Approaching practice research in theory and practice

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Abstract: There is a growing interest in practice as a concept and as a focus of research in social work and within different sciences. This article examines different ways of producing knowledge in social work in relation to practice research. It is based on the research processes conducted in the institutes of practice research in social work in Finland and reflects on the different theoretical and methodological standpoints as well as illuminating the process of creating knowledge in practice research. Practice research calls for the development of concepts and approaches that allow transcendence of the division between theory and practice. The article argues the need for a supportive infrastructure and an open-ended approach to diverse practice research models.

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Introduction

This article examines different conceptions of knowledge and ways of producing knowledge in social work in relation to practice research. The issue of practice research in social work has also been discussed in Finnish in Mäntysaari, Pohjola and Pösö (2008) *Sosiaalityö ja Teoriat*. The objective is to create a review of the different thoughts and perceptions that we have formed in our numerous activities in this field of study. The article will describe our connection to practice research and, particularly, to its methodology. We will also evaluate different influences that practice research has taken from other fields of study. Through different examples we will attempt to illuminate the process of creating knowledge in practice research towards the end of the article. Our approach to the subject is hence practice-oriented and the point of departure is practice-based. In contrast, the literature on the topic is mainly interdisciplinary and theoretically constructed from many different areas of social sciences. The aim has been to keep our approach sensitive to all of the ideas that have been created within the broad framework of practice research. The article does not attempt to give a conclusive definition of practice research because strict definitions, or even attempts to define the subject matter, may culminate in restricting rather than unlocking different paths to discussing the phenomena. Our view is that practice research in social work is still a novel subject trying to find its characteristic form and content.

This article has been written by carrying out a dialogue, not only amongst ourselves, but also with different communities of practice research. Heikki Waris Institute (Finnish-speaking) and the Mathilda Wrede Institute (Swedish-speaking) are organizations in Helsinki that focus on social work research and teaching. The operations of these institutes are directed towards the everyday life of social work[1]. Both institutes organize and invest resources in teaching practice research, but in this paper we will concentrate solely on research. The *Research & Write* study group (organized conjointly by the Waris and Wrede Institutes) has become an innovative arena for collective learning. Our thinking has benefited greatly from different discussions in both of the Institutes. Naturally, the first critical audience for this article works in these Institutes.

There is no one definition of practice research; in different contexts it has been understood and defined in various ways. Different terms are also used when describing practice research in social work: practice-based research (Epstein 2001; Johnsson & Svensson 2005), practitioner research (Shaw 2005) and practice research (Satka et al. 2005). To draw the line is not unambiguous, but one division that can be established is whether the conductor of practice research is an active practitioner, a social worker, or whether the process of producing knowledge is seen in a larger perspective. Some researchers place their focus particularly on the practitioner. For example, Knud Ramian (2004) demands that a social worker carrying out research needs to spend 80 % of his or her time at work in practice.

Generally speaking, researchers do not have a preference or they do not recommend any particular methods or approaches, although many of them mention different participative principles such as action research and ethnography (McCrystal 2000). A short overview of the discussion reveals that the following qualities are seen as relevant in practice research:

1. Problem-solving is connected to practices within social field, or as Epstein (2001) describes: 'to be able to answer questions that derive from practice and to be able to answer in such a way that it informs practice'.
2. The research process is characterized by its orientation to change, i.e. transformative nature.
3. The research is conducted in an interactive manner with various actors involved in the research process.
4. The roles of the researcher and the practitioner overlap and the researcher is both the subject and the object.
5. The production and implementation of knowledge overlap.

In the first Finnish book of practice research in social work (Satka et al. 2005), the development of practice research is described, introducing conceptual and methodological tools in social work and its research. The book defines practice research in social work as an approach that studies and solves problems related to practices in the social field, having an applicable nature and serving many different interests. According to the book, the function of practice research in social work is to strengthen an innovative culture of research and knowledge formation in the social field. It is particularly the culture of creating knowledge that is seen to separate practice research from the more conventional field of social research[2].

Practice research is conducted at the Institutes of practice research in Helsinki and is heuristically located at the intersection of two worlds, that is where the practice of developmental social work and the academic world, through scientific research on social work, meet. The practical side of social work wants to put resources into enhancing services, the university for its part wants to improve the quality of teaching social work as a subject and strengthen its substance and theory basis. Practice-based knowledge formation and research-based practice form a dialectic connection that can be best put to use in the practices of social work and the social field of study. An indirect objective is to introduce the knowledge formed in practice to the academic world and to further improve the theoretical basis of social work as a subject matter.

Foundations of practice research

What we understand as practice research in social work has its own particular origins. The methodological interests of the 1980s in studying humans and the social world were a window of opportunity also for the development of social work. Different new empirical methods concerning the actor, interaction and speech became popular at the same time as social work, as an academic discipline, was framed in different universities. The different phases of the development of social sciences – the decline of logical empiricism (and science based on its methods), the rise of qualitative and narrative research and the so-called linguistic turn – have further trained researchers of social sciences, including social work, and equipped them with different methodological approaches and abilities to reflect upon the theoretical basis and commitments of their research. The mental distance between the researcher and the subject of research has diminished, the relationship between the objectivity and subjectivity of research has become more problematic and, by and large, the question of the nature of knowledge and the methods of acquiring knowledge has become a common part of research activity. The question of the 'voice' of the subject, user's point of view and the framework of different meanings have become an interesting challenge in the research process. Simultaneously, a new relationship has been established between science and the society surrounding it. We may remark that the perspective of critical welfare research has broadened or even switched, to study the interaction between an actor, civil society and the different communities within it (Williams & Popay 1999; Juhila 2006).

A research approach that emphasizes the importance of the relation to practice has counterparts in previous history, when the groundwork of social work was just starting to be put in place. We can find crucial influences from pragmatic epistemology, according to which knowledge is *a posteriori:* Knowledge is something that comes about after practice, action and experience. What is relevant is the conscious and logical analysis of experience and perceptions as well as testing knowledge in practice. (Bertilsson & Christiansen 2001, 467-472.) In fact, it is an interesting detail that the operational field of some of the pioneers and pragmatists, such as Jane Addams and George Herbert Mead was the same: the industrialized city environment of early twentieth century Chicago and its settlement movement.

On the one hand, pragmatic tradition was a constant reminder that scientific research does not offer a privileged view into the world as it is, but that we also need to take seriously other points of view of human practices, such as morality and religion (Pihlström 1998). On the other hand, pragmatic tradition is not a united front either. Charles S. Peirce, who has been mentioned as the father of pragmatism, was a conservative and he opposed practical applications of science, whereas another famous pragmatist John Dewey was a utilitarian, defending the function of science to produce intelligent tools with which to develop civil society.

Peirce, however, softened his views later when developing the idea of abductive reasoning (Bergman 2008). In fact, the principle of abductive reasoning has been adopted largely into western research from the pragmatic philosophy of science (Peirce 2001). What Peirce meant by abduction was reasoning 'backwards', that is a search for a hypothesis that would explain a new or strange phenomenon perceived in practice. Peirce himself had a certain basic model of research according to which ideas are first sought abductively, then clarified deductively and finally tested inductively. The search for ideas starts with research material and through analysis of perceptions (Paavola & Hakkarainen 2006, 271.) Compared to hypothetic-deductive reasoning, the difference concerns the material-based approach, i.e. looking for ideas in research material. Deductive reasoning does not produce new knowledge, but verifies it and gives it a truth-value. The difference from inductive reasoning is in the implementation of already existing knowledge while explaining the phenomenon. In fact, most of the qualitative research in social sciences could probably be included within the limits of the different degrees of abductive reasoning – pure inductive research is impossible. Abduction has particularly been considered as a method of invention (Paavola & Hakkarainen 2006, 272). As the demand for innovations runs high today, the interest to this 'third way' of reasoning has also grown.

The pragmatist John Dewey (1929/1999) criticized in his time the European, Cartesian philosophy of science which separated practice and knowledge, which according to him had developed into the rule of rational thinking, scientific knowledge and even scientific superstition, compared to practical wisdom and acquired skills.

> Are the objects of the affections, of desire, effort, choice, that is to say everything to which we attach value, real? Yes, if they can be warranted by knowledge; if we can *know objects* having these value properties, we are justified in thinking them real. But as objects of desire and purpose they have no sure place in Being until they are approached and validated through knowledge. The idea is so familiar that we overlook the unexpressed premise upon which it rests, namely that only the completely fixed and unchanging can be real. The quest for certitude has determined our basic metaphysics. (Dewey 1929, 17-18)

What Dewey wanted to do was to restore the value of the needs of practical life in the field of knowledge formation; although practice is uncertain, chaotic and volatile, it is nevertheless the reality within which people have to solve the problems they face. Dewey pointed out that the method of becoming conscious of something is the same whether it concerns common life or scientific work. In both cases, the question is about problem solving and science is also work in practice.

Science has been seen as mankind's way out of uncertainty and the objective of science is the pursuit of certainty (Dewey 1929/1999).What has followed is that

reality has started to be understood as parallel to scientific knowledge:

> There are certain things which are alone inherently the proper objects of knowledge and science. Things in the production of which we participate we cannot know in the true sense of the word, for such things succeed instead of preceding our action. What concerns action forms the realm of mere guesswork and probability, as distinct from the warrant of rational assurance which is the ideal of true knowledge. We are so accustomed to the separation of knowledge from doing and making that we fail to recognize how it controls our conceptions of mind, of consciousness and of reflective inquiry. For as it relates to genuine knowledge, these must all be defined, on the basis of the premise, so as not to admit of the presence of any overt action that modifies conditions having prior and independent existence. (Dewey 1929, 18.)

Dewey's pattern of inquiry (1938) is based on a pragmatic paradigm that sees commonsense as well as scientific knowledge as a means to improve human practices. It emphasises that the *scientific goal is to create knowledge of the practical world,* that is, knowledge capable of practical application. With reference to practice research what is relevant is Dewey's criticism that only when experiences and the perceptions of the actors can be based upon research results do they become real, hence only then would they be regarded as subjects of social reform.

An operational and pragmatic element is involved in all acquisitions of knowledge. Since the research process is only possible in a context that has already been shaped by different operational conventions, the individuals or the communities they form need to already have certain skills at the outset of the research, which they can develop further as the research progresses. There are no ways of operating without the appropriate skills that can be used and applied in a conventional manner to cope with certain assignments. Hence, there is no research without skills. Thinking can be perceived only in texts; to acquire knowledge requires research operations regulated by skills. Theories are formed and tested always with an eye on practice. There is no 'pure' science without the motivation offered by technical applications, or without the testing of the theories enabled by the technical arrangements of tests. Nevertheless, pragmatists do not claim that knowledge would equal skill or that science is the same as technical operations. They only inform us that the boundaries are tied to the context and that they are imprecise in the end.

What is also relevant from the point of view of practice research is the active and changing nature of learning. According to Dewey, knowledge is not something similar to the passive reviewing of facts, but something that is skillfully operating in the practical context, solving problems and reaching for goals that are valued as worthwhile. Learning does not have any perennial, a-historical nature, and the nature of learning can change over time as different learning-related practices and skills develop. Acquiring knowledge is to learn how to operate skilfully and learn through practice. 'Learning by doing' is a good description that encapsulates

the entanglement of knowledge and action underlined by pragmatism. However, learning through practice has also been criticized as a naïve perspective, because it does not result in a deeper conceptual understanding, but it also requires a different kind of learning in order to support the development of understanding (cf. Hakkarainen et al. 1999; 2004).

Empirical methods emphasizing the concept of reflexivity of pragmatism have prevailed mainly in pedagogy (Mezirow 1991) and in organization research (Schön 1983). In social sciences, the methods of action research and participative observation, that have their roots in the Chicago school, have maintained their place at the margins of social research for decades. Pragmatism as a practical research orientation has, however, been neglected.

Research has different kinds of epistemological functions. There are many different ways of conducting research and the question of what kind of interpretation research needs or entails, has everything to do with the intellectual functions and interests of the research (Ronkainen 2007). The social nature of knowledge is illuminated by Jürgen Habermas' (1965) division between the technical, practical and critical interests of knowledge. Habermas highlights that critical consciousness is formed when an actor has to confront other traditions and ways of life and faces existential dichotomies. People need a perspective on their own existence and on the existing institutional phenomena. Understanding, in other words, includes the transference and extension of this perspective. A human being sees things differently after he or she understands them; even our self-perception might change. Understanding or being aware is therefore the object of critical thinking, and critical consciousness even has an existential dimension; 'self-knowledge' can develop as a person obtains a perspective on his own existence. According to Habermas, all kinds of communal consolidation are ultimately tied to the question of how the understanding of social reality is reached. We may even claim that Habermas' objective is to build a bridge between the culture of experts and common life, and therefore to enrich and challenge different perspectives that might have originally been taken for granted.

Habermas' theory of communicative action (1987) rules out authority-based institutions except when there is a good argument for them, and offers perspectives on how critique and change could be extended to be within the reach of actors. Shotter and Gustavsen (1999) have developed this theory further and turned dialogical criteria into operational practice , according to which free communication without domination is possible. They have formed a criterion, which is known as a method of discussion and democratic dialogue in the Nordic research of work life and organizations (see also Gustavsen 1996 2004). The point of departure for a perspective that underlines the importance of democratic dialogue is that real operational changes require the involvement and participation of several different parties. A democratic dialogue can also be seen as one particular tool that enhances self-understanding regarding practice. In social work practice research the creation

of knowledge is tied to practices and their development. It emphasizes interaction and the equal discussion between different parties in order to enable change. In the creation of knowledge and aspirations for participation, collective and innovative practice research can greatly benefit from ideas developed in different fields of study regarding action research and the dialogical approach. Such fields of study are in accordance with the above-mentioned pragmatism: ethnography, action research, action theory and developmental work research. In action theory a practice can be studied as a construct, which consists of activity, action and operation. In this case, practice is a collective activity that has its own social motive and history. The science of action is usually applied to action research and its development in different organizations. The approach is based on Chris Argyris's work, which was influenced by Donald Schön. Relying on the science of action, workers are encouraged to turn into reflective practitioners (Heikkinen et al. 2006).

The turns in knowledge production

In our attempt to develop the concept of practice research we have also been influenced by sociological science and technology research, which studies the practices of producing scientific knowledge and technical innovations. In this field the focus is particularly on birth process, transformation and transference of scientific knowledge. Hence we have reached the world we live in today; a discussion of the ever changing role of knowledge is part of our time.

Human beings and different organizations function in a changing technological, human, institutional, economic and natural environment. In a worldwide scale, we are entering a new global, information-guided and networked environment. Welfare society is also adapting to the challenges of the new era. According to the analysis of Castells and Himanen (2001, 181), the changes are apparent in the multiplicity of web-based information environments as well as in the transformation into a new kind of expertise. In this world, production of knowledge is no longer demarcated within the boundaries of universities and research institutes, since an increasing number of organizations, such as the R&D departments of companies, consultants, development units of public administration, etc. have started to produce knowledge for their own purposes. The number of monopolies of knowledge is in decline.

Gibbons, Nowotny and Scott (1999) discuss two different models of knowledge production. The first is based on the perceptions acquired by the methods of natural science that are mainly produced by academic staff. The other model is a reference to knowledge that is more heterogeneous, temporary, socially relevant and reflective. It is usually also locally contextualized. In the first model, external knowledge and expertise appear to be superior, and objective compared to the traditions of practitioners and their knowledge that is based on practice. In the

second model, the point of departure is more equal and interactive. We may say that today expert knowledge is understood to be socially determined, which means that experts are thought to be functioning within social contexts, such as work groups and communities. In practice research we are in search of a third way of knowing, in which academic knowledge and expert knowledge based in practice are seen as mutually relevant and in a dialogue, so that both accept and value the unique nature of the other party.

Knowledge formation arising out of practice means in fact the use of a methodological approach that is in accordance with abductive reasoning. This model is very close to the view of knowledge formation in social work expressed by Aulikki Kananoja (1984):

> A question has risen whether knowledge is born also in the manner that a social worker in her own work perceives things systematically, gathers these perceptions into a constant whole, gives the perceived knowledge different meanings and, subsequently, in her own work tests whether these new meanings are reliable.

Both the epistemology criticized by the pragmatists and their own analyses were products of their time. However, what is particularly interesting today is that practice and conscious action have once again become crucial issues. Hans Joas has continued developing the pragmatism and modern analysis of it in his book *The Creativity of Action* (1996). What Joas brings to the surface is particularly the importance of creative and collective action as a new focus in social sciences.

Ulla Mutka (1998) in her book, *The Fourth Turn of Social Work*, discusses the state of social work, and its ways of conception and self-understanding. The problem, according to Mutka, has been the superiority and primacy of scientific knowledge compared to experimental knowledge. She asserts that the confusion and hesitance brought about by the development of civil society that is typical of our age is necessarily calling for more versatile ways of knowing, which simultaneously is developing the basis for different ways of defining expertise.

A relevant topic of discussion in social work research is knowledge formation arising from practice with the help of the so-called critical reflection (for example, Karvinen et al. 2000, Fook 2002).This additionally has a larger connection to postmodernism as well as to different discussions in social sciences in which knowledge and knowledge formation are analyzed critically, hence bridging the gap between knowledge, knowing and practice (see Karvinen-Niinikoski 1999) Karvinen-Niinikoski emphasizes the epistemological turn that concerns knowledge production and the significance of practice turn: scientific knowledge cannot be viewed as independent, but it is thought to be shaped in continuous interaction with other forms of knowledge and in the practice of common life among the practitioners.

One strong basis of practice research in social work is thus the building of a new relationship between knowledge, knowing and practice. Present day experts need to

be able to cross different kinds of borders and to connect different elements in order to meet the challenges that the development of our society produces. This creates pressure also for the knowledge formation process itself; how to develop research problems so that they would better meet the burning challenges set for research. The communal demand for practice research is based on local needs to develop new knowledge constructions and the desire for developmental work. The development as local action is however not enough, what is also required is the construction of development work more intensively and consciously using the different tools of research.

Development means creating something new and looking forward. The challenge in knowledge production is to see what kind of problem framework or choice of possible worlds ought to be set as the target: what is the focus of the work now and what will it be in ten years. At its best, practice research can function in processes of change as a communal practice that can unite three functions of social sciences – constancy (upholding continuity), critical (challenging the existing) and constructive (renewal) – and benefiting all of these in a fruitful way. Science can then be seen as a social practice that is based upon a dialogue between science and its subject.

In social work, a reflective attitude has slowly become the dominant attitude in practices relating to the job as well as studying for it, but research problems based on experience in the development of working methods of social work are relatively new. In the processes of social work and the processes of scientific thinking there are many similarities related to creative problem solving. Social work seeks solutions suitable for its users while research seeks answers to the research problems (Pohjola 1994). One of the recent ideas is that in fact many of the epistemological and methodological analyses are quite similar to those that are raised in service user work. This concerns the similarities not only in the processes, but also in the principles and methods (Laine & Saurama, 2009).

Experiences of practice research

In our attempts to conduct practice research , we have been able to use the above mentioned textbook *Practice research of social work* (Satka et al. 2005) as a tool. It condenses practice research as follows (cf. 10-11):

1. the proposed problems to be solved are related to the practices of the social field and the purpose is to serve the different interests of the field
2. there exists an immediate connection to developmental work that enables us to build a new kind of relationship with the prevailing conceptions and theories in social sciences

3. the methodological innovativeness of the practitioners reaches from the theories of social science to the development of work methods
4. all the participants are vessels of knowledge and they have a right to participate in the production of knowledge
5. the work commits to bringing forth the experiences and knowledge of marginalized individuals and of those citizens that are unable or too weak to defend themselves.

Practice research attempts to create a reflective relationship to the prevailing conceptions and theories existing in social sciences that are created through its connection to practice. Practice research uses tales, metaphors and dialogical encounters that analyze the living reality in a coherent and proper manner. It is characteristic for knowledge gained from practice and the experience of individuals to be personally touching. This research tendency has taken as one of its objective to particularly expose the experiences and knowledge of individuals pushed to the margins (Satka et al. 2005). In other words, practice research is value-laden. It is attached to practice and its development, it attempts to make social work more visible, aims to continuously re-evaluate its conceptions, operates in a communal manner, and takes seriously the ethics of the social work field.

A crucial aim in practice research is to find ways of producing knowledge that cross boundaries. In different institutes the researcher/social workers study the methodology of practice research and through their own empirical projects they seek to contribute to improving and spreading the concept. We have sought to apply the criteria of democratic dialogue and critical and expansive learning to the whole process of knowledge formation. The researcher/social workers also try to participate in direct work with clients as much as possible. However, according to our own experience the idea of a researcher who would devote 80 % of her time to client work is simply unrealistic (cf. Ramian 2004). Our starting point is not that the researcher/social worker needs to strictly spend a certain amount of their time in working directly with users, but to ensure that the work is relevant in practice by operating in an open and collective manner.

Participatory and collective knowledge formation in practice means that all participants are involved: the users of services, other citizens, professionals, providers of services and different actors in administrative and voluntary sectors. Promoting the participation of the customer in the process of creating knowledge in practice research has strong intellectual support. Anne-Marie Lindqvist's (2008) thesis on participation in the context of care and research studies participation in practice and also the role of research through the users of social work – in her case, the participation of disabled individuals. The users became co-researchers. The research process itself became part of the research material in which the researcher was involved as both the subject and the object. Half of the thesis consists of analysing how participation is implemented at different phases of the care context,

the other half on how participation was implemented within the research context. The research process was open and it included regular dialogues between the actors in practice. Users also participated in the research reference group. What is clear is that the participation of the users brings a critical point of view to the research as it simultaneously enlightens the plurality and complexity of the concrete implementation in practice.

What we are therefore doing when formulating the concept of practice research is looking for a multilateral and collective way of creating knowledge. We aim to consciously work in an interactive and abductive manner. The possible conceptual tools, different situations and the information that they offer play a crucial role in this. The reasoning involved is usually carried out as a communally decentralized process, as well as relying on the available literature. What needs to be taken into consideration when planning the upcoming research is firstly the participation of service users in knowledge production, secondly the role of developmental and peer groups, and thirdly the participation of management and awareness of the goals of the undertaking. This method of working ensures the applicability and relevance of the knowledge being produced. Researcher/social workers create within the field developmental teams made up of social workers dealing with users. These pilot groups analyze their own work (for example, Koskinen 2007; Myllärniemi 2007; Lindroos 2008; Sjöblom 2008; Muukkonen 2008). The reasearcher/social workers develop and test ideas together with their pilot group. Later the forthcoming material will be used in their research. The material and its interpretations is also returned to the field to be reviewed by the developmental team, in which case the results and interpretations transform from subject-bound into a communal perspective. Different field and writing periods are divided according to the needs of different research and developmental projects. When the ideas are expressed for the use of the community at large, new conceptualizations are created that can then be developed further, compared and/or tested in practice (Hakkarainen et al. 1999).

Regarding the research conducted at universities, the developmental orientation has meant that it is a challenge to traditional research, regardless of how empirically or inductively oriented it is. Practice research means creating new meanings which are different from the traditional basis of research which studies what has already taken place – something that has already found its meaning and is part of past reality (cf. Sulkunen 1997). An example would be how to study the flow of phenomena or something that has not yet become part of the semiotic world. To understand the deeper meaning of this question has also resulted in recognizing the need to develop the methodology of practice research.

When social work is analyzed as an academic subject matter and as an object of scientific research, the question of the flow of action and the participation of the actors in action that becomes knowledge cannot be answered within the traditional methodology of research. Conceptualization means making something visible and verbalizing the feelings, perceptions and unconscious actions that still have no words

for describing it. When words are transformed into concepts, these may already be part of a theory. Parallel processes of knowledge acquirement – perceptions, systematizing and analyzing perceptions and constructing, testing and evaluating new operational models – are what we mean when we use the term practice research. It is not a *de facto* research method, but more of a paradigm or a culture of knowledge formation that includes the whole process of knowledge formation in practice. The interest of knowledge is tied to practice without excluding different ways of carrying out practice research. Practice research does not require a certain kind of method, because that might classify research in much too narrow a way. The aim is more experimental in the spirit of Charles S. Peirce (1931): 'I sincerely believe that a bit of fun helps thought and tends to make it pragmatical'

In the Finnish institutes of practice research and in the different projects that have been carried out and developed, the ratio between development and research varies,. There is a continuum where there is no set boundary. Nevertheless, experience has proved that the goals change during the process. In some cases the point of departure is visible, while the process progresses critically towards creating new practices (Koskinen 2007; Myllärniemi 2007). Some projects aim more purely and boldly towards modelling. These cases call for earlier ground work and they also require an extensive amount of knowledge formation so that the project can be taken towards the systematizing of action (e.g. Ervast & Tulensalo 2006; Lindroos 2008). Other research projects study critically the research project as well as the phenomenon itself (Lindqvist 2008; Sjöblom 2008) attempting to develop the methodology of practice research and exposing the experiences of people in the margins and citizens with lesser abilities to defend themselves.

What is interesting from the action-based and methodological perspective is this orientation in research to commit itself to openly seeking for something new, and the willingness to accept and analyze change. We have been able to find many similarities with the pragmatic scientific tradition, although we are not committed to following any particular school or tradition. In the Institutes we are concerned with how to carry out action research, and with being able to make sure that the results of different projects are relevant in practice. Perhaps the most important point about practice research is that the researchers have worked or are currently working in practice *and* have been trained for research as well. It is both, a resource and a challenge. Many years ago Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Breckinridge had already emphasized the capabilities of researchers in the work of the Hull House settlement in 1920s Chicago. They defended a view that social workers hold significant scientific abilities and that research should not be conducted only by social scientists (see Shaw & Bryderup 2008). Researcher/social workers offer a different perspective on research which researchers working from the outside do not possess. At the same time, a multiparty, communal and critical process of learning enhances the birth of novel mental commitments.

When the researcher, the subject, is also part of the object that is studied,

an interesting question is raised, namely how to study one's own actions. The Mertonian norms of science say that a researcher needs to seclude him or herself from the subject matter and neutralize her own influence on the field of study. We have identified this problem realizing that a researcher needs to be able to perform different kinds of mental transformations during the research. When gathering the research material, discussing, perceiving and interviewing, he or she might well identify him or herself with the work group and users, but the analysis of the material, must be based upon tried research methods. The researcher should also be reflective about her own role in the field. The gathered analyzed material and the analyses are returned as if in a hermeneutic securely sealed circle to the developmental team to be reviewed at the point at which they become externalised. In other words, the researcher is responsible for the *analysis* of the research process, whereas the other participants act as vessels and *interpreters* of knowledge.

Can the practice of social work be approached in any other way than as research concerning one's own work? Different models of knowledge production prevail in our Institutes and we encourage our researcher/social workers to try new methodological applications and new points of departure. One example concerns boys in child protection who are approached in their everyday school communities and, in a sense, studied ethnographically at close range. What is relevant in this case is how the researcher/social worker uses his experience of child protection, how he is in regular interaction with the child protection worker, and how he tests the possible conceptual creations and develops them further. This kind of research process is open-ended and it crosses different boundaries. In this concrete project an analogous example is the well-known Barneby Skå community in which about 70-80 troubled young men between the age of 7 and 15 lived. Gustav Jonsson and Anna-Lisa Kälvestan who built the research community in Skå balanced practice and research, and wanted to learn more about what kind of phenomena they were working with and what kind of results the community produced. Their point of departure was interesting: the idea was not to produce material about youngsters in the Skå community, but to study ordinary boys living in Stockholm. In this way they were able to form a theoretical framework that functioned as a mirror for the practice (Börjesson 2004; Vinterhed 1977). By studying in an innovative manner the family relations of the children and the communities (for example by using the drawings of the children) the researchers managed to form a significant theoretical basis for child protection practices (Jonsson & Kälvestan 1964). The material of the research was huge – altogether 222 boys participated – and it is known as the first qualitative research in Swedish social work, although as a whole it was quantitatively oriented as it was customary at the time.

Reflections

Practice research is open to different kinds of interesting epistemological considerations. Conceptualization requires much expertise from the researcher: it calls for methods of thinking learned in scientific research, systematization and research logic, approved research methods, and good background knowledge of relevant literature – but most of all, what is required is different fora where knowledge formation can be developed and tested communally. Unsurprisingly, Hakkarainen, Lonka and Lipponen (1999) point out that meta-conceptual awareness is possible only through being actively part of the research process. Through the process of communal learning an individual can become aware of his own mental commitments and gradually start to change them.

Our view is that practice research is at a stage of dynamic development in which it is important to maintain a searching, bold and innovative attitude towards conducting practice-based research. It means that the relevant actors are actively studying and carrying out collective discussions and also building their own community. We have invested considerable resources in building a trustworthy and secure research community. Regular meetings, group tutoring, study groups and development seminars as well as a willingness to present the results of different projects to outside visitors, create a shared spirit and a development-oriented atmosphere. It can already be remarked that an experience of ten years has brought 'the field' and 'the university' closer together. The research-orientation of social workers has increased, students feel that they are better equipped when they graduate and teachers have found new connections to actors who work in practice.

The research capabilities of social workers are the instrumental resource on which practice research depends. The premise of implementing practice research is fundamental to the educational system of Finnish social work which offers social workers, in addition to the skills to work with service users, the resources to carry out research. The knowledge produced by the users and the employees can become part of the research process, either in a material or an interpretational framework, although the commitment to the research process might vary.

Social work research is versatile by nature and it is supposed to be so. This research can be practised academically when developing theoretical analyses and conceptions. This research is also required as knowledge producing action that arises more directly from practice and also returns to the field. As a social actor, social work has a significant role in the lives of citizens. The interventions of social work require social expertise and that the gathered database of knowledge is applied sensitively while questioning what is perceived as self-evident.

Our approach towards the concept of practice research has been (and is) very open-ended. We have brought forward the following critical points: the relationship between the subjects and objects of knowledge, the relationship between research and development, and the collective nature of knowledge formation, and particularly,

user-participation. A crucial part of the conceptual awareness of practice research is that different kinds of knowledge related to the organization of reality are in equal standing with each other. They have different roles in human conduct. The ideal is that research and practice-based expertise meet each other as equals.

We would also want to emphasize that different dimensions can be seen in the transformative nature of practice research and how practice research is involved in the whole process of knowledge formation – changing both it and the culture around it. If and when the goal is to change and develop existing practices, the information of the actors in practice is relevant: who is speaking and from whose perspective? When the user's expertise concerning his/her own life and the experience of employees are considered as forms of knowledge, a whole new horizon is visible for piecing together the reality of social work and a new cultural way of outlining the knowledge formation of social work. But most of all, we must go back to basics. We need to ask what knowledge is, what research is, and what they mean in the context of social work. We are particularly interested in the question of what the research that takes place in changing different practices for the better is. Our answer is – at least for the time being – that this concerns a world where the object under review is a larger entity than merely the research and its methodology.

Notes

1. The research and teaching facilities are based in the city of Helsinki Social ServicesDepartment and different operations are coordinated on contract basis. The department has established six researcher/social worker posts at the Heikki Waris –Institute and two at the Mathilda Wrede –Institute. The idea is that social workers coming from the field work in two year projects. The subjects of research are agreed upon in the boards of the institutes that are formed by the different parties involved. The University of Helsinki funds the professorships and the lectureships in practice research. Also other municipalities in the region participate in the funding.
2. Characteristic of the rapid adaptation of the concept of practice research is that it was coined only while writing the textbook that brought the different themes together. After the book was published, while reflecting upon it, different actors started asking 'is what I am doing practice research?' The actors asking this question were also the authors who participated in writing the book. This is a distinctive example of how concepts affect reality – and in this case – how they restrict it.

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