



## **The Salisbury Statement**

### **1 Background to developing a statement on practice research**

Professionals in the early 21st century are required to practise more effectively amid the increasing challenge of uncertainty and complexity. The widespread call for evidence-based practice is a major response to this. Yet contemporary approaches to research often fail to produce adequate evidence or knowledge about practice for use in variable situations. How is professional practice to be researched better, to provide a basis for improved practice? This question affects us all, and is answered in both similar and different ways across a range of countries and professions.

Mapping the range of answers to this question is an important step in developing research for better practice. In June 2008, a group of interested professionals came together (organised by SPRING – the Southampton Practice Research Initiative Network Group) in Salisbury, UK, to begin this mapping by formulating an international statement on practice research. The group comprised academics and practitioners from a range of countries (the Nordic countries, Italy, Canada, the USA, Israel, Singapore and the UK). This group formed the backbone of the group known as the “Salisbury Forum”.

The group was comprised primarily of social workers, but tried to formulate a statement which might be applied more broadly in all professions where the research of practice is important.

The statement is not intended to be definitive or conclusive, but simply aims to begin tracing the contours of practice research at this point in time as it continues to evolve. We have tried to word it in an inclusive manner, so that various perspectives and differences are recognised. We hope that the statement will provide a basis for continued discussion. We have written it so that various professionals, from different countries and contexts, will be able to use this statement to continue to craft their own thinking and positions on practice research; to increase the profile of practice research; and above all to undertake more and better practice research.

### **2 PRACTICE RESEARCH: THE SALISBURY STATEMENT**

Practice research: why is it important and why now?

The current global context demands effective practice from professionals. Economic and social changes mean more accountability is required yet the climate is of increasing unpredictability which compounds the difficulties in achieving accountability. There needs to be a shift in the way practice is researched so that it provides relevant knowledge for better practice in complex and uncertain situations.

A major problem is a mainstream assumption that research leads practice. But research also needs to be practice-minded in order to better study and develop knowledge which emerges directly from the complex practices themselves. Practice research, involving equal dialogue

between the worlds of practice and research is important as a concept, since it seeks to develop our understanding of the best ways to research this complexity. It is important at this time in history given that concerns with new accountabilities now converge with doubts about the adequacy of scientific knowledge as a sole basis for improving practice.

What is it?

There is no definite consensus on the meaning of the term “practice research” and other related terms (e.g. “practitioner research”) are often used instead. Following is an example of a statement about practice research which captures some of the nuances involved:

“.....Practice research involves curiosity about practice. It is about identifying good and promising ways in which to help people; and it is about challenging troubling practice through the critical examination of practice and the development of new ideas in the light of experience. It recognises that this is best done by practitioners in partnership with researchers, where the latter have as much, if not more, to learn from practitioners as practitioners have to learn from researchers. It is an inclusive approach to professional knowledge that is concerned with understanding the complexity of practice alongside the commitment to empower, and to realise social justice, through practice.”

Practice research involves the generation of knowledge of direct relevance to professional practice and therefore will normally involve knowledge generated directly from practice itself in a grounded way.

The following identifies some of the specific aspects involved.

Clearly there has been thinking and practice regarding the linking of practice and research for some time, and this has taken particular paths of historical development in different settings (eg. the case study approach was seen as an early method for researching practice in some countries). Much of the contemporary meaning turns on the issue of how to bridge the gap between the world of research and the world of practice.

Several specific issues are involved in determining how best to bridge this gap:

- Whether and how practitioners are involved in practice research.
- This involves questions of whether practitioners are both users and creators of knowledge, and whether this means they **MUST** be involved in research to make it meaningful practice research.
- Whether all research which is useful to professionals is practice research or are there also other sorts of research which are necessary for effective practice.
- How practice is understood and the different aspects incorporated (e.g. different types, methods, settings). How practitioners use and develop knowledge (and what types of knowledge) is a central question. What is the nature of complex practice experience, and how is this best represented through research? Practice research at some level needs to be able to represent the concerns of everyday practice.

- How the concept of research is understood – the particular approach to ways of knowing (epistemology) which underpins research, and how concepts like “rigour” and “trustworthiness” relate. In particular, the conception of research may need to allow for the creation of knowledge through day to day practice experience, “Inquiry”, or “research-minded practice” may be more appropriate terms.
- How the concept of knowledge is understood underpins both the above issues. In particular, what types of knowledge does practice research focus on, and whether it should involve exposing the tacit/implicit dimension of practice are key issues.
- How practice research relates to research in other disciplines (e.g. social science) or dominant professions (e.g. medicine) is a key question, including whether it simply draws from and modifies these, or whether there is a need to develop new and different paradigms/methods.

### **3 Why is it done?**

Broadly and simply, practice research aims to directly improve practice, by generating relevant professional knowledge.

However there is a multitude of complicating perspectives on exactly what is involved in this:

- Who is it for? There are many different interest groups involved (practitioners, service users, academics, researchers, policy makers, managers, the general public) who may represent contradictory interests. Which ones take primacy, and whether practice research must always benefit (and involve) the service users directly are major issues on which perspectives will differ.
- The drivers of practice research. This is linked with the above question.
- Questions of whether it must be driven by concerns which derive directly from practice, or whether it is possible that less direct concerns may also be relevant provide different perspectives
- The value base of practice research. Should there be a value base tied directly with the value base of the relevant profession (i.e. In the case of social work should it aim at change towards greater justice (social and personal)?
- In developing the relationship between practice and research the following principles/practices are important:
  - Collaboration
  - participation
  - ethical reflexivity and critical reflection
  - contextuality and
  - the dynamic, fluid or relational nature of research

- Practice research may also contribute to the development of the profession through generating its distinctive knowledge and expertise.

#### **4 How is it done?**

What methods are relevant to practice research? Whilst it is acknowledged that the actual problems and questions which arise from practice should drive its research, it is also appropriate to ask whether particular methodologies or methods are preferable.

Both existing and new methods may be relevant in continuing to develop the ways in which the complexities of practice are researched. An inclusive approach (recognising multiple perspectives) is important in articulating paradigms therefore purely quantitative or purely qualitative approaches are seldom applicable. Practice research may often require creating new methods or innovatively using existing methods in ways which are congruent with the principles of collaboration, complexity, dialogue, relationality and contextuality. For example, methods such as participatory action research, or involving reflection and reflexivity, may lend themselves more readily to the purposes of practice research.

If there is to be dynamic dialogue between practice and research, the methods for devising research problems and questions directly from practice, and the relative roles of practitioners and researchers require further attention. How does each of the different parties in the research process (practitioner, academic, service user, policy maker, manager) make a differing (or similar) contribution based on their specific position and expertise?

#### **5 What next?**

What is now needed to further develop practice research?

- Structures, processes and conditions to support practice research – a range of different structures and conditions may be needed depending on the interest group and resources available. Different countries have tried different initiatives (e.g. In Finland the Centres of Excellence; in other Nordic countries the HUSK partnerships between government, academia and service users). Within organisations, spaces (physical and intellectual and protected time) need to be made available for exchange of practice research ideas. Social capital needs to be built to enable practice research, and to encourage educationalists to train practitioners to be more research - minded, and researchers to be more practice-minded.
- Research funding bodies need to recognise the emergence of new models for researching practice.
- New paradigms/epistemologies? Perhaps new ways of talking about practice research need to be developed in order to recognise the emergent nature of a practice research approach
- Call for action. The time has come for further systematic and collaborative action. Educationalists, practitioners, researchers, managers and employers all have an intrinsic part to play in developing practice research, so collaborative efforts in a number of spheres are vital.
- Having the resources and structures is not enough. What should animate these is a culture which supports the engagement of practitioners and researchers; where their

different skills can be valued and exchanged; and where equal value is given to the challenge of making knowledge more generalisable and to the recognition and valuing of specific and local knowledge.

- A vital part of developing the concept of practice research is the need to keep doing it, and from these practices, to continue to develop our understanding.

## **6 APPENDIX**

The following were part of the Salisbury Forum Group that provided the foundation of this Statement:

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**Social Work  
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