

Chapter 8

Professionalism and practice-focused research

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Introduction: the place of research in social work

Social work as a discipline is an applied form of inquiry, obviously, in the sense that its central focus is practice; and it might seem equally obvious that the quality of practice in turn depends on an active engagement with research ('knowledge'), just as it is underpinned by the other two elements of the triad, 'skills' and 'values'. Thus, we might expect research activity to be readily recognised as a significant contributor to the pool of ideas and evidence informing and supporting practice; and we might also expect to see social work practitioners as active users and producers of research. Indeed, there has been much recent emphasis on the importance of 'evidence-based practice' in social work and other fields of state welfare, such as mental health and rehabilitation in criminal justice (Marsh and Fisher, 2005).

While the potential contribution of research to improvements in practice might have been acknowledged in principle, this does not always seem to be reflected in the day-to-day organisation and delivery of social work intervention. One possible explanation for this lies in the shortage of relevant skills and a lack of confidence amongst practitioners in knowing how to access, 'read', interpret and then apply the lessons of research, but there are certain to be other inhibiting factors as well. These may be predictable, such as lack of time, limited access to research findings, and organisational priorities and expectations. It is sometimes the case, too, that research findings themselves are not easy to assimilate, often being tentative and hedged with qualifications, or concluding not with answers, but with more questions. While these various constraints and limitations should be acknowledged and addressed, it remains the case that practitioners and their agencies should be well prepared, at the very least, to be able to find, evaluate and use research evidence effectively. It is of great importance, therefore, to 'be informed', and to retain an active orientation towards the continuing development of the knowledge base to inform one's own practice. Social work is not just applied common sense after all (Gammack, 1982).

The purpose of this chapter is to develop this argument further by exploring the underlying principles, skills and approaches which will help practitioners and others to approach social work research positively, at whatever stage, and to develop the capacity to identify what makes good (and bad) research, and how it can be applied effectively in variable and challenging contexts to inform and enhance the quality of practice. In brief, the aim is to suggest why it is so important to develop 'research-mindedness', and how to do so, both in the sense of contributing to improvements in practice and in helping to give substance to the core values underpinning social work itself.

Beginning with some reflections on the importance of 'research-mindedness', the chapter will then address both generic and specific questions on the nature of social work research – what are its applications, why we need it, how we can evaluate it, and how we can take a critical view of the messages it generates.

From this point, the chapter will go on to enumerate core research skills, to do with open-minded and systematic information gathering, coherent analytical approaches, interpretation of findings and critical reflection on the process and outcomes of the research activity. In covering this ground, it will also be useful to reflect on the commonalities between research and practice, notably in the kind of skills required and the manner in which they should be applied, as well as some of the common challenges, such as explicating and negotiating power relationships.

From this overview, the chapter will then go on to consider in more detail the distinctive features and value-base of practice-oriented research in social work. This, in turn, will help to demonstrate the particular strengths and potential contributions of research activity which is undertaken by practitioners (or intending practitioners) and which is, at the same time, properly user-centred.

Following on from this, it will also be important to set out some of the key issues concerning the practicalities of undertaking research 'professionally', including approaches to the organisation and management of investigations, and key ethical requirements, especially where service users are involved or affected (as they almost certainly will be).

Finally, the chapter will return to the question of the importance of research in and for social work, and its added value, as well as reflecting on the necessity of acquiring and retaining 'research-mindedness' over the course of a social work career, in terms of the pursuit of better outcomes for people who use services, and the promotion of the wider goal of achieving fair treatment and social justice.

Being 'research-minded'

The practical orientation of social work, combined with its aspirations to expert professional status, necessitate a readiness to inquire into the domain of activity which it encompasses. As we shall see, social work has already been the subject

of extensive and varied investigation, and a significant body of evidence of potential value to practice is already in the public domain. It is therefore important to develop the capability to identify and access these sources, but also to be able to evaluate effectively the quality of what is produced, and gain a critical perspective on the findings that emerge, which may inevitably be complex, contradictory, 'unfinished' or partial (in both senses). It is the recognition of this point that has prompted the Social Work Reform Board to emphasise the significance of 'research-mindedness' in its own proposals:

The curriculum framework should provide opportunities for students to develop research mindedness, enhance their capacity for evidenced informed practice and prepare them to develop their own learning and curiosity. Teaching and learning about social work research clearly plays a significant and distinctive part in achieving these outcomes throughout their initial qualifying courses and throughout their career. The development of research literate students is key to promoting quality practice that can support change for children, families and vulnerable adults and lay the foundation for some future careers in academic social work.

(Social Work Reform Board, 2011: 24)

A professional approach necessitates being open to new insights and knowledge as it is developed in the field of practice; but it also means not simply taking these at face value, or simply treating every emerging finding as superseding all that precedes it. Key elements of research-mindedness find direct parallels in the professional attributes associated with effective social work practitioners, such as: a rigorous approach to the process of inquiry; critical evaluation of the available evidence; the capacity to analyse complex material effectively; and the ability to organise such material into a considered and justifiable conclusion.

When evaluating the messages from research, while being receptive to the available evidence, we also need to have in mind a series of pertinent questions to be addressed to the findings with which we are presented, such as:

- Who commissioned this study? What is their agenda?
- Who carried out the research? What is their relationship to the commissioner?
- Are the methods used justifiable, clearly specified and soundly applied (as far as you can tell)?
- Are the findings properly documented? Are they consistent with the evidence from other related research?
- What messages can you take from the research? Are there any messages you can take from it which are not directly presented to you?
- In what ways might the evidence provided affect your thinking or practice?
- What important questions have not been considered/answered?

While it is important to evaluate research critically, and to be aware of its limitations, it is also important to value what it has to offer, even when its findings are not neat or conclusive, as tends to be the case.

Many of the questions outlined above apply to the conduct of research as well as its interpretation and use. Research awareness and research literacy are thus further enhanced through the process of designing and carrying out one's own investigative study, even in the light of the kind of constraints set out earlier. Carrying out a research project, however small scale or time limited, is not therefore just an end in itself, but it also, in turn, equips the researcher to better understand and adopt a critical perspective on practice-relevant findings.

What is (social work) research, then?

So, let us begin with the inevitable definitional questions: 'What is research?' And: 'What is social work research?'. Inevitably, for academic purposes, a definition of research must encompass a wide range of disciplines, with their very different objects of study, assumptions about the nature of reality and what counts as knowledge, and methods and tools of investigation, from philosophy to physics. Understandably, then, it is a challenge to arrive at an overarching definition which encompasses this breadth of perspectives without becoming unhelpfully vague and general. To be meaningful and useful, a definition of research must establish its distinctive characteristics, true for all disciplines, but which sets it apart from, say, journalism, or, indeed, the processes of critical inquiry, evaluation and assessment which are central to social work practice.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition seeks to achieve this as follows, defining research as *the systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions*. This is helpful up to a point; it does seem important to recognise research as being 'systematic', that is, guided by rules of knowledge acquisition and the application of ideas (theory) which seek to gain an inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the object of study. In addition, though, the field of study and the research question need to be specified clearly and precisely – the central question must be 'researchable' (for example, 'Is social work effective?' seems like an important question but its scope is probably too wide to be directly answerable).

Not only must the question be clear and precise, but the methods of investigation and analysis must also be transparent and intelligible, capable of being reproduced by others and applied consistently. The application of these principles should, in turn, generate findings which are fully and precisely accounted for; but to justify its claims to be more than just knowledge-gathering, research must also be expected to generate ideas and theories, as well as material evidence. Research is uniquely characterised by its theoretical dimension, utilising, generating and/or testing concepts and new insights into the topic of inquiry. Findings must therefore be contextualised by explanations ('why' and 'how', as well as 'what'). Implicit in this characterisation is the assumption that the proces

of inquiry and discovery is intended to generate lessons for wider application, dissemination and use. In this sense, research activity may be distinguished from, say, a social work core assessment in child protection which may generate wider lessons and 'practice wisdom', but whose principal focus, rightly, is the well-being of the child or children concerned.

Research is also sometimes differentiated, and distinctions are made, between 'basic' and 'applied' forms of inquiry. Basic research is sometimes characterised as the means by which the building blocks of all other ('applied') research are constructed, establishing the core principles, ideas and fundamental 'truths' on which all subsequent investigations are based. It therefore tends to be seen as the source of essential theoretical principles and generalisable assumptions which hold good at all times.

Applied research, on the other hand, is depicted as being predominantly concerned with the situated investigation of processes and ideas in the 'real world'. Do the ideas developed in basic research 'work' in practice? Clearly, this form of research activity approximates more closely to the type of inquiry typically undertaken within social work, but this sometimes works to the disadvantage of the discipline. In the same way as practice is sometimes viewed as being based on ideas and approaches drawn from psychology, for instance, so too, social work research may be seen as essentially second-hand, relying on more established disciplines such as psychology and sociology for its core ideas and methods. Not only might applied research in social work be seen as limited because of its derivative qualities, but it may also be considered as limited in scope, essentially only being capable of localised application and giving rise to mid-range rather than grand theory.

While there might be a tendency to see social work research as principally an 'applied' form of inquiry, it would be unwise to consider that its value or quality is diminished by being grounded in 'real world' questions. This does not inevitably preclude research of this kind from opening up or addressing theoretical debates. If it were to become preoccupied purely with 'what works?', this would certainly diminish its ability to break new ground conceptually as well as in developing new forms of practice.

The domains of social work research

It seems self-evident that the quality of social work practice more or less depends on a sound grasp of the evidence relating to service users' circumstances and their experiences of interventions. How else would we be able to estimate need and make informed decisions about how to address it? What is the most effective response? And, when is it better not to respond, for fear of creating over-dependency or stigma? Critically informed and appropriate practice depends on answering this type of question, it would seem.

Developing this question, we might be able to identify a number of potential domains of inquiry in social work, each of which contributes to our understanding

of what constitutes best practice. These could be typified in terms of: research for social work; research on/about social work; and research with social work. These effectively cover the issues of who we should be working with, what happens when we do, and what influences the conditions in which practice takes place.

1. *Research for social work*: In this category falls research which identifies, and attempts to account for, the circumstances of those who fall under the remit of social work intervention. Thus, for example, the changing nature and demography of ageing is a significant topic, and in this potential area of practice we might also be concerned to identify the incidence of specific conditions associated with getting older, such as dementia, or social isolation, while the expectations and needs (both subjectively and externally defined) and wishes of older people might all be areas of inquiry which help to identify the scope and potential requirements of social practice with this potential population of service users.
2. *Research on/about social work*: Under this heading are likely to be included investigations into the form, content and effects of social work interventions, from the perspectives of both service providers and those who use services. Thus, for example, the experiences and views of parents of children at risk of harm would be a legitimate area of investigation, while, equally, changes in the levels of safety and well-being amongst this group of children are a significant topic of interest to social work research.
3. *Research with social work*: Of equal importance is the task of establishing a sense of what constitute the 'conditions' for practice. That is to say, how practitioners experience and feel about their work, how they are supported and empowered to practise, and the processes by which they engage with and establish relationships with service users are all key questions which are capable of being addressed meaningfully through research. The subjects of appropriate training, professional development and effective supervision and management thus qualify as subject areas worthy of scrutiny, quite clearly.

As these brief summaries indicate, this suggests a very wide range of topics and potential research strategies relevant to social work, which in turn means that there is likely to be a considerable demand for work to be undertaken within the remit afforded by the discipline. There is also, therefore, an obvious question of capacity and, related to this, quality. How is it possible to generate the range and standards of research required to inform and improve social work practice in order to pursue the shared goal of achieving the best possible outcomes for people who use services, especially in times of financial stringency, as at present?

Over time there has been substantial investment in investigations of 'hot topics' in social work; for example, the Department of Health (1995, 2001) on several occasions during the 1980s and 1990s commissioned major programmes of inquiry into children's well-being and safeguarding services. These programmes of research were influential in emphasising the value of early preventive services, for example, although messages about the careful exercise of professional judgement in safeguarding cases were not always heeded quite so well. Other significant sources of funding from social work research include research councils (especially

the Economic and Social Research Council) and charitable trusts, notably including the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. These have helped to provide a more independent source of evidence and ideas, and have often been useful in drawing attention to areas of need which have been unrecognised and unmet, such as the community care needs of disabled people from ethnic minorities (e.g. Vernon, 2002).

In the face of the accusation sometimes levelled at them of being uninterested in social work research, it is also of note that several consortia of provider organisations (statutory and voluntary) have themselves sponsored and coordinated research activity, often producing significant pointers towards 'good practice' (see Frost, 2005).

Beyond the institutional level, a great deal of social work research is carried out by qualifying students, practitioners and academic researchers, sometimes with and sometimes without the support of agencies and institutions. Indeed, this kind of research activity does afford the investigator a considerable degree of independence in deciding on types and method of inquiry; although at the same time, the experience of acting as a 'lone researcher' has its drawbacks in terms of frequently experienced limitations and constraints. Managing the scale of activity, gaining permissions, negotiating ethical procedures and simply finding time are all potential inhibiting factors, with the result that a great deal of small-scale but potentially highly useful research work is compromised from the start by what seem like insurmountable obstacles.

Developing skills, applying learning: the value of practice-focused research

As indicated, there are considerable overlaps between research and practice in social work; and it therefore seems that there may be much to be gained from developing 'research-mindedness' in preparation for practice or the enhancement of existing skills. As we have already noted, this might involve acquiring the capacity to read and evaluate existing research evidence critically, but it may also involve planning and carrying out one's own investigation.

Although there does seem to be some variation, depending on geography and agency setting, typically opportunities can be created for students (and practitioners) to undertake small-scale studies focusing on specific issues affecting service users. The findings and lessons learnt may be highly localised, but will nonetheless be of potential value in their specific context. In such cases the focus of the inquiry is likely to be the needs or aspirations of an identifiable group of service users (asylum seekers using a particular local resource, for example), the impact and experiences of a particular service (a support scheme for victims, possibly) or areas of unmet need (children with special educational needs, say), or unfair treatment (South Asian women affected by domestic violence, perhaps), which are capable of being investigated in 'close up'.

At the time of writing, I have just finished marking a series of research dissertations by practitioners undertaking agency-based studies as part of their post-qualifying learning, covering subjects as diverse as communication with young children, advocacy and practitioner well-being. In every case, the intention is to make use of their findings to influence and improve the service provided by the agency by offering practical and realistic recommendations for change.

Additional value can certainly be gained when the research in question can be used to validate, improve or change practice, or to draw attention to needs which are not being addressed effectively; that is, when it can be 'fed in' to organisational thinking, to enable service enhancements to be made. The study I undertook as a practitioner in juvenile diversion helped to 'validate' a number of aspects of practice at the time. With a sympathetic employer and a supportive external supervisor, I was able to carry out a detailed, mixed-methods study of the practices and outcomes of a 'sister' project which followed the same broad working principles (see Smith, 1987), but where I was not too close to the subject of inquiry. There is no doubt that organisational support and systematic supervision are important elements in facilitating practitioner research, but as in this case, the value for the agency of testing the validity of its approach to practice offers justification for this kind of limited investment.

So, where an agency may wish to gain an independent account of the value and effectiveness of its services for people with whom it works, the potential contribution of a small-scale research inquiry 'from outside' might well be substantial. Here, it would seem, there is a specific opportunity for practitioners/students in social work to combine skills development with meaningful contributions to practice knowledge and understanding of the service user perspective. While there are clearly practical challenges to be faced in organising and delivering an effective and valid piece of research, there are still good grounds for creating the space to undertake applied investigations of this kind.

Practice-focused research: bridging the divide

In addition to becoming attuned to research and appreciating its potential uses, those involved in social work practice may gain in other ways from undertaking applied research activity. For a start, research and practice share many common attributes, and it is arguable that the development and application of key research skills provides an additional opportunity to hone specific capabilities for social work practice. In this sense alone, then, engaging in research activity should not be seen as a diversion from the core task of learning how to 'do' social work, but as complementary to it. As well as being able to draw on the 'outputs' of research, intending and existing practitioners will benefit from understanding research processes from the inside.

Thus, for example, just as in practice, good research depends crucially on a process of systematic information gathering with a clear purpose in mind. The questions to be asked must be specific and answerable; the methods of inquiry used

must be capable of producing sound evidence pertinent to these questions; the methods of gathering, recording and retrieving information must be robust, replicable and reliable. In support of this, the sources to be identified, the tools developed and quality control mechanisms to be applied must be designed to underpin the adequacy and credibility of the material gathered.

Furthermore, as in social work practice, the interview is a central feature of much social research. The organisation and content of a research interview have to be shaped by very similar considerations to those applying to practitioners undertaking assessments. In both cases, close attention needs to be paid to: location; timing; preparation; information-sharing; interviewer/interviewee characteristics and mutual expectations; context effect; specific communication issues; risks of harm or distress; ethical issues, such as vulnerability, disclosure and confidentiality; and 'what happens next?' This is not to suggest an exact equivalence between social work practice interviews and those carried out for research purposes, but rather to suggest that there is a very close alignment of the relevant professional skills. Undertaking subject-relevant research activity of this kind should, therefore, support the acquisition of relevant capabilities for practice; while, on the other hand, recognition of the extensive common ground between the two domains of inquiry may help those in, or preparing for, practice to feel considerably less apprehensive about undertaking research, as well as making sense of findings which they may be expected to assimilate into their own direct work.

It is not only in the acquisition and processing of information that there is considerable common ground between the worlds of practice and research. A similar case can be made for the requirement for sound analysis, interpretation, critical reflection and review. Although it is by no means the case that these skills are restricted to social work, their value in this field is particularly obvious. Thus, for example, it is reasonable to suggest that models of thematic analysis utilised often in qualitative research also offer significant lessons for the process of making sense of diverse and complex material gathered in the course of a safeguarding assessment in practice. Similarly, it is important for researchers and practitioners alike to develop the capacity to consider and account for their own place and influence in the process of interaction with research participants/service users (Smith, 2004). The argument for a critically reflexive approach is now well made in the social work context (see e.g. Gould and Baldwin, 2004). What is the impact of our own actions, indeed our presence, as well as the formal nature of the relationships we have with those on the other side of the interaction? The argument for reflective skills as a key element of the social worker's toolkit is mirrored by the need for the researcher to 'factor in' the impact of their involvement and the way it shapes reactions and responses (the 'Hawthorne' effect; e.g. Coombs and Smith, 2003).

While there are clearly a number of areas of similarity between research and practice methods, there are also a number of key distinctions to be made between the practitioner role and that of the researcher (except possibly in some forms of participatory/action research). The nature of the relationship with participants/

service users is perhaps the most obvious of these; for instance, timescales are necessarily quite different (or they can be), with researchers having only limited involvement, whereas social work practitioners can expect to have a reasonably lengthy involvement with service users. The researcher is thus less 'engaged' and clearly does not have the same range of professional concerns and responsibilities. Even though they are accountable for their practice through their own ethical requirements, and arguably through a shared commitment to core social work values, researchers may have a greater degree of latitude to determine if and how to use information received in confidence. For practitioner-researchers, the distinction between aspects of their role may be difficult to sustain, in this and other respects; but it is obviously important to be clear with users/participants just which 'hat' one is wearing.

The researcher may, interestingly, be less 'unequal' with participants than is the case for practitioners, who may hold formal authority to act, or certainly be perceived as holding the 'power' to do so by service users (Smith, 2008), especially 'involuntary clients'. It might be argued, too, that research is geared in the main towards extracting findings and interpretations for wider use, while the practitioner is principally concerned with, and may be directly responsible for, the well-being and safety of the service user, thereby taking a more situated and task-oriented view. By the same token, the researcher is less bound by the need to find answers, and indeed applied research is often criticised (unreasonably) for not doing so; whereas, in the main, practitioners cannot leave challenging circumstances or personal crises unresolved.

Despite these distinctions, there remains a considerable skills overlap between practice and research in social work, especially in relation to information-gathering and analysis; and, equally significantly, research and practice in social work are able to draw on a common value-base. A shared commitment to the centrality of service user interests, to challenging disadvantage and oppression, while at the same time promoting social well-being, can and should reasonably be assumed. This, in turn, helps to point up some of the distinctive features of research in social work.

Initiating and undertaking practice-focused research

Despite its obvious benefits, for those involved in or intending to undertake practice-focused research there are likely to be significant challenges in planning and managing the process of inquiry. These arise from the predictable pressures of time, limited resources (often restricted to oneself), access problems (organisational gatekeeping, for example), permissions, time management, and the processes for eventual dissemination and use of findings.

In any research setting, but especially where such pressures apply, it is vital to maintain close control over the practicalities of the project; thus, breaking the

overall task into manageable 'bite-size chunks' is almost certain to be a necessity. Indeed, at the risk of experiencing the frustration of 'not getting on with it', it will probably be productive in the long run to attend as far as possible to detailed preparation in advance. Davies (2007) suggests employing a 'timed road map' whereby the discrete elements of a research project are identified and time-tabled as accurately as possible (Figure 8.1). In practice, some of these elements will be lengthy and continuous, such as the development of a detailed review of relevant literature, while others, such as securing ethical approval, will need to be undertaken at clearly specified points, in order to be able to proceed to subsequent stages.

| Task | Sept | Oct | Nov | Dec | Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul | Aug |
|--------------------------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Literature Review | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Develop project proposal | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Ethical approval process | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Data collection | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Analysis | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Writing-up | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Dissemination | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Figure 8.1 Outline research project timetable

When teaching research design, I use the analogy of home decorating to illustrate that much of the groundwork of research consists of work which will subsequently remain invisible, but without which a good quality end product would not be possible. Thus, planning methods, gaining access, negotiating permissions and developing protocols may all involve substantial investment of time for no immediate return, but all enable the subsequent work to proceed on a sound basis with fewer chances of unexpected 'hold ups'. In fact, many of these tasks can be completed in parallel, along with other necessary initial steps, such as familiarisation with relevant research literature and other background material (policy documents, previous evaluations, operational procedures and guidance, for instance), and the development and testing of possible research 'tools' (interview schedules, or observational coding templates).

There may well be problems of gaining access or permissions from all those with a vested interest, including organisational heads, service users and practitioners. In

anticipation of this, it will probably be helpful to have alternative sites or participant groups in mind. In addition, for those practice-focused researchers who themselves are close to the intended field of inquiry, it will be important to establish a clear distinction between different roles, whether with the organisation concerned, colleagues or service users. Different rules of confidentiality or disclosure might apply, and it is clearly important to establish explicit understandings about these.

Finding ways to accommodate less than perfect conditions for the conduct of research is also likely to be a requirement for the organisation of practice-based investigations. Managing the acquisition of data and ensuring that it remains meaningful may well necessitate a creative approach to information gathering and consideration of techniques such as 'triangulation' (Denzin, 1970) and the development of different sources of usable material. While sample sizes may need to be minimised, because of access difficulties or simply the limited availability of participants, making use of a range of data sources may well offer compensatory gains (for instance, drawing on carers' as well as service users' insights where these might be relevant). Increasingly, too, the potential for using the internet and other electronic media provides additional options in terms of alternative data sources, and these may indeed be more in keeping with the preferred modes of communication of research participants – while at the same time offering more certain safeguards in terms of anonymity and confidentiality. Research in and around practice is almost certain to be shaped to some extent by 'the art of the possible'; and this is only problematic where the credibility of findings or messages from research becomes questionable.

Aside from the challenge of managing research which is directly engaged with practice, ethical considerations are also likely to loom large. This is particularly so for social work, given the need for researchers to remain grounded in the core values of the profession, and also espoused by the academic discipline (see Butler, 2002). Research in social work, as elsewhere, may well be based on motivations which stem from outside the immediate practice setting, whether from the researcher's need to gain a qualification, the sponsor's interest in more effective practice or continued funding, or perhaps because the researcher is coming to the topic with a particular committed viewpoint. Such contextual factors impose their own pressures and expectations and it is important to avoid making unacceptable ethical compromises as a consequence. It is also important, clearly, to avoid applying pressure on potential research subjects to participate; equally, they should only be involved on the basis that they are fully informed about the purposes and uses of the inquiry. It is particularly important to be clear about the limited extent to which any of those involved, including the researcher, can control what happens with the material generated once it is 'out there' in the public domain. McLaughlin (2012: 70) draws attention to examples of unintended and adverse consequences, sometimes over a considerable period of time, when the findings of research become known and research subjects are identifiable and may feel a 'sense of betrayal' (page 71).

The nature of the researcher–researched relationship is distinctive, too, as we have already noted. While it is likely to be time-limited and more superficial than

the practitioner–service user relationship, it is still essentially bounded by the same underlying principles. We can expect that it will be user-centred and geared towards the promotion of well-being, the protection of those in vulnerable situations, empowerment and challenging discrimination. These principles apply in the sense both that they are underlying objectives and that they should underpin the research process itself.

Research in use: practice and principles

Of course, as it is an applied discipline, the endpoint of research in social work is the conversion of findings into subsequent use, generating new insights into the rights and needs of service users on the one hand, and providing signposts and tools for better practice, in their interests, on the other. Practice-focused research has to justify itself to commissioners and others, especially to people who use services, and it is therefore likely to be judged according to external as well as internal criteria of relevance and quality. While methodological concerns might focus initially on questions of ‘validity’ or ‘plausibility’, additional, equally important considerations of value and benefit also apply in this context.

For those engaged in social work research, it is thus helpful to think about the processes of dissemination and use from the start, and as part of a continuing dialogue with practice. It is legitimate, indeed, essential, to be concerned with ‘impact’ and what goes on beyond the end of a specific research ‘project’. Considerations of use thereby become a central feature of the research process, linking in turn to those questions of values and principle which are rightly viewed as being fundamental to social work as it is practised.

Aside from those key ethical questions which apply to the conduct of a piece of research, others, too, need to be addressed: what considerations need to be given to the dissemination and promotion of messages from our inquiries, for example? And, what do we ‘owe’ participants, in terms of continuing involvement and promoting implementation? We must also be concerned with the question of what to do when findings emerge which are awkward and potentially challenging; for researchers who are close to the subject matter in other respects, or who are already involved with agencies which might come in for criticism, this can be testing. For research to retain its integrity, however, the possibility of challenge must be recognised; commissioners must be prepared for the possibility of ‘bad news’, and findings should be reported honestly and openly.

Conclusion: realising the value of practice-focused research

In this chapter I have sought to outline the attributes and potential contributions of ‘practice-focused research’, concentrating particularly on the place of those in

and around practice in this endeavour. I have suggested that there is considerable potential for direct involvement in research activity to carry out the dual function of improving professionally relevant skills, while also offering insights which themselves may contribute directly to improvements in practice. Sometimes it might seem as if there is something of a schism between practice and research, with one stereotypically remaining essentially task-oriented and unwilling/unable to look up from the task in hand; while the other is caricatured as being pre-occupied with self-serving, irrelevant or impractical investigations which rarely, if ever, produce meaningful or usable outputs. Whatever the substance of these stereotypes, the argument advanced here is that such depictions or beliefs are unhelpful and unnecessary, serving only to inhibit the potential for useful and productive dialogue.

Research can be seen to operate in a number of ways to enhance understanding and promote improvements in practice and outcomes for people who use services: research for practice, research in practice, and research as practice. That is to say, in the first instance research into key aspects of the social work domain can demonstrably act as a source of understanding of how to enhance services and interventions; in this case, the important attribute to be developed by practitioners is that of 'research awareness', the capacity to identify reliable sources, 'read' evidence critically, and apply the lessons from it to local settings and local needs. Research 'in' practice, as we have observed, provides an opportunity to develop key transferable skills, particularly in the sense of information gathering and synthesis; but it is also a potentially valuable resource in terms of generating important insights (usually small scale and localised) into aspects of practice and the service user experience. Research 'as' practice takes this further, and illustrates the potential for research activity in certain forms to act as the stimulus for collaborative working and direct engagement with service users and others in the process of change and service improvement.

Social work is an evolving area of practice. It is important to use research to understand what works and there is rich evidence within the practice arena that should provide insight to complement and illuminate research.

(Research in Practice for Adults Manifesto, www.interactive.ripfa.org.uk/social-work-manifesto)

Evidencing value is the responsibility of people doing practice as well as those undertaking research. Practice-focused research in social work promises a great deal in terms of its potential contribution to understanding need and promoting improvements in service provision. It depends, however, on a positive dialogue between practitioners and researchers and the acquisition of key skills ('research-mindedness') which enable those in practice to engage in, argue with and make sense of the processes and products of research itself.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. Research in social work rarely produces conclusive results? Is this a problem?
2. To what extent should social work research be user-led?
3. Is it ever legitimate to carry out research in your own practice setting? What safeguards do you need to put in place?
4. How can you retain your independence as a researcher?

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING



Butler, I (2002) A Code of Ethics for Social Work and Social Care Research. *British Journal of Social Work*, 32(2): 239–48.

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