



Practice Literate Research: Turning the Tables

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1 Introduction

In the never-ending dialogue between the study and practice of social work, the relationship between research and practice occupies one of those special places reserved for ancient disputes. Researchers argue that practitioners typically fail to draw on available research, and that practice lacks an evidence base. Practitioners argue that research is often irrelevant to their daily concerns, and that, in any case, they do not have the time or resources to review their practice in the light of evidence. The stand-off is made more stark because those who research practice are rarely the same people as those who practise social work.

This paper, from a practising researcher, will walk a little way in the practitioners' shoes and try to understand practitioners' reluctance to engage with research. Working from the practitioners' perspective, the paper will argue that the constant emphasis on developing research literacy among practitioners needs to be matched by the development of *practice* literacy among researchers.

The emphasis here is on practice research, meaning rigorous and systematic investigation that originates in the concerns of practice and develops practice-based solutions. This is distinct from research by practitioners, which may or may not address practice concerns (for more on this distinction, see Shaw 2005).

2 Research and evidence-based policy and practice

The drive to base social work interventions on evidence is one of the defining characteristics of modern welfare. While there are subtle differences of emphasis between evidence-based practice, evidence-informed practice, and empirically supported practice, these approaches all belong to a movement that underlines the relevance of social science to solving social issues and that argues both for greater effectiveness and greater efficiency. Using interventions that 'work' will better address the issues that people who use services need to resolve, and will make better use of resources.

Of course, there is nothing new about an emphasis on the relevance of social science to social work practice. In 1908, Mary Richmond was teaching social research to student practitioners and shortly afterwards published a research study containing socio-demographic details of *Nine Hundred and Eighty Five Widows Known to Certain Charity Organisation Societies in 1910* (Richmond and Hall 1913). What is new in today's climate is an emphasis on transparency, or democratisation, of expertise, so that professional decision-making is accountable to people who use services. This is combined with a strong policy emphasis on the need to use resources effectively and efficiently. Basing practice on evidence has therefore become a democratic and moral imperative.

The assumed direct relationship between research-based evidence and practice begs many questions. Researchers and practitioners rarely share employment by the same organisation: indeed, in the UK, we have made it almost impossible for any exchange between agencies and

universities by requiring a level of research performance that practitioners can rarely acquire before entering university employment. In turn, university employment conditions render it virtually impossible for research staff to maintain their practice. Those closest to practice are the least likely to be those engaged in research (Marsh and Fisher 2005), leading some to call for the development of 'practice near' research (Froggett and Briggs 2009).

The lack of exchange means that practice concerns rarely drive research and that research and practice agendas remain in separate silos (Marsh and Fisher 2008). This provides fertile ground for mutual misinformation, and the greater prestige of research usually helps it to occupy the moral high ground. What emerges is a set of assumptions that:

- there is a direct relationship between research findings and their use in practice;
- much current practice contains faulty knowledge or is marginal to evidence based practice;
- evidence use by practitioners can be measured by their ability to cite research;
- research, and the research agenda, belong to researchers (and not to practitioners).

Some proponents of evidence based practice have tended to adopt an inquisitorial approach to the knowledge held by practitioners. For example, a large survey of 1226 respondents were 'tested on their knowledge of two types of effectiveness research ... a client opinion study, and a randomised controlled trial' (Sheldon and Chilvers 2001). Citing the evidence was important to the (research) authors: while 43% claimed acquaintance with a piece of evaluative research, only 16.5% could correctly identify it (p.45: we are not told what the acceptable form of identification was). It was worse for studies of the views of people who use services: only 12.7% could identify one (p.46). When asked to identify what else (besides social work) might influence outcomes, only 13.5% could 'correctly answer the question' (p.48). The authors suggest that 'the level of ignorance here is startling' (p.48). Asked to define statistical significance, 37.6% claimed they could define it, but only 3.9% of these showed a 'full understanding' of it (p.54-55). The level of knowledge is described as 'dismal'.

This is not so much an exploration of practitioners' research-based knowledge as how far they think in the same way as researchers: it does not appear to occur to the researchers that practitioners might integrate research knowledge into their practice in more subtle ways than are captured by such simple catechisms. As Shaw has highlighted (Shaw 1999), this treats practice as the passive recipient of knowledge created elsewhere:

To regard theory and practice problems this way is to relegate 'practice' to the subordinate, the acted-upon... (p.3)

3 How practitioners know and use research-based knowledge

The argument, therefore, is to explore *from the practitioners' perspective*, how research-based knowledge is acquired and used. Researchers working from this perspective tend to draw on wider research on the nature of professional knowledge and to gather data on the form in which research-based knowledge is visible in practitioners' decision-making and in accounts of their practice.

The wider perspective on professional knowledge draws attention to the role of tacit knowledge and the way it is integrated into holistic action. Collins (Collins 2000), for example, describes tacit knowledge as 'those things that we know how to do but are unable to

explain to someone else' (p.108). That quote should be read again, to register fully the emphasis on knowing *and* doing. It is not just that the knowledge is difficult to make explicit, it is also that its integration into doing makes it more difficult to surface the steps and the units that make up the knowledge-and-doing. Analogies with physical activity come to mind, such as playing music without knowing explicitly at every moment the position of your fingers, or riding a bicycle without giving a running commentary on the laws of physics that make it possible.

Of course, this is not an argument for fudging the knowledge base for practice: practitioners should be able to track back to the constituent elements of a judgment, and indeed are often required to in formal reports. It is rather that practice knowledge requires the ability to know-and-do holistically, without having to stop and consult the manual for the next step. Indeed it is more often the mark of the novice that action is approached in a linear, stepwise fashion: as Kondrat (Kondrat 1992) remarks, 'simple linear applications of theory to the concrete case are more frequently the mark not of the expert but of the novice professional, one who is either unaware of the complexities or unable to systematically take them into account' (p.242).

Because knowledge and doing are integrated, experienced practitioners will say that they 'sense' or 'just know' things, in a way that may frustrate the researcher trying to locate formal knowledge. Practitioners thus form a judgment using a wide variety of external cues, which are linked to internal knowledge, but are not easily tracked to simple units of research-based knowledge. It is little wonder that practitioners do not readily cite research reports.

Using this understanding, Rosen and Zeira have explored the kind of rationality that underpins practice decisions. One study included 2347 'rationales', from work with 297 clients by 34 social workers (Rosen, Proctor et al. 1995). The researchers were able to detect a rationale in 75% of decisions and concluded that, if practitioners appear unable to articulate their knowledge base, this does not inevitably denote an atheoretical stance or an absence of research-based knowledge. Zeira and Rosen drew explicitly on the concept of tacit knowledge in a study of hypotheses and outcomes in 2480 interventions (Zeira and Rosen 2000). They concluded that 'responsible professional practice (is) a rational process in which interventions are carefully selected for their potential to maximise outcome attainment', and that 'Our findings show that interventions were employed in a discriminating manner in relation to the desired outcomes...' (p.119).

Another kind of enquiry focuses on how social workers talk about their practice, and attempt to build understandings of knowledge use from an ethnographic approach. For example, Osmond and O'Connor undertook a groundbreaking study by using interviews with social workers, reflective recall based on a client interview, a knowledge map, and personal, autobiographical narratives (Osmond and O'Connor 2004). They found that practitioners communicate their knowledge through (1) case examples, stories and metaphor (2) understanding which resemble existing knowledge (3) reformulated or synthesised knowledge and (4) explicitly named understandings (p.681). When pressed for research knowledge:

A title would eventually be offered by participants, albeit speculatively at times, which could easily have been dismissed and discarded had recognition only been given to that which participants were sure of and could formally identify (p.685).

Osmond went on to develop the concept of a 'knowledge spectrum framework' as a tool for assisting educators and practitioners to analyse knowledge use (Osmond 2005). The approach that seeks to understand and build on practice knowledge can be seen in the US literature on personal practice models (Mullen 1988), practitioner-researcher relationships (Mullen and

McCartt-Hess 1995) and evidence based guidelines (Rosen and Proctor 2003), and this produces a far more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between the evidence base and practice (Mullen, Shlonsky et al. 2005).

Lastly, the fractiousness of the relationship between research and practice has given rise to a caricature that practitioners are over-focused on the relationship, or on 'process' issues (empathy, warmth and genuineness) at the expense of hard-nosed commitment to improving outcomes. Stevens and colleagues throw an interesting light on this in a unique comparison of the research priorities of funding agencies and practitioners (Stevens, Liabo et al. 2007; Stevens, Liabo et al. 2009). Although limited to the UK and to child welfare, their work demonstrates major mismatches between what is funded (presumably reflecting the priorities of researchers) and areas on which practitioners want research.

Stevens and her colleagues show that almost half the practitioners' questions concerned effectiveness, but research on this question amounted to only 13% of funded studies. There was also a large discrepancy between the proportion of funded studies exploring the causes of problems (64%) and the proportion of practice questions focussing on this (16%). It seems practitioners place greater emphasis on knowing what is effective than do researchers.

This brief analysis of research on practice knowledge allows us to build a more complex picture of the knowledge that underpins practice, and the way that research-based knowledge is used in practice. The research indicates the need to recognise the applied, action-oriented stance of practice, a stance that draws on formal rationales, but in which formal knowledge often remains at the tacit level (until it is necessary to make it formally visible). In at least one key area of practice, the research shows that practitioners are genuinely concerned about the research-based knowledge available to support more effective practice. This suggests a research agenda with the aims of

- respecting and building on practice knowledge, by surfacing and analysing the rationality of practice;
- addressing the concerns of practitioners;
- providing practice interventions that are feasible in day to day services; and
- going beyond analysis and understanding to testing practice responses (Marsh and Fisher 2008).

4 Starting points: the Salisbury Statement

In 2008, an international group of academics and practitioners met in Salisbury, UK, to review the state of practice research. Some of the reasons behind the meeting echo themes in the research reviewed above: the unequal relationship between research and practice, the relevance of research-based knowledge to practice, and a call for researchers to be 'practice-minded'. With some important variations, a common picture emerged in a wide range of countries, leading to agreement on a joint statement (Salisbury Statement 2010).

While the statement records a range of unresolved and sometimes complex issues, it also offers a clear vision of the principles that should underpin practice research, including that:

- there should be an equal dialogue between research and practice – and service users should be integral partners;

- practice issues should lead research priorities;
- practice research requires the involvement of practitioners, whether or not they undertake the research themselves;
- research should generate ‘knowledge of direct relevance to professional practice’.

The Salisbury Statement also offers a definition:

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 (p.2).

While this deftly captures the core principles, the attempt to be inclusive has produced a number of coded phrases. ‘Curiosity’ for example, refers to a debate about why practitioners so often seems to regard research as beyond them, when the starting point may be as simple as curiosity. Some participants then took away this concept and explored its relevance in more detail (Austin and Dal Santo 2009). Research is not the only way of ‘challenging troubling practice’, but some participants felt it was critical. References to the complexity of practice, empowerment and social justice similarly reflect participants’ concerns about the nature and purposes of social work, concepts to which participants sought to link practice research.

In view of this, a simpler – and hopefully more direct – definition would be:

Practice research originates in the concerns of practice and develops practice-based solutions. It uses a collaborative, developmental approach that respects the knowledge held by practitioners and engages practitioners in the research process.

Of course, it might be argued that this leaves out much complexity, for example, about what we mean by ‘collaborative’ and ‘developmental’. The intention, however, is to capture essential principles rather than to prescribe methods. From this perspective, ‘developmental’ research might mean many things, but it must always be guided by practice concerns, respect practice knowledge, engage practitioners and offer solutions that have been tested in practice.

5 An agenda for practice research

Similar issues about the balance of detail and principle arise in setting an agenda for practice research. The following suggestions are deliberately set at an abstract level, focusing on the *kind* of practice research that would develop problem solving knowledge, rather than on specific topics.

1. Reclaim the rationality of practice

The outline of the relationship between practice and research has illustrated the risk that practice is seen as lacking what Rosen and colleagues have called ‘rationales’ (Rosen, Proctor et al. 1995). The practice research task is to ‘formalize the unformalized’, as Osborne and O’Connor phrase it (Osmond and O’Connor 2004), or to surface the internal logic of the practice knowledge on which decisions are based, rather than detecting research findings lurking in practitioners’ accounts.

Not only will this articulate the rationality of practice, it will also outline the existing knowledge base against which practitioners assess new knowledge, and thus assist the adoption of new knowledge.

2. Understanding the experience of people who use services and the outcomes they want

I have argued that some accounts of evidence-based practice minimise the value of existing practitioner knowledge. There is the additional risk that research values experiences and outcomes identified by researchers without paying equal attention to those identified by people who use services. It is a central purpose of social work practice to understand the meanings people attach to their experiences. This provides the basis for advocacy to service providers and the basis for understanding the outcomes sought by people who use services.

Unless the user is required by law to receive services, people increasingly seek personalised services and outcomes (Leadbetter 2004; Carr 2010). Practice research can systematise the knowledge of user-defined outcomes gained by practitioners to set alongside the outcomes sought by providers.

3. Involve different constituencies in knowledge production

Many of the advances in understanding what outcomes matter and how they can be achieved have depended on changing the relationship between researchers and the researched (Oliver 1992; Evans and Fisher 1999; Fisher 2002; Barnes 2003; Fisher 2005). A new relationship, based on participatory and empowerment approaches, allows different perspectives on how and what data is collected, and how it is interpreted.

In social work practice, this mirrors what Gibbons and colleagues have analysed at the broader, societal level as the shift between Mode 1 and Mode 2 types of knowledge production (Gibbons, Limoges et al. 1994). In Mode 1, knowledge production is seen primarily as the reserve of single disciplines within universities, and its application as a separate activity. The shift towards knowledge that is useable and useful requires a different pattern of engagement between different disciplines and different constituencies, which Gibbons and colleagues called Mode 2 (p.3-4, 5, 14). This kind of engagement is second nature to practitioners and their involvement in practice research can provide immediate and direct access to different kinds of constituencies (including people who use services).

4. Interpret existing research for practice and develop practical application

Practice research is not the only kind of research in social work, and there is also highly relevant research undertaken outside social work. There will always be a need, therefore, to interpret and implement research from outside the practice research framework and from outside social work. The key role of practice research is to think through the implications and to test applications.

For example, we now have very good research, mainly from psychology, about how keeping contact with their birth parents helps children who must be raised outside their birth family to retain their sense of self (Social Care Institute for Excellence 2004). However, the research does not elaborate on how this should be achieved. One of the teams reviewing this research commented that ‘contact is more problematic than has hitherto been thought’ and research evidence was not available to show how contact should be undertaken ‘with different family members, for different purposes and in different contexts’ (Wilson, Sinclair et al. 2004). The task for practice research is to interpret *what this means in practice*, and to develop and test the effectiveness of different ways of helping children to retain contact.

We might add that the audience for this work is not restricted to professionals – practice researchers should have a key role in helping people who use services to understand what research may assist them.

5. Undertake research to generate problem-solving knowledge for practice

If the previous function concerns interpreting research where practical application was not part of the work, the final, key function is to build in practical application from the outset.

This is the area in which practice research should excel. Practitioners are surrounded by social issues that require analysis *and* action. The linkage is essential. For example, the analysis of why meaningful work is so important to people with mental health problems must be allied to investigation of the practical measures that might assist them to re-enter work (Dickson and Gough 2008). The last thing that people who use services or practitioners want is research that stops at analysis.

In setting up such research, the concerns of people who use services and of practitioners should set the agenda. An orientation towards practical application can be built in from the outset. Respecting the knowledge held by different constituencies, researchers can gather data on what people find helpful, and what is feasible in day-to-day practice. The design of effectiveness research can reflect outcomes defined by people who use services and achievable by practitioners. Finally, the research can identify the practical work and the incentives for different constituencies to move from their current to research-informed practice.

A framework for practice research, incorporating these five functions, could thus offer more effective and relevant knowledge for practice.

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