ABSTRACT

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the debate on the relationship between academic research and policymaking in international relations (IR) is its lack of empirical foundations. Although some of the discipline’s leading scholars have contributed to the debate over the years, much of what we know about this relationship continues to be based on anecdotal reflections and untested assumptions. This is surprising and paradoxical, not only because academe’s “comparative advantage” is normally its attention to evidence and analysis, but also because other social science disciplines have taken a more serious approach to investigating the policy impacts of their own research outputs. Using the literature on “fragile states” as a window into the research-policy interface, this article finds that scholarship on state fragility appears to have had indirect but potentially important effects on the policies of influential international actors: namely, by helping them to define and refine understandings of state fragility as a policy problem, and by informing the development of operational frameworks for responding to this problem. Put differently, scholars appear to have helped “order” the conceptual world for policymakers, who themselves faced the difficult task of understanding and responding to the most disorderly parts of the physical world. However, this article also finds evidence of apparent problems in the transmission of ideas between the academic and policy realms: in particular, there are substantial time lags; research findings can be distorted and manipulated; and unreliable findings have the potential to circulate as quickly as more reliable information. Learning more about these problems would a first step towards correcting or mitigating them, while also shedding light on the broader relationship between IR research and policymaking.
Since the early 1990s, there has been an explosion of academic literature on “fragile states,” an expansive and contested label that often describes countries at risk of civil conflict or already mired in conflict.\(^1\) In the policy world, too, state fragility has emerged as a central theme in the work of major international organizations and influential countries, transcending traditional boundaries between international security and development policy. The U.S. defense secretary, for instance, calls fragile states “the main security challenge of our time” (Gates 2010) and the president of the World Bank describes them as “the toughest development challenge of our era” (Zoellick 2008). Rarely has a concept traveled so quickly from the periphery to the core of both international relations (IR) scholarship and policymaking.

But what is the relationship between scholarship and policymaking on fragile states? If the many lamentations about the growing divide between IR scholars and practitioners are to be believed, one might expect to see little interaction between the academic and policy domains on this subject (Nye 2009b; Maliniak et al. 2009). Stephen Krasner, a prominent IR professor who recently served as director of policy planning in the U.S. State Department, goes further, arguing that the scholar-practitioner gap is “unbridgeable” (2009:116). Academics may “lob ideas across the gap,” he writes, but doing so will have no impact on policy, except under “haphazard” circumstances. Others are less dismissive, pointing to examples of IR research programs that gained traction in governmental circles – from nuclear deterrence to the democratic peace (Siverson 2000) – but most seem to accept the judgment that academic IR has had, at most, “limited influence” in the policy world (Walt 1995). Anyone who has served in government would likely share this perception. Policymakers, particularly those at senior ranks, rarely have the time or inclination to read academic treatises, not least because they tend to view IR scholarship as abstruse and irrelevant (Steinberg 2009).

It is often said that scholars and practitioners inhabit different worlds or cultures, each with its own distinctive language and beliefs about what counts as useful knowledge. Indeed, when academics work in government and later recount the experience, their descriptions sometimes resemble anthropological field notes: reports of surprising discoveries in foreign lands. The fact that the “realities” of the policy world are reported back to colleagues in this manner suggests that even the best academic IR training provides lamentably little insight into, or preparation for, the lived experience of policymaking. On the other hand, the IR discipline excels at other things, including meticulous theoretical and empirical analysis – strengths that practitioners neglect at their own peril. As Robert Jervis (2008) points out, even the most basic standards of academic research such as footnoting sources could have exposed the lack of credible evidence in internal government reports on Iraq’s purported possession of weapons of mass destruction.

\(^1\) For recent reviews of the literature, see Call (2010); Marten (2010); and Bates (2008). The terminology of state fragility is confused and confusing. Most donors now define fragile states as countries lacking the will or capacity to perform core state functions, but each country and organization seems to have its own views on what counts as “core” functions (Carment et al. 2010: 22-54). To complicate matters further, practitioners continue to use different labels for countries experiencing severe internal problems. Although “fragile state” has emerged as the most common term, references to “failed,” “failing,” “crisis,” “weak,” “collapsed,” “poorly performing,” “ineffective,” “vulnerable” and “at risk” states are not uncommon (Cammack et al. 2006). Distinctions between these labels have never been clear, but they all generally refer to countries that are at particularly high risk of violent internal upheavals.
These points and counterpoints have peppered the literature on the scholar-practitioner divide for many years (George 1993). Yet, there is a paradox at the heart of this literature: Much of what we know about the relationship between IR research and policymaking is based on personal anecdotes and untested assumptions. Most academic writings on this subject have been either autobiographical reflections (Krasner 2009; Nye 2009a; Stein 2009; Tickner and Tsygankov 2008) or works examining the causes or consequences of the scholar-practitioner gap but treating the gap itself as a “given.” For example, some argue that the IR discipline is largely to blame for the gap because it pays too little attention to “real world” concerns (Newsom 1995; Kruzel 1994). Others suggest that government officials should draw more extensively on IR scholarship and that doing so might reduce sloppy thinking in the policymaking process (Frieden and Lake 2005; Jervis 2008). Still others concentrate on understanding differences in how practitioners and academics think about and use information (Wal 1995; Lepgold 1998). Yet, all these analyses skip over a fundamental question: How much do we actually know about the impact of IR research on policy?

The purpose of this article is to begin answering this question by examining the interaction between scholarship and policymaking on fragile states. My argument is straightforward: If policy influence is defined narrowly – as the ability to induce practitioners to respond directly to specific academic findings or recommendations – then the influence of the fragile states scholarship has been very limited. This is what Krasner apparently has in mind when he disparages the “lobbing” of ideas across the scholar-practitioner gap. It is also the standard according to which policymakers have periodically dismissed academic research for failing to guide “the actual conduct of foreign policy” (Nitze 1993:3). On the other hand, academic ideas may also play a role in influencing practitioners’ understandings of what is possible or desirable in a particular policy field or set of circumstances, thus “ordering the world” in which officials identify options and implement policies (Goldstein and Keohane 1993:12). If policy influence is defined in this broader manner – capturing the “gradual seepages into organizations of new ideas, metaphors and rationales” (Beyer and Trice 1982:615) – then the scholarship on fragile states seems to have been more influential. Specifically, academic research has helped to define and refine understandings of state fragility as a policy problem and it has informed the development of operational frameworks for responding to this problem. Put another way, scholarly ideas have helped to “order” the conceptual world for policymakers who face the difficult task of responding to most disorderly parts of the physical world.

Studying these effects is important for several reasons. First, determining what types of knowledge actually shape policy could help scholars communicate their research results more effectively. Second, as we shall see, the existing “system” of knowledge transfer between the academic and policy realms is problematic: there are substantial time lags; research findings can be distorted and manipulated; and unreliable findings have the potential to circulate as quickly as more reliable information. More generally, the IR discipline needs to investigate the policy impacts of its own research outputs in a more sustained and serious manner. The dearth of reliable knowledge on the research-policy interface in this field is surprising, given the steady stream of opining on the relevance or irrelevance of IR scholarship. As we shall see, other disciplines have taken a more serious approach to such analysis.
In what follows, I trace the evolution of key themes in scholarship and policy on fragile states, focusing on influential governments and international organizations such as the U.S., the U.K., the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank – as well as Organizational for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which has served as a clearinghouse for strategic thinking on fragile states policy among donor countries. I do not purport to present a complete survey of the sprawling literature on fragile states or a definitive evaluation of the policy impacts of this literature. Doing so would require a large-scale data collection and analysis exercise beyond the scope of this review essay. Rather, I use secondary sources to describe several examples of scholarly ideas shaping fragile states policy; and then, based on this initial analysis, I offer recommendations for future research into the relationship between IR scholarship and policymaking.

**Conceptual Ordering and Fragile States Policy**

Policy domains are defined by humans; they are not given by nature. Every policy problem reflects stated and unstated assumptions about the nature and scope of the problem and why it warrants attention. Moreover, the manner in which a problem is defined may open up certain kinds of policy responses, while foreclosing others. The collection of assumptions and beliefs that perform this problem-defining function is typically called a “discourse” (Epstein 2008) and the process by which discourses classify problems and possible solutions is often labeled “framing” (Steensland 2008). The study of discursive framing is very old, dating back at least to the works of Aristotle (1954), who explained that the use of well-chosen metaphors in political speech could induce people to “see things” they might not otherwise perceive. Metaphors are powerful discursive tools because they can help actors make sense of complex or ambiguous situations by drawing comparisons to other, more familiar phenomena, such as well-known historical events (Paris 2002). In addition to metaphors, factual claims and “causal stories” can also define the boundaries of policy problems and orient action, including by making certain situations seem amenable to particular kinds of human intervention (Stone 1989).

These are well-tilled themes in the IR literature, particularly since the discipline’s “turn to ideas” in the 1990s (Blyth 2003), which saw a proliferation of research into the causal and constitutive role of ideas and knowledge in international affairs (Haas 1995; Philpott 2001), foreign policies (Yee 1996) and the policymaking process (Radaelli 1995). Against this backdrop, the lack of serious investigation into the effects of scholarly ideas is particularly puzzling. What has been missing, in other words, is a concerted effort to evaluate the policy impact of knowledge emanating from IR scholarship itself. In the words of Johan Eriksson and Ludvig Norman (2010), “There is a tendency in the IR literature to treat the research-policy interface as an ‘extracurricular’ activity not worthy of theory-building and empirical inquiry.” As a result, the discussion of policy relevance in IR has been based on relatively little reliable information about the impact of academic outputs on policymaking. Moreover, such discussions have tended to reflect a narrow, literalist conception of what counts as policy relevant research, focusing on research that provides specific recommendations that practitioners can directly implement. This is an important form of influence, to be sure, but it is not the only one. A broader view of relevance would also consider ways in which scholarly research might frame the policy domain itself and thus “order the world” for practitioners.
As it turns out, this distinction figures prominently in the voluminous literature on “research utilization,” which examines the impact of scholarship on policymaking in many other disciplines including sociology, public health, psychology and environmental studies (Blake and Ottoson 2009; Huberman 1994; Beyer and Trice 1982). One leading member of the research utilization school, Carol Weiss (1979), for example, differentiates between the problem-solving and enlightenment functions of scholarly ideas. In Weiss’ formulation, problem-solving entails “the direct application of the results of a specific social science study to a pending decision” (p. 427), whereas enlightenment involves “social science generalizations and orientations percolating through informed publics and coming to shape the way in which people think about… issues” (p. 429). These categories roughly correspond to the narrow versus broad notions of policy influence discussed above. In fact, most empirical studies of research utilization have concluded that the enlightenment model provides a more accurate description of what actually happens when scholarly ideas enter the policy realm – a finding that appears to hold across several disciplines (Amara et al. 2004).

Whether this finding also applies to the IR literature is unclear, but surely the time has come to find out. As we shall see in the specific case of fragile states research, academic ideas do appear to have helped “order” policymaking in at least three ways: (1) by identifying and characterizing the policy problem itself; (2) by constructing causal narratives to account for the problem; and (3) by conceptualizing frameworks for responding to the problem.

“Seeing” the Problem of Fragile States

In the period immediately following the end of the Cold War, policymakers faced a flurry of unexpected internal conflicts in such places as Somalia and Bosnia. Some scholars sought to explain the violence by focusing on the absence of effective state authority. The result was an emerging literature on “failed states,” a term that gained broad circulation following the publication of an article co-authored by former diplomat Gerald Helman and international legal scholar Steven Ratner (1993). Other scholars were simultaneously writing on similar themes, with many arguing that African countries, in particular, had witnessed “both total and partial failure of the institution of the State” (Abdullahi 1994:570). Moreover, such studies were often built upon prior investigations into “weak states” (Migdal 1988) and “juridical statehood” (Jackson 1987), which predated the end of the Cold War. Although academics were by no means the only contributors to this discourse – one popular magazine article that gained wide readership in policy circles, for example, was Robert Kaplan’s “The Coming Anarchy” in The Atlantic (1994) – it is worth noting that Kaplan’s article explicitly borrowed ideas from scholars such as Ali Mazrui, Thomas Homer-Dixon and Martin van Creveld. In short, while Kaplan and other journalists seemed to be instrumental in bringing such ideas to wider attention, scholars played a leading role in articulating the concept of state failure.

Indeed, this academic literature grew rapidly. It included efforts to begin classifying different types of failed states (Gros 1996) and to identify factors associated with state failure (Esty et al. 1995) – efforts that represented the beginnings of an empirical research program that continues today. However, it was the elaboration of state failure as an organizing concept, more than the findings of the nascent empirical literature, which seemed to successfully penetrate into the policy domain in the early-and-mid 1990s. The failed state concept offered a way of thinking
about the new international security environment at a moment when venerable Cold War policy frameworks – including bipolarity, containment and deterrence – seemed suddenly obsolete. Indeed, this was the message of many academic writings: “In the world after the Cold War, not only has the bipolar, interstate system of world order dissolved, but in many places the state itself has collapsed,” wrote Zartman (1995:1), for instance. Exactly how this concept journeyed from academia to the policy world warrants closer study, as I shall argue below. But through one channel or another, it evidently reached and resonated with practitioners in national governments and international agencies, who began to highlight the importance of state failure as an international policy challenge in their speeches and policy documents. By 1998, the problem of failed states had become a core element – indeed, part of the organizing doctrine – of the U.S. national security strategy (USG 1998:7).

This type of indirect influence is, by its nature, less obvious than the recommendation-reaction model outlined above, but it also has potentially more profound effects. As Michael Barnett and Martha Finnemore (2004:32) point out, the ability to define categories and to “invest situations with a particular meaning constitutes an important source of power.” We lack the vocabulary in English to capture this idea precisely; verbs such as “defining” and “constituting” connote many more things than the process of identifying and naming a phenomenon and investing it with meaning. The German term *Sinnstiftung* – which literally means “sense creation” – may offer a better alternative. The concept of fragile states served as a *Sinnstiftung* narrative after the Cold War, defining a phenomenon that helped practitioners make sense of a new, ambiguous international environment, which was open to many possible interpretations. Madeleine Albright (1997), for example, explained that shortly after becoming US Ambassador to the UN in the early 1990s she came to see the world as being divided into four types of states: those understanding the need for international rules; those in transition to democracy; rogue states seeking to undermine international rules; and finally “so-called failed states.” This typology may seem anachronistic today, but it provides a glimpse of Albright’s mental map at the time, including the prominence of the new concept of state failure in policy thinking.

**Constructing Causal Narratives**

Another branch of fragile states scholarship has studied the causes of political instability and civil conflict. This research is sometimes divided into three broad approaches, each focusing on a different set of explanations: cultural, economic and political (Bates 2008; Woodward 2007). According to proponents of the cultural approach, the principal cause of civil unrest is inter-group (often ethnically based) division, discrimination and mobilization (Laitin 2007; Fearon 2006). Economic arguments, by contrast, tend to focus on material opportunities for groups to use violence in pursuit of their goals, including the availability of “lootable” natural resources to finance private armies (Collier et al. 2009). A third cluster of explanations examines different types of political regimes, arguing that the most powerful predictor of instability in a country is the degree of democracy, autocracy and factionalism characterizing its government (Goldstone et al. 2010).

Overall, the quality of this research has been impressive. Well-articulated competing theories have been tested against the historical record (and against each other), leading to the refinement of all the principal explanations. On the other hand, what makes for an excellent empirical
research program does not necessarily provide immediately usable advice to policymakers. Such models can highlight risk factors, but they cannot generate reliable point predictions or recommendations for action in particular cases (Ikpe 2007). Quantitative indices of state failure face similar limitations. These indices, which rank countries according to composite measures of fragility, are “much better adapted to highlight worrying trends that to identify with great specificity a likely tipping point into violence” (Grono 2010) and consequently “are not very precise when it comes to deciding on key intervention points and designing specific interventions” (Stepputat and Engberg-Pedersen 2008:26).

However, the scholarship on the causes of civil conflict appears to have influenced policy in less direct ways: by shaping policy discourses and understandings of state fragility. The idea that natural resource exploitation by rebel groups, for example, is a principal cause of civil war had “a marked impact on international policymaking towards civil wars, especially within the United Nations” that has been visible in policy documents and in the actions of UN Security Council, which launched major efforts to prevent the abuse of such resources in Angola, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Berdal 2005; cf. Ballentine and Sherman 2003). The argument that political regime type is a principal cause of civil war and political instability has also featured prominently in policy documents, including direct references to the scholarship (USAID 2005:17; European Development Report 2009:22).

These causal narratives (and others that gain currency in the policy realm) tend to be repeated in documents and speeches, in some cases becoming important reference points for policy deliberations. Problems arise, however, when the scholarly findings that underpin such narratives are contested or later revised. The lootable resources explanation for civil war, for example, was shown by other academics to rely on “shaky empirical and methodological foundations” (Ron 2005:446), yet the thesis continued to feature prominently in the policy discourse. Similarly, a finding that countries emerging from civil war have nearly a 50 per cent risk of sliding back into conflict within five years was commonly cited by practitioners in the UN and elsewhere to justify their focus on post-conflict peacebuilding, even after the authors of this figure revised their initial estimate down to 20 percent (Suhrke and Samset 2007). In short, once causal narratives and findings are established in the policy discourse, they may be quite difficult to dislodge.
Conceptualizing Operational Frameworks

Academic ideas have also shaped the development of operational frameworks for responding to fragile states, including those just emerging from civil wars. At the end of the Cold War, the UN launched a series of large, multifunctional missions in post-conflict countries, including Namibia, El Salvador and Cambodia, which involved a broader range of tasks than the traditional “peacekeeping” missions of earlier decades. Instead of simply monitoring ceasefires, international personnel were now overseeing elections, demobilizing former fighters, advising on economic policy, and generally helping to implement the terms of peace agreements negotiated among the local parties.

Practice led theory: these missions were launched before their significance as a “new” form of intervention was fully recognized, and without clear guidelines or doctrine. In 1992, three years after the start of the Namibia operation, UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali described such post-conflict interventions as “peacebuilding,” which he defined as “action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict” (para 21). Scholars soon began investigating and critiquing the assumptions of these missions – including the notion that post-conflict countries could be quickly and successfully set on a path towards self-sustaining peace simply by initiating democratic political reforms and market-oriented economic adjustment (Bertram 1995; Paris 1997). By the early 2000s, there was a substantial body of academic work on the importance of building functioning and legitimate governmental institutions in countries undergoing these reforms and war-to-peace transitions, or what came to be known as “statebuilding” (Chesterman 2004; Fukuyama 2004; Paris 2004).

These findings gradually seeped into the policy domain. There was a growing movement in the UN and donor governments to adjust the doctrinal bases of peacebuilding, which was “spurred on by scholarly analysis that cautioned against early liberalization (through electoral competition or rapid market reform) in the absence of institutionalization” (Wyeth and Sisk 2009). Senior officials in the World Bank and OECD have acknowledged the role that academic research played in establishing statebuilding as a central priority of post-conflict peacebuilding (McKechnie 2009:5; Manning and Trzeciak-Duval 2010:107-109). This movement also resulted in the publication of the OECD’s 2005 draft principles for international engagement in fragile states, which advised donor countries to “focus on statebuilding as the central objective” – a policy position that, in the view of one longtime observer, represented “a striking break from the prevailing wisdom” of previous decades (Boyce 2007:2). Soon thereafter, a leading international diplomat concluded that the “concept of statebuilding is becoming more and more accepted within the international community” (Brahimi 2007). While by no means universally accepted, academic ideas about the importance of institutional strengthening or statebuilding contributed to this doctrinal shift.

It is also worth noting more recent trends in the literature. A number of academics have, for example, critiqued the fragile states concept for lumping together countries that suffer from quite different types of internal problems (Call 2010; Hehir 2007; Patrick 2007). Others have similarly criticized practitioners for oversimplifying distinctive and complex sources of instability in different countries and for applying standardized “top down” solutions which fail to take local
conditions into account (Autesserre 2010; Kaplan 2010). A related and rapidly growing literature on “hybrid political orders” examines the blending of formal and informal governance structures an alternative conceptual framework for thinking about statebuilding in fragile states (Renders and Terlinden 2010; Boege et al. 2009). Linking all of these arguments is a growing emphasis on governmental legitimacy and the relationship between state and society. Indeed, an increasing number of academic works now define state fragility as a failure of governmental effectiveness and legitimacy (Goldstone 2008; Lemay-Hébert 2009) or the “disequilibrium between state functions and capacity on one hand and social expectations on the other” (Jones and Chandran et al. 2008:22).

There are early signs that national and international agencies are taking these critiques seriously. Documents issued by some development organizations have increasingly focused on the importance of state legitimacy and state-society relations in peacebuilding operations, sometimes referring directly to the academic literature on this subject (DFID 2010:16; OECD 2010a and 2010b). It is now also more common for donor governments to talk about the need to support “the development of institutions that make sense in the local context” and to avoid the impulse to “recreate” foreign institutions within transitional societies (Cannon 2009). It remains to be seen if these ideas shape peacebuilding doctrine in the same way that earlier analyses contributed to the policy shift towards statebuilding. In the earlier examples, there was a time lag between the production of the academic ideas and their appearance in the policy discourse. At the very least, however, donors seem to be increasingly aware of the need to work “with the grain” of fragile societies when governance reforms are pursued (DFID 2010:33; OECD 2010b:12).

What We Don’t Know

Although these examples provide only a glimpse of the wide-ranging literature on fragile states, they reveal some interesting patterns: The form of policy influence emerging from these vignettes rarely involves scholarly recommendations leading directly to policy changes. Rather, academic research on fragile states seems to have shaped understandings of the nature and causes of state fragility as well as conceptual frameworks for responding to the problem. Nevertheless, these examples also highlight the limits of existing knowledge about the policy influence of fragile states scholarship. Addressing these knowledge gaps, including the four questions listed

2 There has been a parallel evolution in thinking on counterinsurgency operations in recent years. Although the circumstances of most peacebuilding operations (which typically involve international actors overseeing the implementation of peace agreements negotiated among local parties) differ from those of post-invasion Iraq and Afghanistan (where stabilization efforts have been conducted in the aftermath of a forcible “regime change”), U.S. counterinsurgency policy in Iraq and Afghanistan have also come to emphasize the primary goal of establishing popular support for a legitimate government (U.S. Army/Marine Corps 2006:121; Friis 2010). Although this evolution was a “bottom up tactical innovation” reflecting the field experience of military officers (Kilcullen 2010:19), academics were extensively consulted and directly involved in rewriting U.S. military doctrine, in what amounted to a degree of cooperation between the military and academic worlds “rarely seen at the operational level” (Clemis 2009). Indeed, the collaboration was so close that it generated considerable controversy in scholarly circles, as did the Pentagon’s subsequent decision to deploy civilian social scientists with military units in Iraq and Afghanistan (Baba 2009).
below, would not only improve our understanding of the relationship between fragile states scholarship and policy; it would also provide a foundation for similar investigations into other areas of IR research.

1. What is the relative importance of academic ideas in explaining shifts in policy orientations towards fragile states? This article has presented prima facie evidence that academic concepts and findings have indirectly influenced fragile states policy in key areas: scholars articulated the idea of failed states in the early 1990s (drawing on previous research into weak and strong statehood) before the concept began to appear regularly in policy documents of national and international agencies; causal narratives developed by scholars studying the causes of civil conflict also gained prominence in policy statements and appeared to inform the development of policy initiatives that focused specifically on sources of instability that these analyses had identified, such as control of natural resources; and academic critiques of the assumptions and outcomes of peacebuilding missions in the 1990s contributed, in the judgment of several observers including practitioners, to a doctrinal shift in peacebuilding policies towards a greater emphasis on institutional strengthening, or statebuilding. Nevertheless, all of these conclusions are provisional. The influence of these scholarly ideas needs to be evaluated against other factors that may have also contributed to these observed effects, including different information sources (e.g., think tanks, journalists, interest groups, government analysts) and contextual conditions (e.g., “pivotal” events such as the failure of stabilization efforts in Somalia and the 9/11 attacks, and bureaucratic politics within key donor countries and international organizations). John Kingdon’s (1995) work on “policy windows” and Paul Sabatier’s (1988) “policy advocacy coalition” framework offer two possible starting points for this type of multi-factor analysis.

2. By what channels do academic ideas about state fragility enter the policy domain? The ideas are visible at their point of “departure” (academic publications) and upon “arrival” (in the policy discourse) but the routes they follow between these two points are obscure. Works in other fields and in the research utilization literature have examined the role of “linking mechanisms” and “knowledge brokers” that transmit information between academe and practitioners (Huberman 1994; Lewis and Mosse 2006; Meyer 2010). Which people or organizations play such linking roles in research and policy on fragile states, and what effects do they have on the process of knowledge transfer? At first glance, this process appears to be one of indirect diffusion of scholarly ideas into the policy realm through multiple avenues, including national and intergovernmental organizations such as the OECD’s International Network on Conflict or Britain’s DFID, which have periodically surveyed the academic literature for insights into peacebuilding “best practices”; policy research organizations such as the Fragile and Conflict-Affected Countries unit of the World Bank, the Overseas Development Institute and the International Peace Institute, which straddle the worlds of policymaking and academia; and individual academics hired as consultants by governments and international agencies to prepare reports synthesizing the state of academic knowledge in a particular area of fragile state research. A careful investigation of how (and what type of) information is filtered through these transmission mechanisms might help to explain why some academic ideas on state fragility successfully enter the policy discourse while others do not.
3. What problems or obstacles exist in the researcher-practitioner interface and how might these problems be addressed? As previously noted, there appears to be a considerable time lag between the production of research ideas and their “percolation” through the policy discourse. Such lags are problematic not only because dubious policies may be continued in the interim, but also because by the time “new” academic ideas gain widespread acceptance in the policy world, they may have already been refined, corrected or disproven in the academic world – as we saw in the case of research findings on resources and conflict. Because the existing system of knowledge transfer relies mainly on indirect diffusion, there is no ready mechanism by which academics can correct errors, update findings, or discard dubious information. What is more, scholarly caveats and nuances also tend to be lost in translation, resulting in oversimplification and the potential for distortion. In the worst case, research may be misrepresented and used to justify policies that the actual scholarship, if read accurately, would definitively reject – such as the Bush Administration’s “perversion” of the democratic peace literature to justify its invasion of Iraq (Russett 2005).

Learning more about these problems would be a first step towards correcting or mitigating them. For example, if such problems arise in part from the manner in which academic information on fragile states is being transmitted into the policy world – if the transmission mechanisms are filtering, distorting or delaying the communication of accurate and timely information – then some scholars may see a benefit in creating alternative brokerage mechanisms, subject to greater peer oversight. A representative group of academics might be established, for instance, with a mandate to review and periodically report on the “state of knowledge” in the field, not unlike the function of the International Panel on Climate Change on environmental science. This type of arrangement could also provide a means to correct outdated or flawed information and to identify areas in which there is insufficient knowledge to make any strong empirical claims (Thoms, Ron and Paris 2010).

4. How does the policy discourse influence academic research? We should not assume that the causal arrow of conceptual ordering runs only in one direction. Even though the evidence presented above suggests that practitioners have internalized some academic ideas, the most likely relationship between fragile states research and practice is a reciprocal one. It has been said of international security studies more broadly that “[f]oundation funding patterns and the policy fads of the day tend to encourage researchers to concentrate on current policy priorities” (Nye and Lynn-Jones 1988:12). This characterization is probably also true of fragile states research; but beyond the impressive amount of attention that academics have devoted to this subject in recent years, are there ways in which the policy discourse has influenced the content of this research? Answering this question would offer a more complete picture of the movement of ideas between the academic and policy realms. As Thomas Biersteker (2010) points out, contemporary foreign policy practices and doctrines are “routinely reflected in the content of our theories…whether or not we are self-consciously aware of the fact.”

Conclusion

In contrast to Krasner’s depiction of academics “lobbing” advice into the policy realm to little effect, scholarly ideas about fragile states appear to have insinuated themselves into the policy discourse, shaping the way in which key international actors define and respond to the policy
problem itself. This form of influence, which I have labeled conceptual ordering, is “both less tangible and potentially more influential” than the literalist notion of policy influence (Albæk 1995:79). Put another way, the much-lamented gap between the work of professors and practitioners may be less pronounced, and considerably more complex, than is often assumed.

This is not to suggest that academics should be satisfied with the status quo. On the contrary, the case of fragile states research and policy suggests that there are distortions and other deficiencies in the transmission mechanisms that convey scholarly ideas into the policy realm – deficiencies that need to be understood before they can be effectively addressed. Indeed, discerning the impact of academic ideas on policy (including the nature of the transmission mechanisms) will required sustained research across many areas of IR scholarship and practice. Such efforts are long overdue, for there is little to be gained from continuing to debate a problem that is barely understood – or even studied.
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