Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research – challenges and possibilities

Public lecture NUS October 18th 2019

Lars Uggerhøj
S R Nathan Professor
National University of Singapore
and
Professor of Social Work
Aalborg University
Denmark
I woke up almost happy this morning!

Manager from a social work agency
Research and practice could through a practice research process do something together instead of working at separate levels and instead of criticizing or even fighting each other.
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

Making it possible to connect practice experience and hands on knowledge with research based knowledge and analytical/theoretical approaches in a learning process with the aim of qualifying social work
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

Practice needs the knowledge coming out of the research and the possibility of understanding and analyzing their own initiatives and outcome of services in new and more collective ways.

While research needs practice as an object for studies and the findings to be set into actions.

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Build on more than ‘old knowledge’, knowledge build on personal norms and knowledge build on professional experience

Research based knowledge is probably the most difficult and distant knowledge to obtain in practice

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
It is necessary to establish meetings between research and practice

To make sure that this kind of knowledge production is accepted by and interesting for all partners in the collaboration
Society and social work are in need of establishing new kinds of processes where knowledge production is based and established bottom-up instead of only top-down.
If we want scientific knowledge, and especially empirical evidence, to play an effective role in professional action, then we have to focus on the contexts where the processes of generating knowledge for action actually take shape, that is, on the organizations engaged in social work.

Gredig and Sommerfeld
To qualify social work research researchers need the knowledge from practice

- to know what to study
- to produce usable research question
- to connect findings to learning processes in social work practice
Negotiation

- emphasizing that different perceptions will be part of the development of a practice research process
Collaborative research processes have to be negotiated every time and everywhere it is established and practiced.
It leaves the academic and methodological discussion of research more open and eased from dogmas.
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

Practice research is an ever-changing methodological approach influenced by different beliefs, understandings, perceptions and theories.

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

Research in social work is just as eclectic as social work itself

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

- *Learning in practice* by Laves and Wenger
- *Learning processes* by Laursen and Stegager
- *Mode 2 Knowledge Production* by Nowtny
- *Science of the Concrete* by Flyvbjerg
- *Emancipatory Knowledge* by Habermas
- *Service User Involvement* by Beresford and McLaughlin
- *Sociological and Restrained Imagination* by Mills and Løchen
- *Reflexivity* by Bourdieu

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Practice research is closely connected to theoretical approaches focusing on:

Context; Dialogue; Empathy; Reflexivity; Creativity; Participation; Collective knowledge production; Trans-disciplinarity
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

Science of the concrete

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Key elements in science of the concrete are

- getting close to reality
- emphasizing little things
- looking at practice before discourse
- studying concrete cases and contexts
- joining agency and structure
- dialoguing with a polyphony of voices
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

Theory has a minor position and context a major in science of the concrete

Flyvbjerg is not criticizing research rules, logic, analytical rational and theory per ce

He is criticizing the dominance of these elements in correlation with other phenomenon

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Both participatory context-based research and theory will bias research

But the participatory processes will not bias research more than theory will
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

Science of the concrete constitutes both a philosophical, a scientific, a theoretical and a methodological framework for practice research in social work

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Mode 2 knowledge production is characterised by application-oriented research where both frameworks and findings are discussed and evaluated by a number of partners – including laypeople – in public spheres.
Knowledge production arises in the light of a specific logic which participants must develop in common to be able to act together and towards the problem

Kristiansson
There is a scientific basis for more context-based, dialogue-oriented, critical reflection-needed, participatory based and partnership-focused research and knowledge production - elements connecting very well with, inspire and help to position practice research

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Discuss if this is practice research
Decide which partners are going to participate as stakeholders
Define the joint understanding of both the research project and the learning process
Discuss and decide the practice research approach(es)
Decide the different responsibilities and roles in the process
Work out a plan for meetings
Be ready to argue for your interests and to be open-minded towards others

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Difficult to start joint discussions

Definitions and descriptions may help stakeholders to start and direct discussions and decisions

To agree on, to disagree on or to use as inspiration

A helping kit to projects
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

Practice research is any disciplined empirical inquiry (research, evaluation, analysis) or theoretical/conceptual analyses, conducted by and/or negotiated between researchers, practitioners and/or service users that is intended, wholly or to some significant degree, to shed light on, support learning processes or explain social work intervention/practice with the purpose of qualifying social work through new knowledge and/or developing social work actions.
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

- New knowledge
- Small findings needed for a later development or change
- Part of a big change

Practice research is focusing on being a part of a learning process rather than demanding a big change

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

Practice research on social work

Research questions and design, data-collections, analysis and information about the research are led and directed by external researchers.

Practice has no real say in the process

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

- The phenomenon is understandable to practice
- The problem can be turned into a research question
- It is possible to collect data
- It is possible to apply the findings in practice
- The process and the findings can have implications and impact on developments of social work

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

Service User Focused Research

- Consultants
- Research ‘holders’
- Stakeholders

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

The third approach ‘Practitioner Research’ focuses on research carried out by practitioners

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

*Practice based research is the use of research inspired principles, designs and research methods in everyday practice enabling participants to answer questions, which originates from practice and which will give answers in ways that will inform practice*

---

Epstein

*Practice research is the phenomenon that occurs when practitioners commit themselves to something they call research in their own practice while they, at the same time, practice social work*

---

Ramian

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

Practice is the research institution

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

The researcher does not need to be an educated researcher

But needs to have knowledge about research

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Science producing network

Different kinds of collaboration where practitioner researchers are collaborating, determined and growth-oriented to produce knowledge in a specific practice field and sharing this experience and knowledge with other practitioner researchers.
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

‘Participatory Practice Research’ is carried out in collaboration between practice and research

There is a need and demand for a close collaboration between practice and research

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Practice and research develop every single collaboration in common
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

Research is part of a learning process

Practice will manage the learning process while researchers will manage the research process

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

Practice Research on Social Work Participatory Practice Research Service user focused research Practitioner Research

Research

Problem

Problem

Data collection

Explanation

Explanation

Analyses

Decision

Reflection

Conclusion

Intervention

Action

Putting into perspective

Outcome/Improvement

Improvement

New questions

New problems

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Participatory practice research is both part of traditional research processes and part of processes in practice – but it has its own position in between research on social work and practitioner research
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

Curiosity
Critical reflection
Critical thinking and decision making

Austin, Dal Santo and Lee

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Why can’t practitioners and service user just act as informants in research?

Why do they need to become partners?

What is the added value of involving practitioners and service users in research - and what is the added value of involving researchers in learning and developing processes in agencies?
Practice won’t have to supplement their skills to become researchers and to be informed about the demands, the ethics, scientific positions, usable research methods, analytic tools etc.
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

Data and findings will not be ‘taken away’ from practice it will be co-produced with researchers and kept as a part of learning processes in practice
For research the added value of collaborating with practice and service users is that all parts of the research process become more qualified.
Collaborating with practitioners and service users gives the researcher new angles and insight knowledge about the phenomenon and thus qualify both the research set up and the findings
During collaboration and negotiation stakeholders and partners obtain more knowledge about each other and the different interest among partners – they start to understand what they didn’t understand previously.
The differences between stakeholders need to be discussed and negotiated as a part of the collaboration processes.
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

- The different interests of the different actors are important for each and every one of them – and significant to society
- The quality of function within the different groups of actors depends on the possibility of retaining these different interests

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Instead of trying to balance the differences, it is important to enlighten them
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

Practice Research needs to and will develop and connect both out of contradictions and out of an understanding that collaboration is needed

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Learning processes have to be disturbing to participants

Laursen and Stegager

It must disturb in a constructive way

Cochran-Smith & Lytle

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Practice Research must disturb everyday practice - as well at it has to be disturbing to traditional research practice

The negotiation in practice research will rather be focusing on disturbance than consensus
Practice Research is a field which is characterized by being influenced by and having influence on practice at the same time. A research field that is linked especially to practice and even in its focus in depth and independence will be influenced by practice. In this understanding, practice research in social work and social work practice have to walk hand in hand - without becoming lovers.

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
No individual is skilled enough to give sufficient answers

The role of both researcher, practitioner and service user is to advance parts of the answer as an input in an ongoing dialogue concerning issues and risks mankind is confronted with and concerning how eventually to solve these issues.

Research and practice posses both part of the answer and part of the solution – by which position everybody (researchers, practitioners and service user) is producing knowledge.

Flyvbjerg

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Thank you for listening!
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

References (1):

Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

References (2):
- Special Issue: Teaching Practice Research Volume 36, Issue 1, p. 6-10

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University
Theories and Approaches in Social Work Practice Research

References (3):

Lars Uggerhøj National University of Singapore and Aalborg University