

Reviews

Practice-Based Research in Social Work
A guide for reluctant researchers
Sarah-Jane Dodd and Irwin Epstein
Abingdon, Routledge, 2012, 212pp.
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Just occasionally a book comes along that you wish you had been able to read a year earlier – as a relative novice in social work research, this, for me, is one of them. Aimed at both undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as at social work practitioners, it presents a readable and reasoned argument for the development of research *in* as well as *about* practice. Dodd and Epstein state clearly, ‘Above all, our hope is to be pragmatic and useful to you and your client’ (p.64), and aim to turn ‘research-reluctants’ into research enthusiasts. In an age where social work agencies must demonstrate that they are providing value for money, this is a worthy goal, for evaluation of programmes, services and individual practice is a central aim of applied research. The authors explain clearly that practice-based research is essentially applied, as opposed to basic speculative academic research – instead of asking ‘wouldn’t it be interesting to know ...’, practice-based researchers start at ‘where they are at’ and consider how research can take their work and their client to the next step. In this way, it reminds me of Kazi’s (2003) approach to realist evaluation in practice – what interventions work, who do they work for, and in what context?

The book is divided into three sections: setting out a definition of practice-based research in the context of other models (evidence-based practice and research-based practice) that link research to practice; engaging in the process of practice-based research; and analysing and interpreting results. The bulk of the text is in the second section, covering topics in a logical sequence, from establishing the problem and identifying a research question, through designing research, carrying out a literature review and different methods of data collection, to consideration of ethical issues. The third section covers the areas that many budding researchers, whether practitioner or academic, may find (after ethical concerns) most intimidating: analysing both qualitative and quantitative data, and interpreting and disseminating results.

The introductory section engages the reader quickly, explaining the need for social work practitioners to engage in research so that research questions can have an appropriate practitioner perspective, and be clearly related to real settings. The authors’ use of humour

and a level of self-deprecation effectively demystifies research as an ‘ivory tower’ activity, and uses good examples to which any practitioner would be able to relate. Importantly, they write in a way that should convince any practitioner that they would themselves be able to undertake this model of research, linking practice-based research to the general principle of assessment in practice: defining the general area of problems for the service user, then gathering information systematically, re-defining problems as they are specific to that case, and exploring and evaluating ways of addressing the problems. In fact, you might say that practice-based research could be described as critically reflective practice in its most structured and evaluative form – and this is an approach that is familiar to practitioners from their first practice learning opportunity as students, through qualification, to their studies for continuing professional development.

The chapters discussing engagement in the process of practice-based research show a strong value base, highlighting the principle that research should put no extra burden on service recipients and that it must serve practice, rather than practice serving research. Similarly, whilst ‘strategic compromise’ is advocated when considering the different benefits and value of quantitative as against qualitative methods, it is made clear that practice should never be compromised. In the discussion of research methods and related terminology, I liked the way that research concepts were related, again, to actual practice skills; for example *triangulation* is related (p87) to gathering information from multiple sources in assessment in order to ‘validate’ the conclusion and add to the analysis that informs decision-making and intervention. However, these central chapters are quite ‘technical’, and I think they could have been improved by inclusion of a glossary of terms and abbreviations, and a more extensive list than is given, for sources of the many standardised instruments and scales that are suggested as useful – some are described as in common use in practice, and this may be true in the author’s North American context, but not necessarily elsewhere. I also wondered how the authors’ advocacy of CDM (clinical data mining) would be useful in the UK in light of Data Protection legislation.

For me, the final section of the book was the least strong. There is a very useful discussion of the use of SPSS analytic software, and helpful hints for using a variety of methods for qualitative analysis, but screen-shots would have usefully illustrated the SPSS examples. Similarly, the sections on statistical analysis seemed to assume more familiarity (and comfort) with the ideas of chi-square and T-test than most practitioners might have, and I felt this detracted from the ‘pragmatic usefulness’. From my teaching experience, when practitioners read research reports to inform their practice, it is terms such as these, and references to philosophical research concepts, which can mask the value of the findings. Again, a well-annotated glossary would have been useful.

That aside, I felt this was a book that would appeal to a wide student and practitioner audience; it is written engagingly and acknowledges the pressures of practice that must be negotiated in order to be a practitioner-researcher. It should be essential or at least highly recommended reading for any student, and I have no hesitation in adding it to my reading lists. Whether a student using research to develop their knowledge and understanding of a topic, or a practitioner planning a work-based project, the reader is

taken on a refreshingly straightforward exploration of the research process which should enthuse them to seek out further understanding.

References

Kazi, M (2003) Realist evaluation for practice. *British Journal of Social Work* 33, 803-818

Helen Burrows

Senior Lecturer, Division of Social Work, Health and Social Care and Counselling
Nottingham Trent University
