

Guest Editorial

Social Work Research and Social Justice

The impetus behind this special issue arises from the ESRC Research Development Initiative (RDI) aimed at increasing research capacity in social work as an emergent research discipline. The nine papers included stem from the third funded RDI project, *Further Development of Research Skills of Mid-career Social Work Academics: Supporting Learning Sets, Mixed Methodologies and Research Placements*. Capacity building for social work has received increased attention in recent years (Lewis, 2003; Orme & Powell, 2008; Sharland, 2012). It is as a result of the growing recognition for the need to support the development of research knowledge and skills of social work academics and researchers that four RDI projects were developed.

Essentially, the RDI project acted as a catalyst for the contributors to this issue. The papers span a broad range of topics, including sexual abuse perpetrated by professional helpers, the involvement of service users in post-qualifying social work education, teaching about risk and social justice to social work students, systematic reviews in social work, the self in social work, and image-based methodologies to engage conceptually and empirically with the debates that have shaped the social work discipline. The papers within this issue all raise important questions concerning user involvement and key social work values such as social justice, as these were key themes running through all of the RDI activities.

The first paper, by McDonald, Bernard, Forrester, White and Shemmings, is based on the evaluation of the RDI4. It begins by setting the context for the RDI4 project and outlines the key activities, and then presents data from the evaluation to reflect on the participants' overall learning experiences. The paper reflects on the programme through an assortment of participatory activities that included research writing support groups, research placements, writing retreats, conferences, and advanced methods workshops to enable the RD participants to develop their research skills. A mixed methodological approach using both quantitative and qualitative tools to evaluate the programme of activities allowed for a range of responses to demonstrates the overall positive benefits of the initiative for cultivating and supporting research capacity building in social work. The RDI participants' evaluations were overwhelmingly positive and the usefulness of activities that situate participants at the centre of the learning experience is reflected upon. McDonald et al. conclude that in the current social historical context of social work education, the positive focus on providing 'protected time' by their universities for further development of research knowledge, skills, and attitudes was experienced as an enhancement by the participants.

The second paper, by Melville-Wiseman, explores an issue that has received little attention in the social work literature, notably the sexual abuse by welfare personnel entrusted to work with vulnerable groups of service users in the mental health system.

This paper reports on some of the findings of a small-scale exploratory study that focused on practitioner perspectives of professional sexual abuse in mental health services. Melville-Wiseman brings attention to bear on some of the key facets of professional power, gender and age that are critical factors in framing the discourse. She utilises a social inequalities perspective, to focus on the systemic and institutional dimensions of professional sexual abuse of mental health service users. A particular feature of her argument is that the problem is often hidden by ineffective and collusive management responses. Melville-Wiseman contends that breaking the silence surrounding sexual abuse by professionals is critical for ensuring that the social justice values of social work is achieved for a stigmatised and vulnerable group of service users. This paper breaks new ground by analysing the perspectives of professionals to illuminate facets of institutional cultures that collude with abusive and oppressive practices.

The next paper, by Helen Burrows, draws on a study of service user involvement in the teaching on post-qualifying child care programmes. The study discussed in Burrows' paper involved a collaborative partnership between service user educators, practitioners and academics in four English local authorities. The data identified that whilst direct service user educator input had a positive impact on candidates' practice, some unexpected and rather surprising responses arose. The findings show that there appeared to be significantly less active evaluation of outcomes for service users than had been assumed would be the case. Burrows' paper explores the context of the research and discusses how post-qualifying education as a whole might be evaluated as making a difference to practice. Burrows suggest that the importance of effective evaluation of service user involvement in post-qualifying social work education is vital for harnessing service user knowledge.

The theme of user involvement is also a central focus of Kate Karban's paper, concerning a research collaboration between service users, a local authority and a university. Based on an action research project involving mental health services users living in a supported housing scheme, the paper focuses on the topic of service users as co-researchers. Informed by ideas from feminist and participatory approaches to research, Karban explores the conceptual and practical challenges of equalising power relationships in the context of participatory research. By taking a reflexive and critical stance, Karban illuminates some of the complex power relationships engendered in research involving service users as co-investigators. Karban's paper shows that, overall, there are challenges and benefits to engaging groups who are marginalised and socially excluded as co-researchers. The paper concludes that, in order for the emancipatory potential of research to be realised, user knowledge and experience must be at the heart of the inquiry.

Emma Kelly's paper, examines the contribution systematic review methodology can make to social work research. Prompted by debates about what constitutes reliable research-based evidence for what works in social work practice interventions, Kelly discusses the steps in the process of undertaking a systematic review. She examines core elements of the methodology for evaluating quality evidence from multiple sources,

including search techniques and tools to access and retrieve relevant research, as well as interpreting evidence. In particular, Kelly emphasises the centrality of service users' involvement in systematic reviews, to ensure that their knowledge is utilised. Kelly ends the paper by proposing that social work researchers need to be much more amenable to the benefits of systematic reviews and their potential for elucidating what is effective in social work as the evidence of efficacy.

The paper by Martin Kettle addresses issues to do with risk and social justice in the teaching about child protection risks. He draws on his experiences of moving into social work education from frontline practice to formulate teaching materials about safeguarding concerns. He describes using a simulated case conference as a teaching tool, and shows how social work students critically engage with ideas of risk whilst learning about child protection issues. Kettle argues that making connections between risk, power and justice is essential for promoting social justice goals in social work. As he notes, teaching about risk and safeguarding needs to be more closely aligned with teaching about social justice.

In the seventh paper, Adam Barnard explores notions of the use of self in social work practice and education to explore relationship-based practice. The theoretical framework for his argument is drawn from the key philosophical debates about the self and he provides an overview of major themes of the conception of the self in Western thought before moving on to look at the discourse of self within debates of contemporary developments in professional practice. In doing so, he considers the use of self within the context of the changing nature of social work practice and firmly locates his discussion into a broader inquiry of relationship-based practice. Barnard's central argument is that an understanding of conceptions of the self as socially constructed is fundamental if social workers are to be enabled and supported to critically and reflexively engage with a more complex understanding of relationship-based practice.

Sarah Matthews' paper is a methodological note on non-traditional research approaches to increase service user involvement in research. She offers some commentary on image-based methodology in social work research, and discusses the benefits of using 'image based' methods, in particular 'rich pictures'. A key feature of Matthews' argument is that there is a need to move beyond only using words to explore the experiences of service users. She critically considers the potential of image-based methodology to shift the inherent power imbalances between the researcher and the researched. The thorny issues of validity, reliability and bias in the context of image-based methodologies are explored throughout the paper. Matthews' paper concludes with a discussion of the potential of image-based methodology to enable social work researchers to develop research that is participatory and which reflects the social justice values of social work as a profession.

In the final paper, Andrew Whittaker considers his participation in an earlier RDI programme to reflect on his development as a researcher. Whittaker draws on his experiences to trace his journey and reflects on the transition from practitioner to academic to comment on his preparedness for doing research. He notes in particular his

struggles to establish his identity as a researcher, and how the RDI programme ignited a successful engagement with research for his personal skills development. Whittaker suggests that engaging with the RDI programme to draw on the opportunities offered helped broaden his understanding and nurtured his enthusiasm. It also helped him to hone his skills and learn how to become a good researcher. Whittaker closes with a discussion of the importance of environment to embed a research culture.

We are particularly pleased with the broad range of contributions we received for this special issue, as a number of the contributors are located in environments where there are fewer opportunities for researchers to be mentored effectively, less time available to do research, and little infrastructure to support research. In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that the RDI events and activities created a space for social work scholarship and research to be developed. In this respect, the papers in this special edition satisfy some of the key aims of the RDI, which is to advance social work research and increase outputs. Perhaps one of the main benefits of the RDI programme is that this special issue brings together a number of emerging researchers and stimulates new areas of debate. We hope the readers of *Social Work & Social Sciences Review* find the papers as stimulating as we have.

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