

Theorizing practice research in social work

Lars Uggerhøj¹

Abstract: *The article focuses on theories, definitions, interests, possibilities and barriers in practice research in social work. It points out that both practice and research will be influenced by participating in and developing practice research. – and that both parts must and will learn from the process. To elaborate and define practice research in social work, it is necessary to consider connected approaches and theories. The article will show that practice research is both connected to and can use the theoretical frames of Actual science and Mode 2 knowledge production. To understand and develop research closely connected to practice it is necessary to define it in three different ways: practice research, practitioner research and user-controlled research. Examples from different Nordic approaches connected to these definitions will be presented. Although practice and research both need to develop practice research they do at the same time have different interests which will challenge both parts. Practice research must be looked upon as both an area of collaboration and a meeting point for different stakeholders: users, social workers, administrative management/organizers, politicians and researchers. It is stated that practice research at the same time need to break down barriers between the stakeholders, and to be aware not to combine them totally as differences and dilemmas are a part of practice research and should remain so.*

Key words: *practice research; practitioner research; user-controlled research; actual science; mode 2 knowledge production; barriers and possibilities in practice research; stakeholders in practice research*

1. Associate Professor , Aalborg university

Address for correspondence: Krogstræde 7, 9220 Aalborg Øst, Denmark. lug@socsci.aau.dk

Introduction

Practice research is an emerging approach within social work research. The basic foundation of practice research is building theory from practice (not only from academia). The approach is based on a combination of research methodology, field research and practical experience.

It is impossible to examine and initiate a research process solely from a researcher's point of view, because he or she – as well as social work – is always under the influence of the political and institutional context that frames the phenomenon or the issue in focus. In the words of Gredig and Sommerfeld:

If we want scientific knowledge, and especially empirical evidence, to play an effective role in professional action, then we have to focus on the contexts where the processes of generating knowledge for action actually take shape, that is, on the organizations engaged in social work. (Gredig and Sommerfeld 2008:296).

Nevertheless, an ideal of research is to conduct independent 'in-context' research that – from a neutral position and with no pressure from outside – can study any problem at any time.

Valid criticism may be made of the possibility and desirability of this position. Why should researchers be able to adopt a position untouched by tendencies and trends, and why should they distance themselves from the results of such research? These questions raise an interesting and important discussion topic, one that is necessary in all research at all times.

This discussion is, however, not elaborated further in this chapter. For further elaboration, please read Edgar Marthinsen' paper on this issue. My starting point is that research closely connected to, and under the influence of, practice, with the aim of improving such practice, is of the same high quality as research on the social distance between researcher and the subject. The interface between practice and research, and the degree to which these processes mutually interfere, are even more important than in other research processes. I do not intend to limit this discussion to a certain degree of distance from the phenomenon investigated. Distance can be both useful and necessary in the research process.

This paper will focus on practice research, and is consequently concerned with the possibilities of collaboration where influence is exerted in two directions – both from practice to research and from research to practice. That is to say, it focuses on research and practice in social work.

A theoretical and methodological approach to practice research in social work

As argued throughout this paper, social work research, practice and education are very well suited to practice research. To elaborate and define practice research in social work, it is necessary to consider definitions of connected approaches and theory.

A natural connection that widens the understanding of practice research is what the Danish researcher Bent Flyvbjerg refers to as ‘the science of the concrete’ (Flyvbjerg 1991), or what I would call ‘actual science’. This is bottom-up knowledge production, or a field of research oriented towards subjects more than objects. To restore social science to its rightful place in contemporary society, Flyvbjerg suggests that researchers should return to classical traditions of social inquiry and reorient practice towards what he defines as ‘phronetic social science’ (Flyvbjerg 2001). For Aristotle, the highest of three intellectual virtues was *phronesis*, where judgements and decisions were based on values, and as such quite distinct from *episteme* (analytical) and *techne* (technical) knowledge (Flyvbjerg 2001:55–60). Flyvbjerg defines the science of the concrete, or actual science, as pragmatic, variable, context-dependent and praxis-oriented science (Flyvbjerg 2001:57). It operates via practical rationality based on judgement and experience (Flyvbjerg 2001:58), in which some key elements are:

- *getting close to reality* (the research is conducted close to the phenomenon or the group studied and is subject to reactions from the surroundings, and remains close during the phases of data analysis, feedback and publication of results),
- *emphasizing little things* (the focus is on minutiae, where research studies the major in the minor and where small questions often lead to big answers);
- *looking at practice before discourse* (discourse analysis is disciplined by analysis of practice, and research focuses on practical activities and knowledge in everyday situations);
- *studying concrete cases and contexts* (research methodically builds on case studies, because practical rationality is best understood through cases; practices are studied in their proper contexts);
- *joining agency and structure* (focus is on both actor and structural level; actors and their practices are analysed in relation to structures, and structures in terms of agency); and finally
- *dialoguing with a polyphony of voices* (the research is dialogical and includes itself in a polyphony of voices, with no voice claiming final authority) (Flyvbjerg 2001:132–139).

According to Flyvbjerg, theory has a minor position and context a major one in phronetic social science. Flyvbjerg does not criticize rules, logic, signs and

rationality – in fact, he states that it would be equally problematic if these elements were marginalized by the concrete. However, he criticizes the dominance of these phenomena to the exclusion of more context- and practice-based phenomena (Flyvbjerg 1991:46, Flyvbjerg 2001:49). As the above-mentioned key elements suggest, Flyvbjerg emphasizes that dialogue has a central position in actual science – dialogue with those who are studied, with other researchers, and with decision-makers as well as with other central actors in the field. From this position, research cannot provide straight and simple answers as often seen in more traditional research processes. He stresses that ‘no one is experienced enough or wise enough to give complete answers’ (Flyvbjerg 2001:61). The task of phronetic social science is not to provide simple answers or statements but

to clarify and deliberate about the problems and risks we face and to outline how things may be done differently, in full knowledge that we cannot find ultimate answers to these questions (Flyvbjerg 2001:140).

Flyvbjerg is not emphasizing actual science or phronetic social science on behalf of natural science but stressing that society needs not only natural science but also phronetic-oriented social science to fully investigate developments and processes in modern societies. He argues that both natural and social sciences have their own strengths and weaknesses, depending on subject matter, and that social scientists therefore need to reflect much more on these differences, making it possible to capitalize or build on their strengths, rather than to mimic vainly their natural science counterparts. He puts it this way: ‘Where natural sciences are weakest, social science is strong’ (Flyvbjerg 2001:53), and:

Just as social sciences have not contributed much to explanatory and predictive theory, neither have the natural sciences contributed to reflexive analysis and discussion of values and interests, which is the prerequisite for an enlightened political, economic, and cultural development in any society, and which is at the core of phronesis (Flyvbjerg 2001:3).

From this position, practice research may very well be a way to transform phronetic social science into everyday practice. Phronetic social science could very well constitute both a theoretical and a methodological framework for practice research in social work.

Another natural element of practice research is the connection with mode 2 knowledge production. While mode 1 knowledge production is defined as building upon traditional research approaches guided only by academic norms, mode 2 knowledge production is characterized by application-oriented research where both frameworks and findings are discussed and evaluated by a number of partners—including laymen—in public spheres (Kristiansson 2006).

Mode 2 knowledge production takes place in an interaction between many actors, each and every one of whom represents different interests and contributes a variety of competences and attitudes. It is characterized by a relatively flat network- and collaboration-oriented structure marked by organizational flexibility, and shows no sign of becoming institutionalized in conventional patterns. (Kristiansson 2006:18 - my translation)

The number of researchers will expand from a few privileged people to a mixed group in the production of knowledge.

Other actors once dismissed as mere 'disseminators', 'brokers' or 'users' of research results, are now more actively involved in their 'production'. (Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons 2001:89)

In this way, mode 2 research must be bottom-up rather than top-down in orientation (Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons 2001:113).

The reason why mode 2 knowledge production and research has attracted interest, according to Kristiansson, is the increasing attention to research and its influence on society. This attention has created increasing interest in research into both political and social issues, and in solutions and understanding based on different disciplines instead of a single discipline. As summarized by Gibbons et al., 'Mode 2 knowledge is created in broader transdisciplinary social and economic contexts' (Gibbons et al. 1994:1).

According to Kristiansson, there are a variety of interests within mode 2 knowledge production and research that constitute different expectations of, and demands on, knowledge, development, research design, and findings. Different interests in practice research are discussed below in this paper. Instead of solving possible conflicts among different stakeholders, mode 2 acts within and together with them. That is, collaboration and partnership extend from the very beginning to the very end. In this way, knowledge production

arises in the light of a specific logic which participants must develop in common to be able to act together and towards the problem (Kristiansson 2006:19 - my translation)

In this way, mode 2 is a clash between traditional research evaluated solely by peers and that evaluated both by peers and – as Kristiansson puts it – by a crowd of assorted partners with different agendas. To develop mode 2 knowledge production, all partners must accept ongoing reflection on differences.

Kristiansson also emphasizes that mode 2 is characterized by a new type of knowledge especially connected to practice. Like phronetic research, mode 2 research challenges traditional understanding of knowledge production.

Mode 2 research is, in brief, characterized by its focus on solving problems in specific contexts of practice. In this way, research is controlled by specific tasks, not by the free choice of the researchers. Mode 2 research is application oriented, and oriented more towards generating solutions than towards generating new knowledge. (Rasmussen, Kruse & Holm 2007:124 - my translation)

As Rasmussen, Kruse and Holm put it later, mode 2 research is only valid if individuals or groups of people in the specific practice concerned find the results applicable and useful.

As the descriptions and definitions of phronetic social science and mode 2 knowledge production suggest, there seem to be several movements in the same direction in modern society towards more context-based, dialogue-oriented and partnership-focused research and knowledge production. Practice research in social work is closely connected to, and based on, this orientation and – as the rest of this chapter will show – translates abstract and theoretical concepts into more concrete definitions and practice.

Needs and possibilities for practice research – in practice

Throughout the past 10 years, practice has been confronted with increasing demands to reveal outcomes of public support (Osborne 2002, Heinrich 2002). Buzz words such as documentation, effect and evidence-based practice have become part of everyday social work – both to help politicians and administrative leaders manage growing economic problems and simply to acquire further knowledge about the results of social workers doing social work: what works for who under which conditions. This is stated in the core values of the Department of Social Services in the municipality of Aalborg, Denmark: *Assessment of Coherence between Effort and Results are Common Evaluation Principles* (my translation) (Kjærdsdam 2009). This political and administrative focus has put research in the centre of developing and defining social work. This focus has led not only to interest in managing budgets in social work but also to an interest in more knowledge-based – not only experienced-based – development of both social work and social workers. This is to produce new knowledge and learning strategies on a scientific foundation and in close collaboration with local needs. Thus the demand to reveal outcomes of public support and the modern growth of complexity and uncertainty in society (Nowotny, Scott & Gibbons 2001:47) support the development of new kinds of knowledge production in practice.

Another point of the ‘new’ knowledge production is that it is based not only on more general and large-scale research but also on locally based research and/or evaluation. These kinds of research project are intended to bolster learning processes

in which managers and social workers become partners in research instead of only consumers of it. As a manager in the municipality of Aalborg, Denmark, remarked:

Findings from research and evaluation must be discussed with employees with reference to the learning process and to continuing development, and: the need for evidence-based knowledge has to be ensured in a collaboration process with partners with relevant research competence. (Kjærdsdam 2009 - my translation)

The learning – or collaboration – process involves not only discussing research findings but also respecting partners throughout the research process, and, in areas where research has been dominating and exclusive for many years: the process of producing research questions. As a manager in the municipality of Aalborg stated sharply: ‘We want independence concerning description of research-relevant areas’ (Kjærdsdam 2009 - my translation).

The development and expressed needs within practice strongly indicate a growing need both for a transparent outcome of public support, and for advancing knowledge-based learning processes in a close collaboration with education and science based research. Development in Denmark has shown that although some municipalities build up small research departments, they need ‘outsiders’ to evaluate public support. It is also clear that outside research partners must be open minded towards allowing practitioners and service users to join the research process – from producing research questions, through data collection and analysis, to the information obtained and the transformation of findings into new methods in social work.

Needs and possibilities for practice research – in research

A Danish example further illustrates why researchers find practice research interesting. For researchers, the need to include this type of research is based on an understanding that the institutional context – the framework for social work – is essential to studies and investigations in social work (see Flyvbjerg earlier in this paper). Naturally, the framework of a meeting – for example, between clients and a department of social services – is not an inconsequential matter, and thus the results of initiatives launched by authorities are uncertain. At the same time, research initiatives including practice will potentially influence studies, evaluations and research applicable to practice. Through critical research into the field of social work, the focus of the Danish research network ‘Social Work Research Group’ (FoSo) at Aalborg University is to enable service users and marginalized citizens to take control over their own lives. This kind of research includes user-centered and/or practitioner-inclined approaches to social work practice and study of the

institutional structures that contextualize those practices. More specifically, FoSo aims to enable researchers:

- to explore the perspectives of social work practitioners and service users or marginalized persons in relation to social issues;
- to explore how social work practitioners and service users or marginalized persons respond creatively to their social locations, that is, to explore their own agency in welfare processes;
- to explore the social construction of social problems and the implications of these processes for social work practice and the enablement of service users and marginalized persons;
- to study the institutional structures contextualizing and shaping social work practice (including, for example, law, regulative structures, welfare systems and organizational structures);
- to promote strategies by which social workers and service users or marginalized persons can assist service users/marginalized persons to take more control over their own lives; and
- to develop theory from practice, to develop research methods, to promote the use of theory in social work practice and to develop social work methods. (<http://www.socsci.aau.dk/foso/eng-index.htm> 2006)

With these goals, researchers within the network have difficulty in following traditional paths in science, because knowledge derived from, and understood only by, practice must be unfolded and discussed among researchers, practitioners and service users. It is impossible to understand practice knowledge from a neutral and distant position. One could say that it is impossible for researchers in social work to produce much necessary knowledge unless they collaborate closely with practice and practitioners.

Nordic examples of practice research

During the past decade, (practice) research projects concerning the development of social work services have been launched in all the Nordic countries. These research projects have been connected very closely to the above-mentioned needs in practice or in the development of social work practice. Although many of these projects and processes may not have been called practice research from the beginning – in fact they may have had many different names, such as development of knowledge, evaluation, trying new forms of social work, collaboration between social work, education and research – all have, through these processes, become closer to what above is called practice research, mode 2, the science of the concrete, actual science or phronetic social science.

In Sweden, the Swedish Ministry of Social Affairs established the Centre for Evaluation of Social Services research unit (Centrum för utvärdering av socialt arbete). This resulted in the implementation of the National Support for Knowledge Development programme in the Department of Social Services. The basis of the programme was as follows.

The linkage between social work based in municipalities and universities/schools of social work must be developed. This could happen by, for example, creating a better structure for field placements, with benefit for both universities and municipalities. A much better organization of basic education, further training, and advanced education at the schools of social work must be developed. The link between practice and education and between practice and research constitutes the basis of the knowledge production in the Department of Social Services. A learning field placement must build a structure with continuous collaboration between the Department of Social Services, education and research. (Socialstyrelsen 2005:15–16 - my translation)

To promote collaboration among universities, institutions and municipalities, the Swedish programme established structures that promoted ways of working across organizational boundaries that placed knowledge-based practice at the centre of interest. A number of initiatives – for example, research sequences – were developed, and special practice-oriented seminars and education, practice centres for student work, and combinations of research/practice positions were organized.

In Finland, the approach was influenced by the economic downturn in the 1980s and 1990s. In this period, social work development and social work research took place in the municipalities. The economic crises prompted local authorities to focus on basic social work initiatives, not development or research. At the end of the 1990s, new collaborative initiatives were launched to connect municipalities and regions in consortia that simultaneously created new possibilities to establish research in social work as well as to establish stronger connections among practice, research and development initiatives. Furthermore, a new and stronger government-sponsored collaboration between practice and universities in which all municipalities participated was launched. The result was the establishment of centres of excellence of social welfare and development units. According to an evaluation of the processes and the result, the above-mentioned centres and development units are today the central development actors in the field of social work, since they have created a natural base and meeting point for education, research and practice. The evaluation also shows that it is necessary to focus on permanent financial support instead of temporary project-based support if researchers and educators are to become permanent members of the network (Lähteinen 2005).

In 2006, Norway established the so-called 'College University and Department of Social Services' (the HUSK project). The initiative was undertaken by the Norwegian parliament (Stortinget), which advanced the following argument:

Several attempts to develop competence within the Department of Social Services have been made; for example, in initiatives for drug addicts, homeless people and service users with economic and debt problems. Some have, however, claimed that the divergence among research, education and practice is too big. (st.prp.nr.1 2005-06 p. 240 from the Department of Health and Caring - my translation)

The Norwegian parliament decided that the purpose of the project was:

- to promote firm and equal structures and arenas for collaboration among research, education and the Department of Social Services;
- to strengthen practice-based research; and
- to strengthen knowledge as the foundation of social work practice.

It is imperative for knowledge-based practice in the programme that employees participate in ongoing and process-based development of competence through learning organizations, in which there is room for collective knowledge production. In addition, the Norwegian programme highlights a user perspective in central and local organizations and in the development and implementation of projects within the programme.

In Denmark, a pilot practice research project has been launched. The goal is, over a period of five years, to boost collaboration between research, education and different municipalities, focusing on the development of knowledge-based practice. To establish ongoing and specific relations among practice, research and education, the purpose of the project is to identify activities that:

- enhance practice qualifications exercised within regional or municipality settings;
- establish a research-based development of practice;
- create a platform for research in practice within the field of social work;
- establish exchange of experiences among specific practice and relevant education;
- establish relevant training and education within the area of social work; and
- develop new types of research, education, and practice. (Ebsen and Uggerhøj 2007:3)

As the above-mentioned projects show, over a number of years, there have been various kinds of collaboration between practice and research in social work in the Nordic countries. Despite misconceptions and different historical approaches to social work, it seems that the need and wish to develop practice research in social work is similar.

Barriers to practice research

Despite the presence of comparable social issues, the historical background of research in social work in the Nordic countries varies¹. As mentioned above, the strongest traditions in social work research can be traced to Sweden. Since the 1970s, Sweden has aimed at promoting social work research, with efforts including the establishment of professorships, PhD programmes and important periodicals like *Socialvetenskaplig Tidsskrift* (*The Journal of Social Science*). In recent years, social work research has also become an increasingly important issue in Finland, prompting Finnish universities to establish PhD courses in social work. In Denmark and Norway, the establishment of topical master's degree programmes, PhD programmes and university courses for social workers, and the establishment of professorships in social work has occurred primarily since the 1990s.

Being a relatively new field in Finland, Norway and Denmark, social work has not yet positioned itself as an independent academic subject. An important factor in the establishment of social work at the Nordic universities was the wish to use research to enhance the qualifications of practice and to support the knowledge production of social-work-related topics (see above, and the first paper in this issue). This was urgent, and it has produced the unique possibility of establishing research that from the very beginning focused on context rather than just on its own traditions, which only later was able to build bridges between theory and practice. This does not mean, however, that relations between research and practice and the development of research in social work practice are unproblematic. Below, the discussion of conflicting interests will reveal the contrasts.

Qualified practice is built on many related elements. One of the most central elements – although not the only one – is social workers' knowledge about the effects of initiatives and planning in social work. The fulcrum of the research is the elements that create a natural relation between research and knowledge-based practice and regular evaluations of ongoing initiatives. Hence, an identity of interests exists, but it is essential that the distinction between ends and means should be clear in the collaboration between practice and research as well as in the development of practice research. As an introductory note, it must be emphasized that there is an essential difference between a researcher and a person who works in a profession: the researcher views research as a goal in itself, while the practitioner views research as means. To the researcher, research and the research process are the main objectives. The practitioner's goal is to present initiatives and viable solutions to social problems. This does not mean that the interests of research and practice are necessarily different but that researchers and social workers must remember the difference in interests between them. Currently, the desire to involve research in the development of social work and to develop more academic social work education is increasing, as mentioned above.

In the past, there has been great doubt about the usefulness of academic research

in social work circles, and I do not deny that it remains today. This doubt, I believe, stems from attempts by researchers to exercise autonomy from practice; that is, to maintain research as an academic field independent of practice. The interest in basing knowledge on academic knowledge in social work has – as mentioned above – created a shift from practice to research. The essential element of this new approach is that different research methods relate to practice and the provision of high-quality social services.

What is practice research?

In discussions of practice research, its essential nature is often unclear. As Pain writes in a literature review of practice research:

Despite the many years of research into practice (Gibbons 2001) and debate concerning it, there is still a lack of consensus about what practice research includes and what lies outside its boundaries, and there are continuing debates about paradigms and methods, collaboration and ethics (Pain 2008:1).

It seems that two approaches can be characterized. This paper does not adopt one or the other but includes parts of both in what we understand as practice research in social work. To understand and discuss this, it is, however, first necessary to examine the approaches separately. The first approach defines practice research as research conducted in close collaboration with practice, where it is not crucial who collects data or performs the analysis, although it is under the management of trained researchers and institutions. This approach primarily focuses on the framework, goals and outcomes of the research process. The above-mentioned Nordic projects represent this position.

The second approach defines practice research as research, evaluation and investigation conducted by practitioners. This approach primarily focuses on the roles of the researchers. The Danish research leader Knud Ramian together with a group of English researchers (Ramian 2003) represents this approach.

A third approach, connected to the second, focuses specifically on user participation in research processes. This position includes not only practice research but also all kinds of research activities. Approaches one and two will be examined and discussed below. The discussion about involving users in research processes is important, but it is not specifically connected to practice research. This is a general issue for all kinds of scientific work. Practice research can involve users or can be conducted without them, but it is important to have the discussion and to make a decision concerning user involvement in the research process.

In approach one, the starting point is that it is necessary and desirable that there

should be a close – and often locally bound – collaboration between practice and research, with mutual commitment. However, both sides must primarily do ‘what they are best at’. It seems that a wish or even ideal to establish an unproblematic collaboration among research, education and practice in social work has developed. The ideal could be considered a strength at first, but in the long run, it endangers both research and practice. It is not possible to establish an unproblematic collaboration but at most to make it less problematic. The desire for, and the ideal of, the unproblematic collaboration entails the risk that research, education and practice will become toothless – they will, to put it bluntly, risk falling to the lowest common denominator. This would in all probability lead to never-ending disagreements or obvious conflicts of interest which would affect all aspects of the discussion. There will always be differences in interests between the two areas. If research and practice are to be valid, it is crucial that these different elements should not be diluted. The struggle between partners and conflict between the two fields is, from their perspective, the best potential for both areas. For example, research must always be entitled to look behind the truth, the self-understanding and ideals in practice and always to focus on grey or perhaps invisible areas in practice. If research must have regard to problems in collaboration caused by unpopular findings, the rationale for the research field will be threatened.

It is difficult to ascertain how collaboration between practice and research in practice may be organized, as it must begin with locally based organizations and issues that probably change from time to time. A recent statement on practice research by a participant at the ‘Practice research: developing a new paradigm’ conference said:

Practice research involves curiosity about practice. It is about identifying good and promising ways in which to help people; and it is about challenging troubling practice through the critical examination of practice and the development of new ideas in the light of experience. It recognizes that this is best done by practitioners in partnership with researchers, where the latter have as much, if not more, to learn from practitioners as practitioners have to learn from researchers. It is an inclusive approach to professional knowledge that is concerned with understanding the complexity of practice alongside the commitment to empower, and to realize social justice, through practice. (Salisbury Statement 2009:2–3)

Practice research cannot be research findings planned, conducted and ‘delivered’ by a researcher to practitioners. The main point is that practice and research develop all collaboration in common because practice research must be in tune with all participants. It also means that collaboration can appear differently and may change in the following ways

1. The research could be planned and discussed by researchers and practitioners but carried out by researchers.

2. The research goals and questions could be set, and they could be discussed throughout the process and be part of a learning process where both researchers and practitioners participate all through it.
3. Research could be part of an ongoing research process in which it is hard to distinguish learning processes and research/examination processes.

This division into three arenas within practice research may be connected to what Ilse Julkunen defines as first-, second- and third-person inquiry in the next article in this issue.

The second approach is based on a definition that is similar or identical to practice research in the first approach. According to Epstein:

Practice-based research may be defined as the use of research-inspired principles, designs and information gathering techniques within existing forms of practice to answer questions that emerge from practice in ways that will inform practice. (Epstein 2001:17 – my translation)

However, connected to this, it is said that

practice research ... is a phenomenon that occurs when practitioners commit themselves to something they call research in their own practice while they, at the same time, practice social work. (Ramian 2003:5 – my translation)

This distances this approach from approach one as practitioners are expected to be active researchers. The difference is even more specific when Ramian defines six features in the perception of the phenomenon of practice research (Ramian 2003:5) (my translation).

1. It is conducted by practitioners at work using at least 80% of their working hours as practitioners.
2. The research questions focus on problems connected to everyday practice.
3. Common recognized scientific methods are used.
4. Projects are made feasible.
5. Findings are communicated to other practitioners.
6. The research field is in practice.

With Ramian's six features, it is stated that practice by this definition is the site of the research institution (instead of the university), a view supported by Rehr, who said that practice-based research studies are practitioner led (Rehr 2001). Ramian later underlines that

the practice researcher adjusts his or her strategy and methods in ways that make it

possible to conduct research activities in practice. (Ramian 2003:6)

According to Ramian, (research) practitioners have an interest in, and are dependent on, finding solutions to problems in practice, while traditional researchers are busy meeting the requirements for validity of the research (Ramian 2009). Ramian points out that the short gap between research and practice that occurs when practitioners carry out research increases the possibility of producing knowledge relevant to practice and applying findings to practice. Ramian also points out that findings from practice research are not presented in typical academic journals but rather through media such as conferences and seminars (Ramian 2003).

To highlight the central elements in practice research and to emphasize the importance of the focus on practice, Ramian refers to a study of health care where Reed and Biott stress that practice research:

1. is integrated in practice;
2. is a social process in which peers participate;
3. is valued by all participants in a project;
4. is imbued by development thinking;
5. leads to action and therefore focuses on aspects of practice that the researcher in some ways can control and influence;
6. identifies and studies the impact of social political and historical factors on practice;
7. stimulates discussions on values;
8. is designed to involve all participants;
9. increases professional imagination and the participants' capability to analyse everyday activities;
10. produces knowledge that can be replicated in ways that will interest a larger forum (Reed and Biott 1995).

While Ramian's six features seem to divide the two positions, it is, interesting that Reed and Biott's features on the other hand seem to connect the two approaches, because the latter characteristics could also include approach one and seem to emphasize some aspects of phronetic social science (see above).

According to Ramian, practitioners need not be trained researchers but must be skilled in research to perform research. A collaborative practitioner research network must be established to support the practitioner researchers during the process. Although some focuses are similar, the two approaches appear to diverge at this point, as the first approach requires that the responsibility for research projects will be carried out by trained researchers. Ramian has lately defined his research approach as 'research light' – investigations with a narrow and specific focus that may be completed in 5–10 days by practitioners with few research skills but involved in a 'collaborative practitioner research network' (Ramian 2009). By this Ramian distinguishes 'research light' from what he calls large-scale research as well

as longitudinal research and research in depth. These kinds of research, according to Ramian, must be conducted by trained researchers but build on findings from research light (Ramian 2009). At this point, approaches one and two agree, but it is vital to approach one to attach importance to the responsibility of trained researchers for the research process, whether light or heavy.

One problem in the definition of practice research in approach two seems to be that traditional research resembles old-fashioned social or natural science. Harmaakorpi and Mutanen (2008) point out in an argument for more practice-based innovative processes that

the experts in innovation processes cannot just pour knowledge into the innovation partners and then disappear from the scene. (Harmaakorpi & Mutanen 2008: 88)

This criticism could very well be used to promote approach one as well, because this approach is characterized by innovative collaboration processes from defining research questions to the analysis of data. Both approaches emphasize the differences between research and practice, but while in approach one the differences are seen as natural and inspiring parts of the collaboration and the research process, in approach two they appear to be locked into irreconcilable positions, and researchers are characterized as unwilling to consider the needs and traditions of practice. While Harmaakorpi and Mutanen stress that partners require common interests and intentions determined by practical context, approach one stresses that the partners need to 'do what they are best at' and that no partner can determine what is right: that is, the struggle between the different interests is the strongest potential within the collaboration. For further discussion, see below in this article. Referring to the discussion of modes 1 and 2 above, it seems that approach two locks researchers (for example from universities) into mode 1, making them unable to move towards mode 2, while approach one seems to be understood as mode 2.

To prevent unnecessary conflict between the two positions about the same notion and to maintain the differences, it may be helpful to define them in the following way:

1. Research that focuses on collaboration between practice and research (approach one) is defined as *practice research*;
2. Research that focuses on processes controlled and accomplished by practitioners (approach two) is defined as *practitioner research*;
3. Research that focuses on user participation in the research process (approach three) is defined as *user-controlled research*.

On the above-mentioned basis, this chapter and book focus on approach one and *practice research*, which is defined as:

- critical and curious research that describes, analyses and develops practice;
- research based on generally approved academic standards;
- research built on experience, knowledge and needs within social work practice;
- research where the responsibility for the research is entrusted to generally approved research institutions;
- close, binding and locally based collaboration between researchers and practitioners in planning, completing and disseminating the research;
- research where findings are closely connected to learning processes in practice;
- participatory and dialogue-based research relevant to developing practice and validating different areas of expertise within the partnership; and
- research that produces, analyses and describes specific issues in both empirical and theoretical general coherence.

This approach does not exclude practitioners from the research process. On the contrary, practitioners are often included at different levels in the research process and as researchers, but trained researchers still bear responsibility for research quality. The focus is not on the role of the researcher but on the content of the research. It is 'to use the best from both parts' in a respectful collaboration. One could say, with the words from the Salisbury Statement (Salisbury Statement 2009:4), that the foundation of the approach is practice-minded researchers and research-minded practitioners. Or in the words of Epstein and Blumenfield:

Under the right organizational conditions, with the right kinds of support and consultation and a 'practice-based research' perspective, social work practitioners can actively and enthusiastically engage in research that has implications for their own practice and for practice in other settings. (Epstein and Blumenfield 2001:3)

While both practice and academic wisdom are valued, the point of this chapter is that this approach and definition of practice research is open and inclusive instead of closed and exclusive. It is focused on knowledge production and learning processes in social work practice and research as a whole instead of mainly on processes within chosen practices.

Different interests in practice research

Although I have argued that both practice and research have an interest in collaboration in research processes, this is not tantamount to a total convergence of all areas in the field. On the contrary, as mentioned above in this chapter, it is useful to be aware of contradistinctions that cannot be neutralized, as this would risk establishing collaboration focused on the lowest common denominator. Some of

the natural contradistinctions – and consequences thereof – will be discussed below. The basis of the discussion is that the following are stakeholders in practice research:

- users;
- social workers;
- administrative management and organizations;
- politicians; and
- researchers.

Users have a natural interest in receiving the best support possible. Although many users hope that their participation in studies of social work may have a more general impact on qualifying, for example, for public support (Uggerhøj 1995), their attention will be on receiving the best researched support for their own individual and specific problems. A study on user experience and pedagogical treatment in a Danish institution that deals with families at risk suggests that users judge the intervention differently according to the severity of their problems (Uggerhøj 2000). Furthermore, the study shows how users and social workers judge the same activity differently. While social workers judge selected interventions positively according to their specific task of observing families in the family home, users judge the same activity negatively according to their need to obtain help and support for their individual problems from professional social workers instead of just being observed (Uggerhøj 2000). The example shows the inherent contradictions in the complex work of a family home. There are contradictions and dilemmas that both social workers and users must live with and accept because they are impossible to solve.

Social workers are bound to a political, organizational and professional context. It is not possible for social workers solely to satisfy their own values or needs expressed by users. The legislation stipulates possibilities and obligations; for example, interventions/economic support for particular problems and demands that may be placed on users to obtain support. Furthermore, the resources and the social worker authority are often covered by legislation. Moreover, the administrative and/or political details of management in social work often influence interpretation and application. At the same time, local authorities, politicians and civil servants interpret the legislation that organizes and structures social work differently in various organizations and municipalities. Finally, social workers' educational background, professional values and ideals influence the way social work is implemented in practice. Professional values and ideals often appear in contradistinction to organizational frameworks and to some extent also to user needs, as mentioned above.

Generally, *administrative management and organizational frameworks* are influenced by politically defined boundaries, local cultures and political traditions. Moreover, the desire of social work management and organizations to 'establish order in chaos' concerning user problems and to appear responsible and rational may

conflict with the desires of users and social workers to focus on their individual issues and understanding of the issues. These desires are based on the users' own understanding instead of a rational public understanding. Management needs – together with political requests for more documented and effective social work – often lead to a focus on evidence-based knowledge production and research instead of other research approaches.

Politicians should focus on tools to measure the effects of political decisions and to explain them to citizens. The individual needs of users and descriptions of collaboration processes in social work have less importance, because these are often considered to be the concern of an individual user or included in a particular social worker's professional competence.

Researchers' approaches are influenced by their own research area and needs as well as university management's requirements that they should justify themselves in the academic field. Research areas and academic needs do not always converge with the needs and requirements of social work practice. The demand for publication in peer-reviewed periodicals with detailed and traditional criteria for research, content and article structure may conflict with the needs for information in practice. Furthermore, researchers may be influenced by the specific focus of those who benefit from services – often seen in the economic circumstances of the tender. Finally, the scientific need for distance from the subject of research may appear to conflict with the necessity for practice in proximity. That is, the scientific ideal of objectivity and unwillingness to influence practice conflicts with the need of practitioners to influence and include research in developing practice, which is an interesting and difficult contradiction.

The different stakeholders cannot and must not necessarily combine completely, but it is crucial that practice research constitutes a series of contradistinctions and confluences, which entails dilemmas that both research and practice must address. Dilemmas are not resolved but must be included in the practice research process.

Challenges for research and practice

As mentioned above, actors in social work arenas, such as practitioners, claimants, researchers and users, have different interests. These interests are important to all of them and significant for society as well. They are so important and significant that functioning well depends on the possibility of retaining these different interests. Instead of attempting to balance or reconcile these differences, it is essential to illuminate them if collaboration is to be established. Moreover, in this way, it is possible for the parties involved to gain greater understanding of each other and their respective interests. It is possible to relate this meeting of different interests to other power struggles; for example between management and employees and

between users and social workers where awareness and visibility are key issues in establishing respectful collaboration, yet without eliminating natural differences. Research finds itself in the most powerful position and thus has a special obligation to promote awareness of different interests, exactly as the powerful position of social workers with regard to users gives them a special obligation to use it positively in their relationship.

My claim is that researchers have a special position and responsibility to respond to these contradistinctions. It is thus evident that the possibility of a dialectical approach is based on differences and contradistinctions that are crucial to the *raison d'être* of the two fields and that enable the two areas to challenge each other. From this position, my claim is also that a researcher could or should never become a practitioner, or vice versa. However, this does not mean that efforts should not be made to utilize these differences to inform social work.

My position with regard to change and development in practice research in social work and to collaboration between researchers and practitioners is based on the Marxian process of 'change through the conflict of opposing forces' (The Free Dictionary by Farlex) and not the Hegelian process of 'arriving at the truth by stating a thesis, developing a contradictory antithesis, and combining and resolving them into a coherent synthesis' (The Free Dictionary by Farlex) meaning that contradictions are abolished and new realizations emerge.

As in the introduction of the science of the concrete and phronetic social science, it is, at the same time, important to recall Flyvbjerg's comment that no individual is wise enough to give sufficient answers (Flyvbjerg 2001), meaning that the role of both researchers and practitioners is to advance parts of the answer in an ongoing dialogue about issues in practice and research, and concerning how eventually to resolve these issues. From this point of view, research and practice both possess part of the answer and part of the solution, and thus both researchers and practitioners produce knowledge. Thus, importance is attached to challenges from different interests and at different levels.

As mentioned above, *the challenge from research to practice* is to examine existing truth and common understanding – in the words of Bourdieu: the social worker *doxa* (Bourdieu 1972, Bourdieu 1982) – that is, to establish awareness and elucidate phenomena, actions and considerations to which the practitioners tend to be blind – precisely because they are in practice. From this point of view, it is less challenging simply to describe and measure effects of everyday social work practice. My goal is not to deny that it is interesting to carry out studies on social work and its effects, but such research does not necessarily challenge practice, research and society, as it risks focusing only on insight within practice. Thus, too close a connection and understanding between research and practice is futile and may hinder the emergence of new knowledge.

The challenge from practice to research is to support or provoke research to become more creative in understanding practice built on complexity, and to act flexibly instead

of constructing a paradigm suitable for research. It should also challenge research to be aware of elements of power in both social work and research processes. From a practice point of view, research improves the comprehension of everyday problems as well as encouraging more informed solutions to these problems. This approach challenges the scientific tendency to view a phenomenon from an abstract and theoretical position. The theoretical and analytic approach is pivotal in the internal 'science war' in basic research which – frankly speaking – has high status, and practice research, which has low status. Thus, practice will challenge research at its core, as some researchers will look upon this as research being in danger of losing its basis and identity. In spite of declarations of equality, social work is marked by human beings' different reactions to the same problem. Hence, research in social work has to be able to establish studies of this action-oriented field and the built-in differences between research and practice. Social work research must in this way challenge and intervene in dynamic, complex and ever-changing practice, knowledge and context: the ongoing construction of society of which social work is a part.

Practice research in social work is characterized as being capable of simultaneously influencing and being influenced by practice. It is a research field linked especially to practice, and its scope and independence are defined by the breadth of life, and thus it risks lower status within academic society. Research must focus also on actions, not only on findings, and on quantitative aspects, because these have a profound impact on practice. To express this in another way, actions become findings in a research process, while findings become actions in a practice process. In this way, practice research in social work and social work practice must, so to speak, walk hand in hand without becoming lovers. Practice research seems to constitute common ground for both practice and research, where it is possible to challenge both fields. Research must emphasize that knowledge is produced by both research and practice, meaning that research must establish a close partnership with management, social workers and users in the development of research projects, in the data collection process – for example, by including practitioners and users in this process – and in the development of action research and the development of interview methods. The strength of both practice and research in this view is that they address difficult challenges. The danger for both fields is that they may avoid and reject the challenges.

Conclusion

Practice research is necessary in the ongoing development of social work, but it is also a meeting point for different views, interests and needs, where complexity and dilemmas are inherent in the collaboration and challenge of both practice and research. Practice research in social work cannot develop from either practice or research alone but from both together.

Practice research in social work is not a special research method. On the contrary, it is possible and often necessary to use different research methods, as this often strengthens the research. The critical issue is that the selected research methods must answer research questions posed by research and practice in every study. Certain creative research processes – for example action research as will be described in Karin Kildedal's article on action research in local authority practice in the next issue of this journal – will be beneficial in processes of development and those in which participants interact. However, to establish a practice research project, these are not required. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, practice research is, from my point of view, inclusive rather than exclusive.

Trained researchers are responsible for practice research, unlike practitioner research, where the responsibility and execution lie within practice. Practice research involves practitioners and users as researchers and as collaboration partners throughout the research process and does not prevent practitioner research from being part of the process.

It is possible – although not always necessary – to involve users in practice research. If users participate and are responsible for the research process, it should be characterized as user-controlled research.

In practice research, questions are considered important to both practice and research. The aforementioned Danish pilot project in practice research does not only address questions related to actual practice. It is also possible and necessary to focus on research angles that have considerable abstract and theoretical connections. Hence, it is vital in such research projects to raise practice-based evaluations and investigations to a more theoretical level, enabling researchers to answer questions in depth and to develop new theories and/or new methods in social work. It is pivotal that practice research should be connected to specific needs in everyday social work.

It is possible for practice research to integrate analysis and to produce findings that cannot be translated directly to specific changes in practice. In co-operation, practitioners and researchers can easily implement a theoretical study; for example, on the basis of one or more empirical studies. Thus they may obtain types of knowledge other than evaluations, and investigations based on a high degree of transferability will be able to impart this knowledge. As mentioned before, it is pivotal that both practice experience/knowledge and research experience/knowledge should be involved in practice research processes. One of the considerations of research is exactly how to implement theoretical and more abstract analysis that should also

be conducted in practice research projects. However, if practice research must be included in knowledge production processes and/or practice, it must become part of processes in practice, not only be part of traditional research processes. Research cannot remain on the sidelines and leave the process once data collection and analyses are complete. Research must be involved in providing information. For example, it must educate practitioners in new social work methods/tools, or in new and different ways of carrying out social work, and it must be involved in turning theoretical and analytical findings into useable tools in everyday social work – essentially being a part of learning processes in practice. Moreover, representatives of practice need to be involved or at least to accept that practical issues must be turned into theoretical issues or propositions, and must be involved in developing methods for practice research. It is necessary for both sides to be open-minded and to learn from each other. Not only will practice learn from research but also research will learn from practice which will inform and develop research and research methods.

Practice research must be part of a learning process. Furthermore, researchers must extend their role to become partners in a developing process. Practitioners must be not only consumers of research but also partners in a learning process. This change of role will make practitioners use findings not merely as results but as part of developing everyday practice and methods. They must commit themselves to a learning process of which research findings are a necessary ingredient.

Although this chapter has sought to define practice research – for example, by discussing the difference between practice research and practitioner research – the aim is not to produce a ‘waterproof’ understanding. The aim has been rather to present important discussions and contradictions as well as to argue for the necessity of keeping these discussions and contradictions alive. Frankly speaking, discussion of practice research – considering all the different aspects discussed in this chapter – is much more important than a limited definition.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1972): *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Bourdieu, P. (1982): *The Logic of Practice*, Cambridge: Polity Press
- Flyvbjerg, B. (1991): *Rationalitet og magt*, København: Akademisk Forlag
- Flyvbjerg, B. (1998): *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2001): *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*, New York: Cambridge University Press
- Gibbons, J. (2001): *Effective practice: social work's long history of concerns about outcomes*, *Australian Social Work*, 54 (3), September 2001, pp. 3–13.
- Gibbons, M. et al. (1994): *The New Production of Knowledge*, London: Sage Publications Ltd

- Gredig, D. & Sommerfeld, P. (2008): *New Proposals for Generating and Exploiting Solution-oriented Knowledge*, Research on Social Work Practice 18; 292.
- Ebsen, F. & Uggerhøj, L. (2007): *Praksisforskning i socialt arbejde*, Unpublished application.
- Epstein, I. (2001): *Using Available Clinical Information in Practice-based Research: Mining for Silver While Dreaming of Gold*. In Epstein, I. & Blumenfield, S. (eds.) (2001): 'Clinical Data-mining in Practice-based Research – Social Work in Hospital Settings', New York: The Haworth Social Work Practice Press.
- Epstein, I. & Blumenfield, S. (eds.) (2001): *Clinical Data-mining in Practice-based Research—Social Work in Hospital Settings*, New York: The Haworth Social Work Practice Press.
- Harmaakorpi, V. & Mutanen, A. (2008): *Knowledge Production in Networked Practice-based Innovation Processes – Interrogative Model as a Methodological Approach*, Interdisciplinary Journal of Information, Knowledge and Management, vol 3, 2008.
- Heinrich C. J. (2002): *Outcomes-based Performance Management in the Public Sector: Implications for Government Accountability and Effectiveness*, Public Administration Review, Vol. 62, No. 6, pp. 712–725, Journal of Information, Knowledge and Management, 3, 14.
- Helse- og Omsorgsdepartementet (2005): *Forsøk med nye samarbeidsformer mellom forskning, ut-danning og praksis i sosialtjenesten: St.prp.nr.1 (2005-06)*, Oslo: Helse- og omsorgsdepartementet.
- Hunter, E. & Tsey, K. (2002): *Indigenous health and the contribution of sociology: a review*, Health Sociology Review 11, 1–2, (<http://hsr.e-contentmanagement.com/11.1/11-1p79.htm>)
- Kjærdsdam, W. (2009): *Veje til kvalificering af socialt arbejde*, Upubliceret undervisningsmateriale.
- Kristiansson, Michael René (2006): *Modus 2 vidensproduktion*, DF Revy nr. 2, februar 2006.
- Ljunggren, Synnöve (2005): *Empiri, evidens, empati—Nordiska röster om kunskapsutveckling i socialt arbete*, Århus: Nordiska ministerrådet och Nopus, Nord: 2005:5
- Lähtinen, M. (2005): *Kunskapsutveckling och kompetensuppbyggande* in Ljunggren, Synnöve (2005) 'Empiri, evidens, empati – Nordiska röster om kunskapsutveckling i socialt arbete', Århus.
- Nordiska ministerrådet och Nopus, Nord: 2005:5.
- Nowotny, H, Scott, P. & Gibbons, M. (2001): *Re-thinking Science – Knowledge and the Public in an Age of Uncertainty*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Osborne, S. (2002): *Public Management – A Critical Perspective*, London: Routledge.
- Pain, H. (2008): *Practice Research Literature Review*, unpublished draft, University of Southampton.
- Ramian, K. (2009): *Evidens på egne præmisser*, Vidensbaseret arbejde 2009, 1. februar 2009 2. årgang.
- Ramian, K. (2003): *Praksisforskning som læringsrum*, Uden for Nummer 7/2003.
- Rasmussen, J., Kruse, S. & Holm, C. (2007): *Viden om dannelse – Uddannelsesforskning, pædagogik og pædagogisk praksis*, København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Reed, J. & Biott, C. (1995): *Evaluating and Developing Practitioner Research. Practice Research in Health Care: This Inside Story*, London: Chapman Hall.
- Rehr, H. (2001): *Foreword* in Epstein, I & Blumenfield, S (eds.) (2001) 'Clinical Data-mining in

- Practice-based Research – Social Work in Hospital Settings', New York: The Haworth Social Work Practice Press.
- Salisbury Statement (2009): *The Salisbury Statement on practice research*, <http://www.socsci.soton.ac.uk/spring/salisbury/>, University of Southampton.
- Socialstyrelsen (2005): *Nationellt stöd för kunskapsutveckling inom socialtjänsten*, Stockholm: Socialstyrelsen.
- The Free Dictionary by Farlex <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/dialectic>
- Uggerhøj, L. (2000): *Den udviklede udvikling*, København: Center for Forskning i Socialt Arbejde.
- Uggerhøj, L. (1995): *Hjælp eller afhængighed*, Aalborg Universitetsforlag, Aalborg.
- Winter, S. (1983): *Effektivitet og produktivitet i den offentlige sektor 1*, Politica, Bind 15, 3. <http://www.socsci.aau.dk/foso/eng-index.htm> 2006

Notes

- 1 The Nordic countries consist of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden and their associated territories, which include the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland. In this paper, the Nordic countries refer to the following four countries: Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.