



## Editorial “Special Issue: Practice Research”

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It’s difficult to pin down a definition of practice research, but it is generally thought of as a relationship between research and practice. What is the nature of this relationship? Is it simply that practice is a field of study for research? Or is it that practice requires research to be relevant to its purposes and to reflect its approach?

This subject poses broad questions about the nature of practice and knowledge. In this special issue, while these questions will be considered, the focus will be on considering the challenges raised concerning the nature of research when approached from the perspective of practice. Research is a mode of enquiry. It’s systematic and critical, and it seeks to contribute to an area of knowledge. It’s an activity which is carried out by people, and it produces a form of knowledge seeking to be authoritative and to command attention. Research as a form of knowledge, then, is potentially very broad, and we have to be aware of assumptions that about the way research is understood. This can frequently be in a narrow sense, as empirical enquiry, and the concept of research is sometimes narrowed down further to an idea of a form of enquiry which looks like a natural science approach. But does it have to look like this in order to be research? Critical examination of policy, for instance, is central to practice, and the act of being a practitioner can itself be seen as a form of enquiry.

The way we think of research also relates to who we think creates knowledge. A division can often be built up between the idea of researcher and practitioner. But here again, it’s important to question assumptions about the nature of research. This division only really makes sense if we think of research as a distinct, specialist activity — as a specific job/role. However, if being a researcher isn’t so much having a certain job title, but is an activity in which you take part, then the problem of who is a practitioner and who a researcher becomes less central. The issue perhaps shifts more usefully to how knowledge is created, who can contribute to this and how this knowledge is then communicated to others. How can those involved in practice produce knowledge which communicates their findings to others in a way that is a tangible contribution to a shared wisdom of practice? Part of the issue here is not only the technical question of how this can be done, but also which forms knowledge has to take for others to take it seriously. This question locates practice research in the broader cultural, social and political context. It’s not simply about a relationship between practice and research; it’s about producing knowledge that is seen as having some authority within the profession, and for those who receive social work services—service-users and carers—and those who fund them: citizens, managers, politicians. It’s also about establishing credibility with other professionals with whom social workers work. These different constituencies may pull in different directions, and in different settings and at different times social work may be required to present itself, what it knows and what it does in a way which convinces particular constituencies. This can have an impact on the form of knowledge—for instance, current

government demands in the UK and Scandinavia for evidence-based practice—or on who is involved in deciding what needs to be known and how this knowledge should be produced: for example, service-user-led research.

The edition opens with a copy of the Salisbury Statement, which was the catalyst for this special issue. The statement was written following a meeting under the auspices of the Southampton Practice Research Initiative Group, led by Professor Jan Fook. The meeting involved an international group of social work academics and provided the opportunity to review and reflect on recent debates and developments regarding the relationship between social work research and practice. The statement is not a manifesto: rather, it is a contribution to these debates and an invitation to engage further in them.

The next two articles are critical responses to the statement from different perspectives. Stanley L Witkin, University of Vermont, points out that the debate about practice research is not new, but has been a perennial theme. The idea of a gap between research and practice tends to be explored, he argues, in terms which privilege the traditional idea of research. For Professor Witkin, the challenge is to shift the focus from making practice reflect research to one of dialogue and respect for diverse viewpoints.

Mike Fisher's article focuses on the need for research to be responsive to the requirements and priorities of practitioners. Professor Fisher, who is Head of Quality & Research at the Social Care Institute for Excellence, London explores the assumption sometimes found in research for practice that practitioners are empty vessels who simply need to be filled with correct knowledge. Rather, he argues, research needs to be democratised, involving practitioners throughout the research process to ensure that research is relevant to operational priorities and is useful in practice.

The remaining four articles look at the way ideas of practice research have been put into effect in particular settings. They consider the epistemological underpinning of practice research, its political dimensions and organisational context; and reflect on the experience and what can be learned from this about practice research on the ground.

Jan Fook, Royal Holloway College, University of London, Asbjorn Johannessen, Oslo University College and Maria Psinos, Kingston University, London explore issues of partnership working in the context of a national practice research project in Norway. The project—HUSK—is nationally funded and run in selected local social services areas. Its aim of the project is to build capacity for practice-based social research, and involves partnership of local government, universities, professionals and service-users. Focusing on the Oslo region, the article draws on participant research workshops, which explored participants' experience of working within HUSK, and the development of ideas of research in practice and their critical relationship with issues of empowerment and partnership working across a project.

Lars Uggerhøj, Aalborg University, offers a critical analysis of the ideas of research which relate to practice, and their interrelationship with ideas of practice research. He draws out the collaborative character of practice research and the importance within collaboration of the combination of different viewpoints. Collaboration often entails creative tensions, which are central in the dynamic contribution of practice research to knowledge. He goes on to illustrate the role of creative tensions between partners in practice research through his experience in Denmark.

Professor Ilse Julkunen, Helsinki University, outlines the rationale for and architecture of a practice research project involving universities, local government, professionals and other stakeholders in Helsinki, Finland. She examines the operational foci of the institute as a site of knowledge-production, and offers an analysis of practice research in terms of different modes of production, which she then uses to identify critical elements of the everyday operation and infrastructure of practice research.

Finally, Timothy Sim, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, provides an account of a small-scale practice research project in which he was involved, developing a service for ex-offenders and their families in Singapore. His account draws out similarities between the processes of research and practice. Within this project his role as consultant combined both a practice and a research responsibility, and from this viewpoint he considers the way in which practice and research roles are blurred for all participants. He also looks at the need to disseminate practice research in novel ways in order to capture the complexities of the ideas and experiences which it embodies, and to engage with a range of audiences, ensuring that it has an impact on practice and the service delivery context.

The re-emergence of practice research as a topic within social work reflects the need to explore a new settlement between research and practice in a context of increasing professional accountability, social diversity and anxiety about effectiveness and efficiency of welfare services. Practice research is not a single entity: it is a contested idea. I hope that this issue will highlight some of the debates, as well as providing practical illustrations about the way practice research is being taken forward in different contexts around the globe. Themes that arise from these articles point to the need to be aware of the complex relationships involved in practice research, in terms of the nature of professional knowledge and its connection with formal research and day-to-day practice. As several authors also point out, practice research entails engagement with the broader context of practice and service provision, particularly the involvement of service-users at all stages of knowledge creation. This special issue is meant as a contribution to these debates, and as encouragement for further discussion—not least in the future issues of this journal.

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