participants joined 'affinity groups' to have small group discussions about how the implementation research-practice gap impacts them as researchers, implementation practitioners, or trainees.

Implementation Researchers emphasized that in their work, the research-to-practice gap comes down to limited dissemination capacity and avenues to share research findings. We heard that categorizing people as "researchers," "practitioners," and "trainees" is limiting because it perpetuates silos. Many people wear multiple or blended hats along the implementation science identity spectrum. Moreover, collaboration among individuals with varied professional identities and roles is required both to conduct useful implementation research and to facilitate the translation of evidence into practice.

The productivity of science does not beget the uptake of evidence. IS, still a developing field, suffers from an unbalanced focus on implementation research. Furthermore, evidence is often only shared as far as academic publications and conferences. Implementation practitioners access and consume evidence differently than researchers do. Implementation researchers must think more deeply about where and how to share evidence so that others participating in the translational spectrum can access and use it. Thus, closing the research-to-practice gap may require new structures for the dissemination capacity of researchers.

Implementation Practitioners understand the importance of research-informed practice.

However, implementation practitioners feel undervalued by implementation researchers. Even the term "IS" biases toward research and can be used to dampen the contributions of practitioners. Researchers have developed a reputation among practitioners for advancing theories, models, frameworks, and strategies that are seemingly intended to solve practice challenges without considering the lived experiences of practitioners. This approach falls flat, not sufficiently inclusive of the legislative, budgetary, and organizational realities of specific practice environments nor offering sufficient guidance or support for how to adapt and apply such theories, models, and frameworks (similar to findings in Ramaswamy, 2019). Researchers

would benefit from more authentically partnering with practitioners to understand the limitations under which they work. Practitioners and funders may benefit from embedding researchers within practice environments to advance such partnerships, enhance the usefulness of research evidence, and ultimately speed the translation of evidence back into practice. This could also include embedded partnerships for practitioners to better engage in co-designing or co-selecting theories, models, frameworks, and strategies for their organizational and practice settings, the lack of resources for which has also perpetuated the implementation research-practice gap.

Trainees from various disciplines go into IS with a desire to help address real-world problems. For these trainees, IS offers an opportunity to develop applied research skills that transcend sectors, conditions, and populations. However, IS training varies, leaving students with differing capacities to contribute to closing the research-to-practice gap in implementation. For example, IS terminology varies by country, sector, and discipline, making it difficult to connect with others interested in IS. Most often, trainees come across IS from supplemental learning or have the fortune of a mentor who facilitates implementation research collaborations. Some students enter IS-focused labs that offer opportunities to collaborate in community settings, giving them opportunities to learn important skills around community-based research, but lack resources or opportunities to continue their engagement in community-based implementation or practitioner work once their funding or formal training infrastructure is no longer in place. Implementation researchers who had completed their training also noted that there is a gap in graduate training in how to identify and monitor legislative changes that will affect policy and practice.

Trainees are interested in learning about implementation research and practice competencies and strive to balance both rigor and relevance. However, training to understand implementation practitioners' needs, their roles, and how to support their work is sparse. Trainees voiced understanding that IS impact increases when the research aligns with practitioner needs. Trainees believe that interventions might have better reach if researchers are trained, at least in part, in practice environments and with practice knowledge and skills. However, obtaining implementation practice training is even more limited than obtaining implementation research training. Furthermore, Trainee research projects are typically incentivized by their research institutions rather than the needs of implementation practitioners.

Shared values to be held moving forward

In addition to the affinity group discussions, small discussions in mixed groups were held to explore what values and considerations should be upheld as we move forward in the journey to

address the implementation research-practice gap. Participants across the mixed group conversations coalesced around several shared values:

1. A shared focus on creating greater impact, specifically through improving engagement and outcomes.
2. Respect for and between everyone involved in the co-design of implementation research, planning, and evaluation. Partners all have things to learn from one another and respect for one another's knowledge and expertise is paramount.
3. Humbleness, humility, and openness. We can acknowledge that researchers and practitioners are interdependent and that everyone brings wisdom while having gaps in their knowledge. They must support one another, rather than bias towards one form of knowledge more than the other.
4. Balance between rigor and pragmatism - not sacrificing one for the other, but finding ways to incorporate the two.
5. Equity. Inequities are perpetuated when the beneficiaries of research cannot access that body of research. Research needs to be co-designed with beneficiaries to translate research for those using it and to facilitate practitioners' implementation of interventions.

Other considerations and requirements

Participants emphasized interpersonal and systemic considerations to keep in sight as we explore solutions for the implementation research-to-practice gap. Working in dynamic sectors and living through the recent pandemic repeatedly uncovers the need for nimbleness in our collaborations to adapt as emergent issues arise. This nimbleness can be strengthened by ongoing bi-directional communication between IS collaboration partners. Emergent issues and shifting contexts aside, bi-directional feedback will be essential for all IS partnerships, to allow feedback from different partners to be incorporated across the implementation research-to-practice process.

At the collaboration level, participants noted three key considerations. First, there is inequity in the capacity to generate knowledge. Because of the way systems are constructed, knowledge that is created and disseminated comes from the researcher perspective, despite practitioner interest in knowledge generation. Practitioners do their best to contribute to knowledge generation but do not have the luxury of time, funding, or organizational mandate to collect data as rigorously or in-depth as they wish. To work within this reality, research must be designed collaboratively to make the process practical. This speaks to the interdependency of researchers and practitioners: we cannot generate and promote rigorous, relevant, and actionable knowledge without collaboration. Second, implementation researchers housed in academia are required to perform to institutional standards that often perpetuate silos over

collaboration. Advocacy may be required to clarify the organizational value of IS collaborations. Third, after knowledge generation is complete, we need to consider how to apply the science. This responsibility does not fall squarely on either practitioners or researchers but is required to move evidence into practice. Knowledge application goes beyond dissemination, requiring us to figure out how to draw from the research to fit a local context in ways that work for implementers who are expected to complete implementation on very short timelines.

Finally, participants pointed towards the role of funders in overcoming the implementation research-to-practice gap, stating that funders would be wise to be involved in implementation collaborations. Funders could help provide time and resources for partnership building. They could also require partnerships between researchers, practitioners, and trainees in order to successfully implement programs of interest to the funders. This is an emergent trend in Canada, where funders require 'quadripartite' leadership in grant applications that includes a researcher, policymaker, provider, and patient with lived experience (e.g., CIHR 2022). This granting model was established to allow implementers and people with lived experience to influence implementation research agendas and increase research relevance and utility (CIHR 2023).

Vision for the future

In sharing their perspectives, participants painted a picture of what implementation research-practice partnerships could look like in the future: we no longer experience an implementation research-to-practice gap. Instead, we focus on the strengths of our different partners and how to best collaborate. The field of implementation has strong and accessible bridges between research and practice, with people freely moving between the two. We use these bridges to proactively build collaborations before grant opportunities arise and then sustain relationships after research is complete. The connections made and implementation efforts that come from these bridges create demonstrable impacts. Implementation research is co-designed, conducted by committed applied researchers and scholars, and disseminated through channels co-designed with intermediaries and implementation practitioners.

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