

Reflections on the opportunities and challenges for practice research in social work

As an internal panel member for the 2013 Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise in my university in England, I have listened to and advised colleagues grappling with the challenge of demonstrating the impact of social sciences research and ensuring the excellent quality of research outputs. I was thus struck by the timeliness of the two related editions of this journal that focus on the enterprise of what Marthinsen introduces as 'practice research'. Given, also that my current academic endeavours centre around several projects which share an overarching aim to improve social work practice or the interventions delivered in health and social care settings, I was intrigued to see how peers defined and understood my industry.

Taken together issues 15(1) and 15(2) of *Social Work and Social Sciences Review* provide a significant international contribution to the debate about research which informs, and is in turn informed, by social work practice. Although this agenda is far from straightforward, as this collection of papers demonstrates, the authors do a valiant job of mapping this complex landscape.

In the first of these two issues, Marthinsen and colleagues attempt to set out the parameters for 'different conceptions, and ways of producing knowledge in social work in relation to practice research' (p.1), a thread revisited in the second edition with Saurama and Julkunen's paper. Also in 15(2) the 'Salisbury Statement' on why practice research is important is presented with two examples to illustrate how such research can be conducted in practice.

Yliruka uses an evaluation research design, presenting an illustration of the 'Mirror' method in social work teams. 'Mirror' is used to improve individual and team reflexivity to facilitate a better understanding of client processes and/or team functioning. The approach demonstrated its value in enhancing the methodological nature of social work practice and practitioners' ability to cope with its increasingly complex demands.

Of particular interest to me, given the projects in which I am currently engaged, was Kildedal's paper on action research to explore the quality of social work with at-risk children and families as a tool for improvement and organisational learning. I was fascinated to see that the challenges I have faced in a custodial environment with

women who self-injure were similarly manifest within a community setting and with a different client group.

Worthy of emphasis is the similarity between the skills and capabilities of an effective researcher and an effective social work practitioner. If action arising from the research is to have influence, we must as researchers learn alongside participants to explore their knowledge base and the systems in which they participate. This approach mirrors the way that we as practitioners, informed by our social work values, should be working with service users and their families.

Having found the content of the two editions both illuminating and inspiring I wondered whether social worker practitioners, less engaged in research than I, would report a similar experience? I also reflected on how difficult it is, even in the current economic climate, to recruit social work colleagues who are able to deliver on both the teaching and learning, and the research requirements of higher education. As an interviewer of potential staff, I relate only too well to a scenario where one candidate has a wealth of current practice experience but little in the way of academic standing and few or no publications, while another has impressive research experience and CV, but whose research cannot be considered applied, and who has little or no practice experience. Given my background in mental health I am also mindful that this dichotomy of experience, typical of social work, contrasts so starkly with other disciplines such as psychology, psychiatry and, increasingly, nursing. In these professions the expectation is unquestioned and 'goes with the territory' that professionals will undertake research in and on their practice, which in turn underpins the continued credibility of their discipline.

So whilst I would support the position taken by the Salisbury statement, that practice research is to be nurtured and supported for all sort of reasons and by a range of different stakeholders, I hold firm to the view that the first step is to convince our constituencies of social workers, referred to by Dodd and Epstein¹ (2012) as 'research reluctants' that such research is not just relevant to our role – it is part of the fabric of what we do on a day to day basis. The skills and knowledge we develop as practitioners in our work with service users are the same skills and knowledge we can deploy in research to make a difference either at an individual, team or organisational level of care delivery.

Dodd and Epstein provide a helpful answer to the question should social work practitioners engage in research? They unashamedly affirm such engagement

so that questions can be generated from a social work perspective and explored in social work settings. If social workers do not engage in research then we have to rely on other professions to generate knowledge for us. (p. 3)

If we allow our knowledge to be generated by others then we run the risk of further marginalising the service users and their communities whose dynamics and complexities we seek to understand. We also allow research to develop from a different

value base to that which informs social work practice and interventions and which I believe provides the foundation of social work as a discipline uniquely different from the others that are brought together in an increasingly interdisciplinary approach to the helping professions.

Attempting to engage social work practitioners in a dialogue about research is problematic because of the different terms that are used to refer to the activity we are trying to encourage. Within these two issues of the *Review* we encounter the terms:

- Practice minded research or research minded practice;
- Practice based research or research based practice;
- Knowledge production and Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge; and
- Evidence based practice where the evidence is research based knowledge 'on the results of social workers doing social work' (Uggerhøj, 15 (1) p. 54)

Perhaps then, if we are to engage practitioners we need to find a reference point for the start of their journey. Dodd and Epstein (p.5) articulate quite simply that

Practice based research (PBR) is research conducted by practitioners for practice purposes.

Given that in the absence of service users there would be no need for our practice, this in my view means that in social work evidence can and should be generated from research that occurs in collaboration with those who use services. Whilst we know from the growing body of service user literature that such involvement exists on a continuum (see Bailey, 2012, for a summary) what we also know is that such involvement can make a significant difference to the terms in which research questions are phrased and to the design and execution of studies.

In this respect practice research in social work may differ from other forms of evidence associated with other professions and should be influenced by the type of research questions we are trying to answer. Flyvbjerg (2001) quoted in 15(1) by Uggerhøj's puts this helpfully in perspective:

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. (p.52)

On page 51 Uggerhøj cites Flyvbjerg's 'phronetic social science' and lists the key elements which I would suggest are reflected in the practice based research we as social workers should seek to pursue in the interests of the constituencies that we serve.

I therefore conclude that the research endeavours on which I am embarked as an academic and those which I undertook as a practitioner never strayed far from Dodd and Epstein's definition of PBR. I feel proud to say that over the years I have held tight to my professional values and that they have influenced significantly my approach and

the type of academy I seek to build with the social work students and practitioners I continue to work with.

In preparation for the Research Excellence Framework, I would assert that social work as a discipline can contribute practice based research that is both excellent and has impact – ultimately it will depend on how the higher education community chooses to measure the latter, but where we can demonstrate positive change for service users that improves lives and communities, I would settle for that as evidence of excellence.

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Note

1. A review of *Practice Based Research* by Dodd and Epstein (2012) is included in the reviews section in this issue.

Reference

Bailey, D. (2012) Involving people who use services in interdisciplinary working in mental health. in D. Bailey *Interdisciplinary Working in Mental Health*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.