

## **Advancing the Conversation About the Implementation Research-Practice Gap**

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### **Event Summary**

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### RESEARCH CHALLENGES

- **RCT Limitations:** Overreliance on Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) can limit the use of real-world evidence in health service improvement.
- **Terminology Issues:** Inconsistent use of terms and frameworks hampers research-practice collaboration and evidence uptake.
- **Early Involvement of Implementation Researchers:** Engaging implementation researchers early can optimize programmatic and implementation interventions for real-world use.
- **Balanced Research Portfolio:** Research should balance immediate practical support with foundational studies for future practice.

### PRACTICE CHALLENGES

- **Complex Solutions:** Diverse expertise and perspectives are often required to address implementation challenges.
- **Knowledge Brokers:** Intermediaries should gather practice insights to inform research, not just move evidence to practice.
- **Equity in Collaboration:** Equity should be promoted through research and practice processes.

### COMMUNITY PARTNER CHALLENGES<sup>1</sup>

- **Research-Practice Gap:** The persistent disconnect between implementation research and practical application remains challenging.
- **Community Trust:** Communities often feel exploited when research findings are not shared, which affects trust and the application of results.

### INTERSECTION (TRUST & COLLABORATION)

- **Mutual Respect:** Successful implementation requires mutual respect and meaningful engagement between implementation researchers and implementation practitioners.
- **Transdisciplinary Collaboration:** Partnering across related fields can deepen and accelerate implementation efforts.
- **Optimism in Community:** There is a strong commitment to closing the implementation research-practice gap through respectful, productive dialogue.
- **Clear Roles and Communication:** Defining roles in the field and reinforcing transparent communication can build trust and improve collaborations.
- **Role Clarity:** Clearer differentiation of researcher and practitioner roles enhances strategic collaboration.

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<sup>1</sup> Community partner challenges were identified by session participants, who were researchers, practitioners, and trainees, but not community partners themselves.

## **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, the SIRC community experiences the implementation research-to-practice gap in much of the same way as it is experienced in the broader IS community. As such, members of SIRC's Practitioner Network 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**

"Advancing the Conversation About the Implementation Research-Practice Gap" was an interactive roundtable to discuss the current state and future directions for IS collaborations to close the implementation research-practice gap. Four experienced panellists - one representing the research perspective, two representing the practice perspective, and one that spanned research and practice - summarized their views of common pitfalls causing the gap and potential course corrections. Audience members contributed insights directly throughout the conversation using the Zoom chat function and anonymously through Padlet boards (an online feedback collection platform). The event included 156 participants, including trainees, implementation practitioners, and implementation researchers.

Themes from the event were identified by the authors of this report. A thematic analysis helped make sense of various perspectives around the most pressing issues exacerbating the implementation research-to-practice gap. We transcribed the event recording, Padlet, and Zoom chat verbatim to conduct the thematic analysis and inductively coded the content line-by-line. The first three authors identified and reviewed the overarching themes before summarizing them in this report. We invite feedback on these themes and directions from anyone reviewing this report. Please submit feedback and respond to others' comments using [this online padlet](#).

## **Factors that exacerbate the implementation research-to-practice gap**

Researchers on the panel and in the audience observed that the nature of implementation research often impedes the translation of evidence into practical implementation. For instance, many researchers still view Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) as the primary method to inform change, rather than

leveraging evidence from naturally occurring changes in health service delivery. Additionally, session participants observed frustration in community partners, noting that these partners often feel that implementation researchers collect data but fail to return with the findings. This pattern impacts trust and limits the use of research results in the communities where the studies were conducted.

Both implementation researchers and implementation practitioners agreed that respect between the two professional identities is needed to advance research and practice. Such respect can be demonstrated through meaningful engagement, wherein implementation researchers listen to the needs of implementation practitioners and conduct research that will meet those needs. Conversely, practitioners show respect by adopting and adapting evidence-based implementation practices rooted in knowledge created by the research community.

To create space for meaningful engagement, more accurate and inclusive characterization of the different types of implementation researchers and implementation practitioners may be required. Currently, the field distinguishes implementation research and implementation practice as two nearly separate enterprises. If we had alternate characterizations of the type and nature of work that is happening in the field (e.g., theory-building vs. applied research; direct implementation practice vs. implementation support), considered implementation research and practice on more of a spectrum of professional identities, and were more transparent about the goals of our work activities, we could be more strategic in our collaborative efforts. During the event, panellists and session participants identified one concept that binds most - or perhaps all - professional identities in the field together: problem-solving. Everyone involved in implementation is trying to solve problems. Whether we identify as implementation researchers or implementation practitioners, we are all trying to understand, engineer, and test strategies to solve translational challenges in the evidence-to-practice pipeline. The problems we seek to solve are often complex, non-linear, and require adaptive solutions. By welcoming different perspectives and forms of knowledge into our research and practice, we can leverage a range of expertise in our efforts to address complex problems.

The proliferation of theories, models, and frameworks, paired with a lack of shared terminology around IS concepts, negatively impacts collaboration and practitioners' abilities to take up implementation research evidence. The field needs to balance the use of new terms, which tend to create clarity only over time, with consistency in language, which helps maintain implementation research-practice collaborations.

### **Factors that are already helping to close the implementation research-to-practice gap**

Those working as intermediaries, especially in implementation knowledge synthesis and mobilization, play a key role in facilitating the movement of implementation evidence into practice. However, the focus of knowledge brokers' work is often unidirectional, to move evidence from research into practice. These knowledge brokers could increase their impact by increasing their scope of work to include collecting practice-based insights and delivering those as actionable research questions back to the research community. Some members of the implementation science field are ready to step into these

bi-directional knowledge broker roles to help build the communication and engagement mechanisms between implementation researchers and implementation practitioners.

The implementation community has a sense of optimism, hope, and commitment to work together to close the implementation research-to-practice gap. This event was an example of how people with different perspectives can come together to work on this problem respectfully and productively. These conversations are happening consistently across the implementation science community, indicating global interest in resolving this problem.

### **Additional steps to improve collaboration between researchers and practitioners to overcome the implementation research-to-practice gap**

Understanding, valuing, and making space for both applied and theoretical implementation models and frameworks will be required to accelerate the pace of implementation research and the uptake of new knowledge. To accomplish this, implementation researchers must balance conducting research that will support implementation practitioners today and more foundational (at times, seemingly esoteric) research that will support practice in the future. Implementation research-practice partnerships must underpin both types of research. Thus, a mechanism to communicate the value of both and prioritize various research questions will be required to support cross-field collaborations.

There is also room to expand IS to studies that fall earlier in the research-to-practice pipeline. Implementation researchers normally become involved with existing interventions. They have room to offer more help in developing ‘implementation-optimized interventions’ that account for different contextual factors in intervention design.

Transdisciplinary collaboration between IS and adjacent but relevant fields will also deepen and accelerate our work. Such fields include systems science, change management, and quality improvement science. Increased collaboration with professionals from these fields would create opportunities to develop meaningful insights for IS.

Finally, we must enhance our science, partnerships, and collaborative approaches to advance health equity. Although we are committed to developing policies, practices, and structures that promote equity for our users and beneficiaries, the principles inherent to health equity should guide how we collaborate and conduct our work in implementation research and implementation practice spaces.

### **Final Thoughts**

Partnership is key to advancing IS and closing the implementation research-to-practice gap. Everyone has a role to play in implementation, even though many may not yet feel like they clearly fit into the system. These feelings of isolation will be overcome as we work to clarify and define our professional identities, functions, and the vast array of competencies required to engage with IS effectively. We also need to create spaces to connect with one another and increase the bi-directional pathways of communication between the implementation research and implementation practice communities. Transparency about our goals, funding, timelines, etc., will be a key component of (re)building trust

between the research and practice spaces. Moreover, with growing integration between research and practice, we can act in solidarity to advocate for system structures, policies, and processes (e.g., funding models) that support, instead of hinder, implementation collaborations.

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