

COMMENT

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# It is time to acknowledge and act on the importance of power in integrated knowledge translation

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## Abstract

Integrated knowledge translation (IKT) has emerged as an approach to research centered on collaboration between researchers and knowledge users, particularly in health research. There has been a growing focus on power within the IKT literature, especially the concern that overlooking power inequities within IKT partnerships may reproduce forms of knowledge production and dissemination that do not align with IKT's aspirations of shared decision making to produce useful and usable research findings. However, there remain significant gaps in our understanding of how to address and attend to power in IKT. The lack of conceptual precision around power complicates these efforts. In this commentary, we draw on existing literatures that have grappled with the notion of power to sensitize those who study and engage in IKT to the importance of power and to identify helpful ways of thinking about power in IKT. We propose that it is time to not only acknowledge the importance of power in IKT but also to develop empirically based strategies through which the many dimensions of power can be identified and navigated.

**Keywords** Integrated knowledge translation, Power, Research co-production

## Background

Integrated knowledge translation (IKT) has emerged within Canada as an approach to research centered on collaboration between researchers and knowledge users, particularly in health research. Generally, knowledge users include those who can use the research findings,

including policymakers, administrators, members of the public, and patients [1].

There has been a growing focus on power in the IKT literature [2–5]. In this paper, we define power as the capacity to act or to exert one's will and also as a pervasive dynamic that circulates within IKT teams and the larger structures and processes in which they operate. Power imbalances can affect the process of engaging in IKT and its goal of producing relevant and usable research findings. Nguyen et al. [6] suggest that sharing power across IKT teams fosters environments in which diverse perspectives are integrated, thus supporting inquiry into areas of relevance to knowledge users [6]. Conversely, Mackie et al. and Winterbauer et al. [7, 8] argue that power imbalances can undermine the development of effective partnerships by eroding the trust necessary for collaboration [7, 8].

In brief, overlooking power in IKT risks reproducing forms of knowledge production and translation

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that do not align with IKT's aspirations of shared decision making and the generation of useful and usable research findings. However, as Rycroft-Malone et al. [9] have noted, there remain significant gaps in understanding how to address and attend to power in IKT [9]. The consequences of not addressing power can result in an unproductive process with several costs, including practical costs (e.g., resource costs to manage the team), costs to researchers (e.g., interpersonal conflict, reputational damage), costs to partners (e.g., costs to careers, subjugation of partners), and costs to the research profession (e.g., the usefulness of research is questioned) [10]. The bringing together of researchers and knowledge users does not automatically neutralize power relations, and simple calls to share power, reduce tokenism, and develop authentic partnerships may not fully engage with the conceptual complexity of the notion of power [11, 12]. Power considerations unique to IKT result from the multiple stakeholders on the research team who are engaged throughout the research process. During the shared research process, tensions can arise around what counts as evidence and expertise, sometimes reflecting professional or social hierarchies [13]; competing incentives, demands, and expectations [14]; and the sharing of responsibility and accountability [10]. A lack of conceptual precision around power complicates efforts to account for the dimensions of power in IKT [15].

We propose that it is time to not only acknowledge the importance of power in IKT but also to develop strategies through which the many dimensions of power can be identified and navigated. To support this effort, in this commentary, we identify the ways in which power has been addressed in other disciplines and from which IKT could learn. Our aim is to draw on existing literatures that have grappled with the notion of power to sensitize those who study and engage in IKT. Our objective is to highlight the importance of power and to identify helpful ways of thinking about power in IKT. Drawing on these literatures, we also offer examples of aspects of the research process shaped by power relations, as well as guidance from the literature and on the basis of our own experiences for thinking about power in IKT.

### **Thinking about power in integrated knowledge translation: insights from the literature**

The study of power extends back centuries, and it has also been studied extensively across many disciplines. More recently, the notion of power has been taken up by social scientists who have sought to understand how power emerges and operates. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this commentary to provide an exhaustive overview of the literature on power, in what follows, we identify some of the most influential contemporary definitions

and conceptualizations of power. This includes the three-dimensional model of power proposed by Steven Lukes, which offers a framework for organizing and building on earlier notions of power put forward by Weberians and political scientists [16]. Crucial to this model is the recognition that one dimension of power does not supplant another; rather, they coexist and often reinforce one another. We also discuss the relevance of these theories of power for IKT, including examples drawn from various literatures of how different modes of power might be identified and navigated in IKT. These examples are summarized in Table 1.

The concept of power is challenging to define, as the idea tends to be laden with common sense meanings that downplay the different dimensions of power [17]. Max Weber, a sociologist writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, defined power as follows: "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his [sic] own will despite resistance" [18]. This definition has been the starting point for others and underpins the way many researchers think about power. Within Lukes' multidimensional framework of power described above, Weber's definition is typically positioned as the first dimension of power [16]. It is also the conceptualization of power most frequently employed in the IKT literature, as power tends to be seen as something that is held by one individual to either be used to carry out their will or shared with others. This first dimension of power can appear in IKT projects when, for instance, a single member of the team makes decisions without consulting others [6, 8].

However, one of the primary critiques of Weber's definition is that he treats power as a thing that is held by one actor as a means of dominating others. As various scholars have argued, whilst domination and authoritative modes of power persist, Weber's definition ignores diffuse, decentralized dimensions of power characteristic of contemporary societies [19–23]. In the context of an IKT project, for example, whilst there may be one member of a team who holds a position of authority or dominates the proceedings, thinking of power solely as an object that is held and wielded ignores the many ways in which other members of the team resist and subvert their authority, as well as structural forces that shape the capacity of some people to carry out their will over others.

Michel Foucault, a twentieth-century historian and philosopher, argues that power is not only exercised as a form of top-down domination but is always circulating and shaping social relations [24, 25]. Some scholars have characterized his conceptualization of power as a fourth dimension of power [26]. Foucault traces the emergence of diffuse forms of power that are constantly in flux and

**Table 1** Considerations related to power that may emerge throughout an IKT research partnership and guidance from the literature for thinking about these aspects of power

Aspects of research	Considerations related to power	Guidance from the literature for thinking about power
Generating priorities and ideas for research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negotiating a topic of interest</li> <li>• Determining the aims and priorities of the project</li> <li>• Bringing people together to form a team to conduct the research</li> <li>• Developing research questions (e.g., considering how positional-ity might influence the development of research questions)</li> <li>• Discussing how and when people will be involved</li> <li>• Collaborating with trainees, early career researchers, and knowl-edge users, including establishing plans for mentorship</li> <li>• Defining research priorities and desired outcomes for all mem-bers</li> <li>• Assessing existing power dynamics within the research context</li> <li>• Establishing what is already known</li> <li>• Determining what counts as knowledge and evidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rather than inviting “diverse” members to a partnership as though ticking off a set of boxes to assemble a seemingly diverse team, think about: positionality and power; write positionality statements and discuss prior to research design; those with power should educate themselves and not rely on those who are marginal-ized to educate them; recognize that much social science requires access to marginalized people and consider how this relationship might be subverted [49]</li> <li>• Orient to inclusion as providing space to those who are invited, welcoming them, elevating them, and centering them as often as everyone else [50]</li> <li>• Ask why a topic is of interest and how/by whom it was made prob-lematic; question how issues and problems are defined [50]</li> <li>• Consider the interests and goals of trainees, including their agency within the team and how power with can be mobilized to support them in their careers</li> <li>• Meet in locations that are convenient, accessible, and comfortable for all</li> <li>• Consider broad perspectives of what constitutes an outcome, including directing attention to community issues, developing capacity for research, fostering relationships, and creating spaces for people to express their views [51]</li> <li>• Explore ways of knowing, ontologies, and epistemologies of rel-evance to those engaged in the research [52]</li> <li>• Have early conversations regarding what knowledge is needed for whom and which modes of knowledge translation will be prior-itized (e.g., who will publish what and through which venues)</li> <li>• In early stages of the project, through discussion with all members of the team, analyze the research context to identify existing power dynamics and those that may emerge. Existing tools in the literature can be used to identify more covert forms of power, such as Patri-cia Hill Collins’ domains-of-power framework. These conversations should continue throughout the project</li> </ul>

**Table 1** (continued)

Aspects of research	Considerations related to power	Guidance from the literature for thinking about power
Proposal development and planning the research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning activities, including planning meetings, setting timelines, and deciding on communication channels (e.g., determining who sets timelines and whether this is done through consensus; accounting for everyone's capacity and availability; determining whether administrative or academic policies and timelines align with those of knowledge users and vice versa)</li> <li>• Designing the research methodology (e.g., deciding what counts as legitimate research; determining which research topics and questions are addressed and which are prioritized; considerations related to ontology and epistemology; deciding which theoretical lens or lenses to apply)</li> <li>• Allocating time and resources (e.g., deciding who will allocate which resources, who receives which resources, and who holds access to resources, such as funding, which is often determined by administrative policies)</li> <li>• Budgeting (e.g., determining compensation if needed, deciding how to allocate resources)</li> <li>• Applying for funding (e.g., deciding who will be included as principal investigators, co-investigators, and collaborators on grant applications) and which funding opportunities to pursue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider how the research is situated within larger structural forces of power and how the project can advance trust building, mutual respect, and community empowerment [53]</li> <li>• Aim for parity in designing the research whilst recognizing that all members of the team cannot assume equal responsibility for all aspects of the research all of the time (team members are equal but may not contribute equally)</li> <li>• In designing and conducting research, do not see power as something held by researchers to then be "given up" to knowledge users but rather as a possible resource to be exercised to collaborate with others</li> <li>• Seek, apply for, and support funding calls and bodies that support the development of long-term relationships and a multitude of onto-epistemological approaches</li> </ul>
Data collection and analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collecting data through the chosen methodology (e.g., deciding who will collect the data, what counts as "data," and how data collection will occur)</li> <li>• Analyzing the collected data (e.g., deciding what it means to analyze the data, who is involved in the analysis, and which interpretations are prioritized)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not invite anyone to the project solely for the purposes of accessing hard-to-reach populations or to swoop into communities to extract knowledge [49]</li> <li>• Have regular conversations about who is involved in data collection and data analysis, with a flexible understanding that engagement might look different for different people [54]</li> <li>• Consider implementing different forms of data collection and analysis and theoretical lenses that hold meaning and relevance for those involved in the research, including participants [55]</li> </ul>
Translation and dissemination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supporting and facilitating people's preferences in terms of how they would like to be involved in translation and dissemination</li> <li>• Deciding on a translation and dissemination plan</li> <li>• Reporting the findings</li> <li>• Deciding what counts as a finding worthy of being reported</li> <li>• Deciding who will be included as authors and the order of authorship</li> <li>• Translating and disseminating knowledge in consideration of how the findings could be used to influence change and for whom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborate in deciding which findings are relevant for whom, with a focus on producing findings with and for, rather than on, communities of interest [56]</li> <li>• Explore and design new strategies for dissemination accessible to all audiences [56]</li> <li>• Discuss in advance how unfavorable findings will be handled (e.g., findings that are difficult to implement, paint a funder/organization/partner in a bad light, do not align with stakeholders' interests, etc.)</li> </ul>
Implementation and impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing implementation plans</li> <li>• Implementing the findings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early in the research process and on a regular basis, discuss as a team expectations and priorities around implementation [10]</li> <li>• Establish a mutual understanding of what is meant by "impact" and how ideas about impact may differ between, for example, researchers and knowledge users [57]</li> <li>• Evaluate opportunities to build team capacity to work successfully in partnership and engage in reflection about power and positionality</li> </ul>

**Table 1** (continued)

Aspects of research	Considerations related to power	Guidance from the literature for thinking about power
Developing a larger program of research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing IKT partnerships, networks, and extended projects</li> <li>• Creating and sustaining programs of research that extend beyond a single research project to effect change and/or promote equity</li> <li>• Fostering and supporting communities of IKT practitioners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborate with communities, including those being researched and those for whom knowledge is being produced, to develop programs of research and build trusting relationships [39]</li> <li>• Draw on power with all team members to support the production of relevant knowledge through collaboration and collective action [39, 41]</li> </ul>
The wider contexts in which IKT partnerships are embedded	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Considering the intersecting structures of power in which IKT as a knowledge project and IKT partnerships operate (e.g., racism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, and colonialism)</li> <li>• Accounting for the mechanisms through which power operates (e.g., hiring and promotion processes, educational and workplace barriers that shape who holds health leadership roles)</li> <li>• Identifying and attending to existing power dynamics (e.g., between junior and senior researchers, between researchers and those not traditionally involved in the research process, between those working within health and medical spaces)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify, discuss, and navigate the power structures in which IKT is embedded rather than ignoring or trying to neutralize power relations (e.g., consider who is included and not included on a team and why; ask who counts as a knowledge user and whether historically marginalized people have occupied knowledge user roles, such as, for example, health leadership roles; reflect on the ontologies and epistemologies underlying a project and how these shape the type of knowledge produced and how the knowledge is used) [45, 58]</li> </ul>

being negotiated, including through the operation of regimes of truth in which one of the effects of power is the production of knowledge [27]. The philosophical foundations underpinning IKT, for instance, are produced through regimes that uphold certain beliefs about the production of knowledge as a means of revealing truths about the world that can be implemented within a larger scheme of evidence-based medicine. Through mechanisms that shape the way research is understood, funded, approved, and carried out, certain kinds of knowledge, but not others, can be produced through this process.

Foucault's theory of the diffuse nature of power helps elucidate the ways in which power circulates in IKT teams, although questions still remain about how to navigate these dynamics. Community-based participatory research (CBPR), which shares many of the tenets of IKT, may be instructive here given practitioners' and researchers' existing analyses of the complex power relations that circulate within these research projects. These analyses recognize, for instance, the diffuse nature of power as communities bring their own ideas about the "truth" and what counts as evidence to the research process [8, 28, 29]. The insights gleaned from attending to these and other complex aspects of power are highly relevant to the work of IKT. We can import some understandings from this field whilst being aware that IKT is different from CBPR, as the aim of IKT is to collaborate in decision making with knowledge users in positions of authority to achieve a particular implementation goal, rather than empowerment.

Conceptions of power based on the Weberian definition also assume that conflict occurs in the operation of power. However, this is not necessarily the case. In the 1960s and 1970s, political scientists Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz published a series of papers in which they proposed that definitions of power should account for instances of non-decision making: situations where things do not happen because of factors such as administrative procedures or community values [30–32]. These forms of non-decision making tend to be understood as the second dimension of power. In the context of IKT, non-decision making may arise in contexts where academic and institutional norms foreclose the possibility of considering other ways of doing things. For example, those who engage in forms of knowledge production on the basis of Indigenous ways of knowing have noted that there are decisions not made and questions not raised when Eurocentric ways of knowing are privileged and the logic of these forms of research is taken for granted [33, 34]. Often, the research process that is taught and adopted across research institutions is so engrained that it is difficult to imagine or propose anything different.

This includes tensions between the primacy of building relationships and trust in research approaches aimed at decolonization and tight funding deadlines; researchers' preference to publish in English-language journals for career advancement, which may preclude the dissemination of findings in local languages or accessible formats; and perceptions that funding proposals based on accepted Eurocentric epistemologies have a better chance of being funded such that other forms of research are not proposed or attempted [35, 36].

In his theory of the three dimensions of power, the social theorist Steven Lukes discusses latent forms of power through which individuals' and groups' interests are manipulated [16]. The third dimension of power operates by shaping individuals' preferences and desires without resorting to explicit coercion, even if these preferences may work against their own interests. In IKT, these latent forms of power might emerge when dominant interests shape processes of producing and implementing knowledge in subtle, covert ways that are difficult to identify. The larger interests shaping researchers' and knowledge users' work might result in reluctance to disseminate findings that paint funders or employers in a negative light or pressure to ensure that recommendations for implementation fit existing interests. The literature on health policy and decision making demonstrates that the third dimension of power subtly shapes work processes and relationships when, for example, questions and ideas about implementation are not pursued given individuals' tacit knowledge that these directions will not align with backing institutions' interests.

An important insight from Foucault's work has been the recognition of the positive and productive aspects of power [24, 25, 27, 37]. Power does not merely negate—it can also be positive or productive, as it is through power that, for instance, new partnerships are formed, resources are identified and used, research projects are designed and pursued, and new knowledge is produced, disseminated, and implemented. Hannah Arendt [38], a historian and philosopher writing in the twentieth century, suggested that power not only corresponds to the human ability to act but to act in concert with others in the achievement of collective goals [38]. These notions of power allow us to recognize power as not simply a negative dynamic of domination in IKT partnerships but in fact a mechanism that can be collectively harnessed.

Distinctions drawn between power *to*, power *over*, and power *with* are also instructive here. Within the realm of IKT, we might think of power *to* as the ability to make decisions within a partnership; power *over* might take the shape of having authority over certain members of an IKT team in pursuing one's research interests over others'; and power *with* might be construed as the capacity

to work alongside others in setting mutual objectives. These forms of power do not operate in isolation from one another, but the distinction has been a useful one for acknowledging how power can support collaboration. In their analysis of international philanthropic work, Partzsch and Fuchs [39] argue that the success of philanthropic endeavors often depends on collaboration with local communities, nonprofit organizations, and governments [39]. Likewise, in their feminist analysis of empowerment in international development, Biewener and Bacque [40] conceive of a feminist notion of power as collective agency and power *with* [40]. This distinction has also been mobilized in research on environmental politics [41], political power [42], and governance [43], amongst others. Drawing on scholarship that considers the importance of power in supporting collective agency might offer fruitful avenues for thinking about the development of effective IKT partnerships in which collective action allows for the accomplishment of more together through the mobilization of power *with*.

Critical social science approaches also offer conceptualizations of power and strategies for navigating power of value to IKT that draw attention to structural, systemic, and historical modes of power. For instance, Black feminist onto-epistemologies have produced intersectional analyses of power that account for the inherent interconnections between structures of domination, such as sexism, racism, classism, ableism, colonialism, and so on [44]. In IKT, each team produces and implements geographically and historically situated knowledge within unique power configurations. Whilst a critical step to navigating power is the identification of the precise matrix of power in which each IKT team operates, this can be challenging.

One helpful tool to this end is Patricia Hill Collins's [45] domains-of-power framework, which recognizes four intersecting domains of power [45]. Structural power encompasses public policies that organize and regulate social institutions and hierarchies within them; in IKT, this might include academic institutions and the health-care system. The disciplinary domain of power refers to the rules and regulations of everyday life and how they can be mobilized to uphold or challenge social hierarchies, including disciplinary mechanisms of surveillance through which people watch one another and discipline their own behaviors. In the realm of IKT, markers of success and criteria for hiring and promotion in academia, such as the number of publications and citation counts, emerge as forms of disciplinary power that shape the way researchers disseminate knowledge. The cultural domain of power, which comprises the institutions and practices that produce hegemonic ideas that justify social inequities, may appear in IKT in the form of dominant ideas

about who is an "expert" on a team, who holds authority, and who has the right to make decisions. Finally, the interpersonal domain includes people's interpersonal experiences within these intersecting systems of oppression, such as instances of racism, sexism, ableism, classism, etc.

The notion of power has been taken up in a wide range of fields not only because of the importance of the concept itself but also because of the implications for questions of agency that arise in relation to power. Work on the relationship between power and agency includes the writing of Norbert Elias [46], who developed a relational theory of power wherein power can be said to exist only if one party does not have total control over another [46, 47]. Elias writes of the power "game" – interdependencies in which power is not a monopoly held by one party but instead figurations (dynamic networks comprising interdependent people) in which countless individual interests and strategies are interwoven. Particularly important for Elias are the complex contexts in which these interdependencies arise, as small changes in some aspects of the context might entirely shift existing relations of power. Some important insights for IKT from Elias' work include the recognition that power dynamics may emerge not only between researchers and knowledge users on IKT teams but also between trainees and more senior researchers, full-time and part-time employees, knowledge users working in different organizations or different offices within the same organization, employees who occupy positions of greater or lesser authority in organizational hierarchies, and team members with greater or lesser access to resources. Equally important is the fact that these power relations may change over time, potentially leading to large shifts in existing power dynamics, including, for example, if a trainee takes on a more senior role or if a team member suddenly gains access to new resources [48].

### **Attending to power in integrated knowledge translation**

Our selective overview of the literature has highlighted some of the definitions and theories of power we feel are relevant to IKT. In our call for those who study and engage in IKT to address power, we encourage building on the ideas of others who have worked to address this complex concept. To support these efforts, IKT scientists and practitioners can start with Table 1, where we have pulled together our insights from the literature and our own learnings to offer examples of power dynamics that may emerge throughout an IKT partnership. We have loosely organized this table around aspects of the research process whilst noting that these are not necessarily linear or identical across projects, and we have

included a section on the wider context in which IKT operates to encourage discussion of some of the challenges and opportunities noted in the literature that are less obvious as part of a research project.

Table 1 is written for researchers, and, in presenting the table in this way, we acknowledge that we are giving latent power to researchers over other knowledge users in decision making during the research process. This table is, however, an initial way to start discussions about equitable partnerships, and it can also help researchers improve how they work with others. Similarly, an important power dynamic to recognize from the start is that some members of a research team may be better positioned to address power than others, such as those who hold leadership roles, those operating from more privileged positions within intersecting power structures, and those who hold certain resources. As researchers and knowledge users ourselves, we encourage open and transparent discussions about power from the beginning of these relationships. This will help inform research team members, funders, and health service organizations about how to maximize benefits from IKT research relationships.

This commentary is meant to sensitize those concerned with IKT approaches to the challenges that power might present to an IKT research team operating within larger structural forces. Whilst we raise important considerations, future research should explore topics that the current empirical health services literature says little about, such as which strategies work for whom and under what circumstances and how IKT teams can harness their collective agency through mechanisms of power.

## Conclusions

Ideally, when using an IKT approach, knowledge users and researchers are working together and sharing decision making despite occupying different roles on a team. However, those involved in IKT partnerships will not necessarily know how to work together effectively or how to attend to the many aspects of power that might shape their work simply by virtue of being grouped together. The question of power is made all the more complicated by the fact that there exist many, sometimes contradictory, definitions of power and the reality that power is often not easily identified. In this commentary, we have suggested that it is critical for those who think about and engage in IKT to consider power in its many dimensions. To sensitize those who study and engage in IKT to the importance of power and to identify helpful ways of thinking about power in IKT, we have offered an overview of some of the most influential contemporary conceptualizations of power. Of course, it is important to note that we have only drawn on a handful of areas of

research in this commentary and that there exist countless others that no doubt offer important insights for IKT. It behooves us to continue to draw on these existing and new forms of knowledge to develop more sophisticated strategies for identifying and navigating power in IKT. Likewise, there is an urgent need for empirical investigations into the ways in which power shapes all aspects of IKT and how challenges related to power dynamics and relations can be addressed within IKT.

### Author contributions

A.K., B.J.H., I.L., C.M., L.C., and I.D.G. contributed to the conceptualization of the paper, the analysis, and the writing and revision of the manuscript. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

### Funding

Open access funding was provided through IDG's Canadian Institutes for Health Research Foundation grant: Moving knowledge into action for more effective practice, programs, and policy: A research program focussing on integrated knowledge translation (FDN #143237).

### Availability of data and materials

No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

### Declarations

#### Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable (commentary).

#### Consent for publication

Not applicable (commentary).

#### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Received: 17 November 2024 Accepted: 27 May 2025

Published online: 16 June 2025

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