

Guest Editorial

I am delighted to introduce this Special Issue of *Social Work & Social Science Review* entitled 'Social Work and Research Methodologies for Evaluating Interventions'. This fine collection represents six of the thirty-two formal presentations made by thirty-two respected social science lead researchers at five separate methodology conferences. These conferences were hosted by the ESRC RDI4 (Research Development Initiative) during 2010-11. The aim of this social work RDI4 was to enhance the research skills and attitudes towards research of mid-career social work academics in the UK. The methods were to create protected time, a social space, and a menu of opportunities for a select group of academics. The menu of research related opportunities included a) attending five conferences (1 or 2 day) on research methodologies and observing and learning from senior researchers as they presented information and modeled enthusiasm for research; b) being mentored by a senior researcher on a mini-research placement at a range of universities or research institutes; c) receiving guidance and support for doing research in repeated small group meetings; d) writing and discussing writing at two three day writing retreats for writing proposals with senior social work academics; and e) doing formal presentations of their own research in front of an audience. With repeated social encounters and through participation in their selections from the research menu, participants throughout and at the end reported an increase in both their skills, knowledge and confidence in a mix of research methodologies for social work.

First in this collection is a paper by Professor Elaine Sharland, Sussex University. She sets the stage and the mission for this important special issue as she did for the RDI4 ESRC project when she spoke the first morning of the project launch. Sharland provides us an overview of 'where social work research is now and where it is going.' Sharland had been asked to conduct a national study on the state of social work research in the UK, in her invited role by ESRC as Strategic Advisor for Social Work and Social Care (2008-9). Sharland first assesses the state of social work research in the UK with the results of her research. Then she inspires us with the need for a 'fundamental change in breadth and depth and quality of UK research base in social work and social care'. In her conclusion, Professor Sharland requests of all social work academics to 'think bigger and think wider and to announce their own big questions.'

An overview article follows by Professor Mike Fisher, now at University of Bedfordshire, who was at the time, the Director of Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE). He also spoke at the RDI4 launch the RDI4 initiative with social work academics from almost 30 universities in the UK. Fisher encouraged the participants to pursue funding for their research through ESRC as well as foundations. His paper discusses the need for social work research to include large research projects which can assess social work practice interventions. He provides some history of the tensions between research and practice. Fisher also compares social work practice research across countries, and

shares instances of best practices. Some countries have invested in practitioner-research relationships to foster the dialogue and exchange necessary for practice relevant research in social work to be conducted. The input of the practitioner should be vital for the questions and challenges they can provide to research and development of social work programmes. Fisher points out the contrasts and disparities in government investment in medical intervention research compared to social work intervention research which seeks to improve relationships and social conditions, while addressing disparities. As the head of SCIE, he shifted the focus towards social work research which was seen as meaningful to practitioners, and advocated for government priorities of funding assessments of social work interventions.

The next paper is an evaluation of a strategy for teaching social work students research methods, by Dr Linda Bell and Dr. Carmel Clancy, Middlesex University. The authors' interest is the assessment of post-graduate social work student attitudes towards quantitative research methodologies. They developed a creative initiative in which post-graduate social work students in a module on research methods participate in a pre-post assessment of themselves. The planned intervention being tested is that each student has the experience of entering the pre-data of their own survey and running a simple SPSS analyses on the survey data they have contributed. Specifically, 'does hands-on experience of manipulating pre-post data with SPSS about one's own perceptions about research and data contribute to changes in attitudes?'. To do this, students were learning questionnaire completion, basic data entry skills, and SPSS methods of data analysis of quantitative data, all aspects of quantitative research methodologies. The pre-assessment surveys have a code which only the student can identify, and then at the end of the module, the students are again asked to complete the same survey again (post-test). The conclusion drawn by the authors supports post graduate social work students having minimal exposure to quantitative methods, including data collection and analyses and pre post skills in order to be able to quantitatively assess social work interventions.

Results of a pre-post evaluation of a social work group intervention follows by Professor McDonald, Middlesex University, and Dr. Doostgharin. Multi-family groups are led after school by trained teams for 8 weeks; these are then followed by 2 years of parent-led monthly groups to maintain the gains. The groups aim to build relationships at multiple levels as protective factors against stress for the young children living in disadvantaged communities with family conflict and neglect. Universal inclusion had all children starting primary schools (9) located in disadvantaged communities recruited: 190 whole families participated and completed the 8 weekly groups (100%). Data were collected pre and post from both parents and teachers on questionnaires which included two standardized instruments (SDQ for child mental health; and FES for family functioning). Aggregated evaluation data are presented, which were analyzed with SPSS using paired, one tailed, t-tests, to show cross domain impact on the child, family, parent to parent networks and parent involvement in schools. The United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) sponsored the FAST (Families and Schools Together) training and evaluation in four countries in Central Asia. Discussion

of the perfect retention rates considers the uniqueness of the teams in which no social work practitioners were available to help facilitate the groups, so teams were primarily children's teachers with two parents from each school, vs. historical social context.

Professor Geoff Lindsay, University of Warwick, writes in the next article about a national pre-post mixed methods evaluation of several parenting programmes. This complex national evaluation study was for the UK government on the dissemination of funded by Parenting Early Intervention Pathfinders (PEIP). Lindsay includes pre-post data from parents having attended 425 parent groups using three different approaches, as well as results of focus groups of service users (parents), over 1100 trained practitioners and also managers of services. The paper compares the contextual factors which support programme delivery of evidence based practices (EBP) in 18 local authorities. Lindsay assesses the impact on child mental health (SDQ) and parenting practices, while comparing the varying approaches. His evaluation research methodologies combine both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Two of the most widely used evidence based parenting programmes are primarily based on social learning theory and cognitive behavior therapy principles. Both Triple P and Incredible Years have had many randomized controlled trials published proving efficacy in a range of locations; but the third parenting programme had no randomized controlled trials, is social-contextual, promotes discussions and build relationships to support positive parenting practices. Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities also focuses on social exclusion related to race and poverty. Despite distinctions between the 3 programmes, Lindsay's final evaluation report showed all of the PEIPS' parenting programmes had statistically significant, positive impacts on improved child well-being (SDQ) and on increases in positive parenting. Lindsay's project demonstrates benefits of a large, government funded, mixed methods evaluation on the impact of scaling up parenting interventions.

Professor of Social Work at University of Bedfordshire, Donald Forrester writes a paper on the research methodology of the randomized controlled trial (RCT). The RCT is seen as the best method for testing interventions. He discusses some of the complexities and challenges of conducting RCTs in social work and social care, and also refers to the hostility of some social work academics towards this particular methodology. He writes in a light and informative manner, and pokes a bit of fun at the RCT world of researchers. At the same time, he alerts readers to the possible advantages of assessing the impact of interventions by social workers using this approach. He describes a UK social work academic in the early 1960s (Goldman) who worked with collaborator researchers to conduct RCTs on social work interventions, and became a leader in our field. She was convinced that out of respect for and commitment to clients/service users, social work interventions should be rigorously tested and found effective before using them. As the voices of vulnerable client might be overlooked, advocates for service users should advocate for RCTs. Her estate founded the Goldman Social Work Research Institute at University of Bedfordshire. (Professor Forrester was co-PI with Professor McDonald on the RDI4 initiative, carrying forward the work of the center funder.)

In summary, this special issue presents a group of researchers' perspectives on

methodology and practice and evaluation. There is a commitment to the values of social justice and to the use of both quantitative and qualitative research methodology to assess social work interventions. There is an assumption that social work interventions empower vulnerable service users within the existing oppressive structure and build stronger mutual relationships. Theory based and evaluated interventions respect people in their context, are co-produced and adapted with service users to fit their social context, and to make a difference. Perhaps, if social work researchers have mastery of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, they can better impact government policies to prove with both with tables of data, with elaborations on how the interventions work, and with the voices of users, that the benefits of social work strategies can help make the world a better place.

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