



ANNA LESLIE & SIMON WELLS

TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Anna Leslie and Simon Wells discuss why and how to incorporate research into everyday practice.

Research being translated into practice is not a new phenomenon; for thousands of years the human species has been working things out using the scientific method of encountering a problem, collecting information, analysing what may help solve the problem, testing it, and making subsequent improvements to practice. This is how expertise develops. However, whilst “learning through doing” undoubtedly improves individual performance, it also runs the risk of perpetuating bad practice, which can then be learnt by others through the observation of experienced mentors.

WHAT CAN BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE OFFER INSTEAD?

Traditionally, advances in practice within law enforcement and the intelligence services relied on “hard” science such as the development of forensic DNA testing or technology that identifies someone’s location through mobile phone use.

However, over the past 15 years there has been a sea change in the relevance of behavioural science research. We no longer have to rely on the war stories of highly experienced individuals to enhance our practice and can instead understand what works and why through scientific enquiry.

Due to the efforts of research centres such as NCITE and CREST, we have also gone from having to take broad leaps of faith when applying research that was developed within entirely different contexts to having teams of dedicated academic researchers working directly on the key challenges that practitioners within law enforcement, defence, and the intelligence agencies face. But how does this research add value?

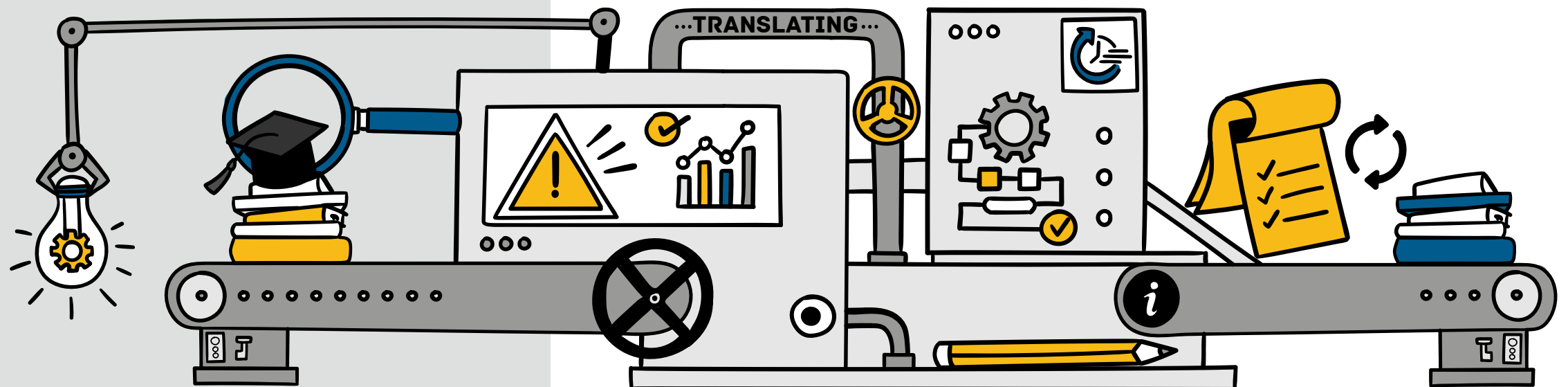
WHAT IS “RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE”?

Throughout our careers, we have used research – that which is developed for our particular context and also that which is developed elsewhere – to try to improve practitioners’ skills in areas such as interviewing, credibility assessment, negotiation, and understanding human behaviour.

We have found that the research as it exists in the traditional forms of academic communication – papers, conferences, journals, and books – are not always suitable for a practitioner audience, and therefore need further translation or explanation.

“ [Traditional forms of academic communication] are not always suitable for a practitioner audience...

There are of course many different types of “practitioner” who require different types and levels of translation. For this article we are focusing on those officers who are at the sharp end of operational work, i.e., law enforcement, defence, and intelligence officers who often work in highly pressurised situations where decisions are made on incomplete information and within a context marked by dynamic changes in risk.



Step 1: Understand the problem

To apply research effectively, you need to really understand the problem that you are applying it to. Much behavioural science research that has been used to improve performance has been developed in other domains. Understanding the nuance of the problem that practitioners face is therefore paramount. As an example, the reliance on “rapport based interview techniques,” which are well-evidenced within Western contexts, have been questioned by some practitioners as not being effective within the cultures in which they work.

Step 2: Understand the science

Practitioners work in challenging environments where their actions can have serious consequences for the safety of others. They are not (usually) behavioural scientists. They do have a wealth of experience and may have developed intuition in understanding human behaviour. They may also have read some literature in pursuit of solutions to their problems. But unless they have received scientific training, they cannot and should not be expected to learn the intricacies of the science. They do not always have the time, or sometimes the skills, to assess the academic rigour of research or to think how to apply the science with the nuance it needs. Without this understanding, its application is immediately flawed, even with the best of intentions.

Consider the claim that liars look right and truth tellers look left, which has been perpetuated in law enforcement training courses and manuals. Or, when academic research is misinterpreted leading to sensationalist headlines in the media (“1,200 killed by mental patients,” The Sun newspaper, 2013).

Step 3: Focus on the “So What”

Expanding the knowledge of practitioners has always been a useful endeavour to advance practice. However, we have to make this process easy. The “So What” of the research has to be articulated clearly and concisely for practice to change. Practitioners need to know how, when, and why research is relevant to their everyday practice, and one (imperfect) way to do this is create “tools” for practitioners to use. These tools can be categorised as:

1. Subject knowledge required to do their role (e.g., to further their understanding of a particular extremist ideology);
2. Techniques that they can put directly into practice (e.g., to elicit credible information);
3. Models/frameworks to assist thinking (e.g., to help risk assessment or decision making).

The first two of these tools often come directly from the research, however, the third needs a little more work.

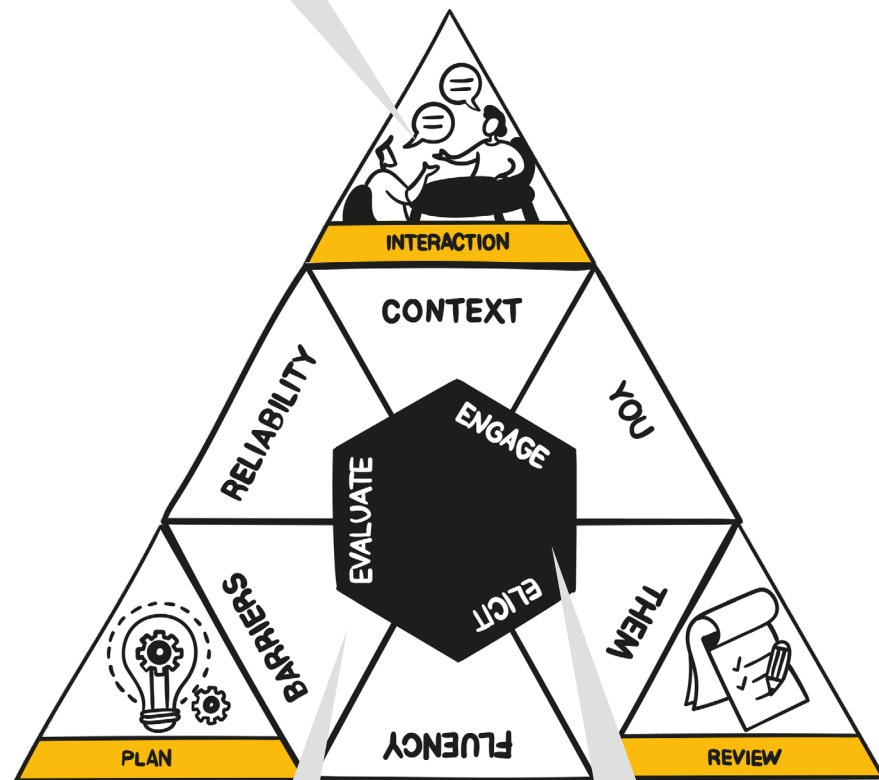
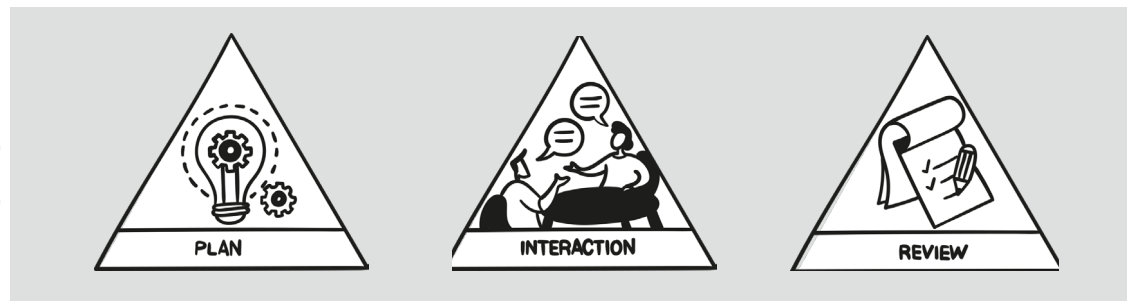
“All models are wrong, but some are useful.”

- George E.P. Box, Statistician.

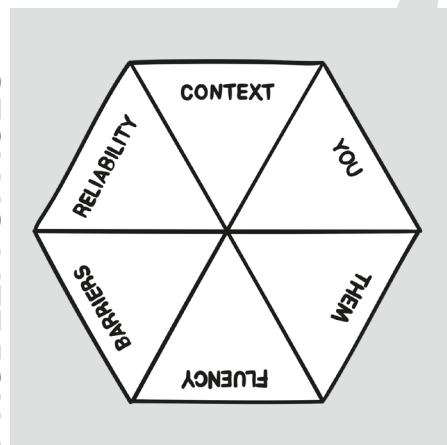
Box’s aphorism is as true for behavioural science as it is for statistics. Distilling research and academic thought into models is reductionist and overly simplified. They are, by their very nature, wrong. However, if they enable practitioners to understand how research from disparate academic areas fits together, expands their knowledge base, assists their thinking processes and helps them access evidence-based practice at two in the morning when a situation is fast-moving and risky, then the positives outweigh the negatives.

THE ELICITING INFORMATION FRAMEWORK (EIF)

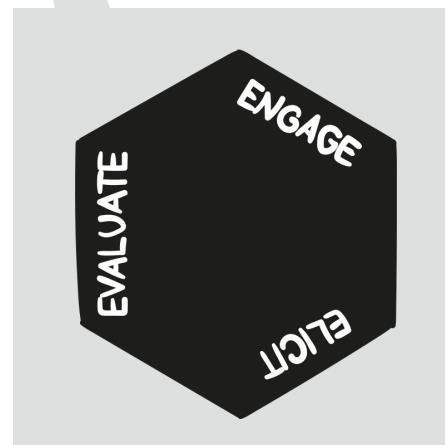
PHASES



PROBLEM SPACES



FUNCTIONS



Examples of research-to-practice in this space come from the High Value Detainee Interrogation Group (HIG), which developed models for interviewing ethically and effectively, and for assessing the credibility of the elicited intelligence. The models created by the HIG were developed, trained, and tested to analyse which parts of the model were successful at obtaining cooperation and information.

“The EIF helps practitioners to see how the tactics they use fit into a strategy.”

This work was developed further into the Eliciting Information Framework (EIF). A conceptual model which enables the underpinning evidence base to lie within the framework so it can be more easily updated, navigated, and trained. The EIF helps practitioners to see how the tactics they use fit into a strategy.

The requirement for someone involved in research-to-practice then, is to ensure a thorough and clear understanding of the problem and the context, be able to translate the relevant and ever-changing evidence base to answer that problem in a contextually sensitive way, and that is accessible, can be digested, retained, and put it into practical effect.

Step 4: Bring the practice back into research

“At some level, it all makes sense.”

- Gillian Butler, Clinical Psychologist

Using the EIF in practice and training enabled another key research-to-practice piece: the loop from practice back into research and academia. Through developing the training for this framework it became clear that practitioners were struggling to make sense of, and understand, the sometimes troubling, confusing, and difficult behaviour that they saw in those they were eliciting information from.

This sparked a dive into existing work on how those in other fields were making sense of such behaviour and prompted commissioning of new research into understanding the impact of trauma and adversity on some of the populations that our practitioners were working with.

DOES RESEARCH-TO-PRACTICE ADD VALUE?

It is often difficult to prove the direct impact of behavioural science within policing, intelligence, and defence. Research contributes to officers practicing in more effective ways, perhaps using a particular technique to find out a critical piece of information – but there is an entire intelligence and defence machine that the officer is operating within, and singling out individual contribution is difficult.

However, recently, we have been involved in trialling a science-based course with a UK police force to improve the communication skills of frontline police officers. Early evaluation has shown that by understanding the problem and the context, training the models which synthesise the research, expanding the knowledge of the officers, and giving them the necessary evidence-based communication techniques results in a significant reduction in complaints, assaults, injuries, and use of force.

This demonstrates that when on-the-job-expertise is infused with evidenced based practice the changes can be powerful, immediate, and lasting. On its own, science can have an impact, but with time and attention paid to the way that research is translated into practice, that impact grows exponentially.

“On its own, science can have an impact, but with time and attention paid to the way that research is translated into practice, that impact grows exponentially.”

With thanks to the anonymous practitioners in the UK and overseas, with whom we have the pleasure to work, who inform our practice on a daily basis.

Anna Leslie and Simon Wells are research-to-practice fellows for CREST. They apply behavioural and social science research to a range of law enforcement, security, and defence issues via training and consultancy.