

ments, and many more. The international and national bureaucracy is both a policy actor and manager, to the extent that the state is both an actor in the political arena and the arena itself<sup>9</sup>. The list could go on, but what matters is that each of the socio-political actors uses specific research results differently, from their own vision and cost-benefit assessment, frequently influenced more by media information than by the research results published in scientific journals. The process produces negotiations, strategic alliances, and predominant positions that end up consolidating a certain vision and excluding others. Such that scientists' intended "influence" not only is not neutral, but is also transformed, in turn, by the respective socio-political actors. The communications media (which are also not neutral) play a decisive role in the consolidation of hegemonies.

In short, the pretense of achieving aseptic formulation of "evidence-based policies" does not appear possible, as proposed by the authors. Yet the understanding of the relations between research and health policies cannot overlook the issue of power in the two processes. This subject merits closer and especially less instrumental attention, based on the sociology of power. In this sense the review by Almeida & Báscolo is highly welcome.

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9. Skocpol T. *Bringing the state back in: strategies of analysis in current research*. In: Evans P, Rueschmeyer D, Skocpol T, editors. *Bringing the state back in*. New York: Cambridge University Press; 1999. p. 3-37.

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This is, in general, a nice summation and assessment of the theoretical work being done on the use (and lack of use) of scientific evidence to improve health policy and health systems. However, at times the authors summarized excessively, and at other times they missed opportunities to critically compare the various approaches they reviewed.

For example, the historical growth of political science theorizing was painted too broadly. It is difficult to interpret the conclusion that there was a "confusion between research and the operations approach" that led to a "differentiation (and separation) of functions between scientists and 'consultants'" (is this a critique of the field of operations research? What does it mean to separate scientists from consultants in this way?).

I would have liked to see more explicit and detailed comparisons and evaluations of the formulations of people like Kirkhart or Patton or Forss or Walt & Gilson. Are they all compatible with one another? If not, which approaches make

most sense for which circumstances? Answering these questions would have helped forward the authors' expressed goal of "formulating and developing analytical and explanatory frameworks that perhaps offer more promise...". I also wanted to see more follow-up of the authors' point that in Spanish and Portuguese the same word, "política", refers both to the content of policy and to the policy-making process itself. What implications might this and other regional differences have for the generalizability in Latin America of research and theorizing based in the United States and Europe?

Whether referring to Northern or Central or Southern America, or elsewhere, I think the authors are quite correct in emphasizing the dynamic and nonlinear relationship between research and policy. It is important that they acknowledge that much of the literature now being generated on evidence-based policy-making has a rather naïve sense of optimism about it, despite warnings decades ago that policy-mak-

ing has many irrational inputs and may not be particularly open to evidence. One need look no farther than my own country, the United States, for some recent, major (and somehow shocking, even to this jaded observer) examples of the willful neglect and manipulation of scientific evidence to fit policy agendas rather than to shape them. These range from *ignoring* evidence for policies the Bush administration opposes (recommendations that emergency contraception be made readily available, or that greenhouse gases are an important cause of global warming); to *refusing to collect* scientific evidence for policies Bush promotes (abstinence-only interventions for reproductive health are funded without evidence of their effectiveness); to *willfully manipulating* scientific evidence to reframe issues in the Bush administration's favor (a national report on health disparities is censored so thoroughly that instead of calling such disparities a national problem it emphasizes ways that ethnic minorities are healthier than the general U.S. population; and government websites are altered to contradict accepted scientific data reviewing condom effectiveness or abortion risks). (Many of these abuses and others are documented at: <http://www.democrats.reform.house.gov/index.asp>.) One wonders at times whether theorizing about improving the use of research in policy is even useful in the absence of political change.

If it is true, as the authors suggest, that there is "a certain consensus" among analysts with respect to the barriers that impede use of research in decision-making, how do they explain this consensus given the many competing theoretical formulations of the research to policy process? That is, if a theorist like Patton thinks more about use *processes* than products, but a theorist like Kirkhart talks more about *influence* than use, why wouldn't these different formulations lead to the identification of quite different types of barriers and a consequent lack of consensus?

I would have liked to see the authors pay more attention to, and review more of, the empirical research they call for in their last paragraph. This attention would have been of benefit to those considering designing such research. Nonetheless, I think this summary piece provides a good introduction to a broad array of important theories and concepts and definitions related to research and policy-making, and I will look forward to the authors' eventual review of the empirical research they urge.

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### **"Talk of bulls": a comment on Almeida & Báscolo**

The question of how health systems research is and may be used in policy decision-making has been the subject of numerous learned articles and international workshops. The ways in which the so-called research-to-policy transfer is viewed or modeled often reflects the academic discipline and ideological background of the authors. The most obvious differences exist between the rational or linear models of the relation between research and policy on the one hand, and the complex, indirect and not necessarily logical models on the other. The paper by Almeida & Báscolo provides an excellent overview of different approaches and analytical frameworks to describe and learn from the interactions of research and policy. Almeida & Báscolo do not conceal the fact that they are dissatisfied with what they have found. In their conclusion, they complain about the "*excessive formalization of instruments and pragmatic simplification*".

Obviously the boundaries between research and policy are not clear-cut and can therefore not be managed easily. It has become obvious that the "two-communities" perspective may be deceiving<sup>1</sup>. After all, neither the research nor the policy community is homogenous and there may even be overlaps in how the world is viewed from each side. Interestingly enough, however, all models relate to a phenomenon that, albeit being paraphrased on a couple of occasions, is not once mentioned explicitly in the review paper: communication. This is particularly surprising as quite a few of the models draw on institutionalism, be it from a sociological or a rational choice perspective. Even if the latter approach frequently neglects communication, institutionalism and communication are conceptually closely linked.

The analysis of communicative processes, taking into account the lessons of social science in terms of organizational relationships as well as the functions of language, promises to point towards a model of effective communicative interaction between researchers and policy-makers. Even if researchers and policy-makers can possibly rely on a culturally ingrained "pre-understanding", effective communication, i.e. an effective research-to-policy transfer, requires a mutual understanding based on the intent on both sides to engage in a communicative process, which again to a certain degree necessitates the willingness to relativize one's position in the light of the other's perspective. In this sense,