WHAT IS GOOD PRACTICE RESEARCH?

Public Lecture

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GETTING TO GRIPS WITH PRACTICE RESEARCH

- I spoke about some aspects of practice research at a lecture last year, and cannot avoid repeating part of what I said then.

- But today I want to keep in mind the development of the research relationship between Singapore agencies and the Department of Social Work at NUS

- What questions seem especially relevant to think about at this stage of the development of the relationship?

WHAT IS GOOD PRACTICE RESEARCH?

PRACTICE RESEARCH INTERNATIONALLY

- Where and when did this idea of 'practice research' emerge?

- In one way, always been around. In any professional field – education, health care, law, social work, counselling, and so on – the question of the special character of research in that field arises. How is it distinctive from disciplines that are not driven by an immediate 'applied' purpose?

THIS IDEA OF 'PRACTICE RESEARCH'

- But the phrase started to be used about ten years ago. I think independently in two places. In Finland a very strong social work research unit in Helsinki started to speak of their research in this way when seeking recognition by their government. Then a small conference was organized in England by Jan Fook then at Southampton – she had shortly left Australia. About 25 people were invited. A 2011 statement (The Salisbury Statement) was published from that event, which you can find at: http://www.socwork.net/sws/article/view/2/12

- Further statements have been issued from subsequent conferences.

- 2012 Helsinki Statement. http://blogs.helsinki.fi/practice-research-conference-2012/helsinki-statement-on-practice-research/

- 2014 New York Statement. http://icpr2017.miceapps.com/uploads/user_uploads/382/images/2014%20The%20New%20York%20Statement%20on%20the%20Evolving%20Definition%20of%20Practice%20Research.pdf

WHAT IS GOOD PRACTICE RESEARCH?

THIS IDEA…

- I think we may yet see the 2017 Hong Kong Statement from the conference earlier this year!

- You may be relieved to learn that I do not plan to take you through these statements, though I think it would be of value for someone here to read through them to learn how the idea has developed in the last few years. Also they allow you to connect your work here to these wider developments.

- My approach will be different

STARTING FROM THE BOTTOM UP

- My intention today is to suggest what I think will be the questions your university/agency initiative will raise. There will be a strong cautionary strand in what I say. What are the risks? The challenges most likely to be overlooked? The 'dangers' that may creep up on you without warning?

- I am, therefore, seeking to lay the ground work for social workers becoming more thoughtfully practical – and practically thoughtful.

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.' (So said the writers of the Salisbury Statement.)

- I asked Lars Uggerhøj – one of the more helpful contributors to this field. He said a few days ago 'we need to be better in explaining what practice research is. We have tried to avoid a more specific definition as we have wanted to be open for new ideas and experiences, but I think we need to work towards a definition or some definitions.'

WHAT IS IT IN SINGAPORE?

- 'In Singapore' - this may sound a compromise, but I suggest there are dangers in developing or choosing a definition. Yes, you should think through just what are the kinds of practice-related inquiry and action you want to undertake here. Leaving it open-ended may make it fragmented.

- But this will not include everything that has been included in practice research everywhere.

- This is NOT advice to go it alone! Know what the field includes, read the Statements, and decide where your interests belong within that field.

WHAT IS GOOD PRACTICE RESEARCH?

WHY DO I SAY THIS?

1. The Statements have been written mainly by academic faculty! One of their concerns – a perfectly correct one – is to gain recognition for social work research in an academic community that sometimes is sceptical. A friend told me 'my PhD student just came back from a research seminar arranged by sociology … and they questioned social work research all the way through the seminar and named the student 'the social worker' and 'the practitioner' instead of the PhD. student.'

WHY DO I SAY THIS?

2. A more important reason for today is that there is much diversity within practice research. While there is good and bad practice research, just as good and bad academic research, we should not set up a hierarchy or exclude certain forms of research.

THREE DIMENSIONS OF DIVERSITY

- Practice led or partnership

- Stand-alone or staged projects

- Free-standing or networked

- As we work our way through these you will see that I am not suggesting any of these should be treated as either/or choices

PRACTITIONER-LED AND ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIP

- I spoke about this last year, in relation to practitioner research - one form of practice research.

- Neil Lunt and I undertook a review of practitioner research in the social care field with adults in the UK. 74 papers published in English 1990-2012. They were analysed by affiliation and country of researchers, research problem, research participants, inquiry methods employed, attention to research quality, attention to research ethics, reported benefits, and utilization of evidence.

PRACTITIONER-LED AND ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIP

- We became increasingly aware of the difficulties of generalizing regarding the character of practitioner research, concluding there are two significantly different kinds of practitioner research.

IN WHAT WAYS DID THEY DIFFER?

Answer – quite a lot!

1. Occupational roles of researchers
2. Working relationship between researchers
3. Focus of the research questions and problems.
4. Research methodology
5. Extent to which benefits and utilisation of the research were addressed
6. Writing relationships and 'voice' in published outputs

WHICH OF THESE ARE RELEVANT TO YOUR INITIATIVE?

- Three of them:

- Occupational roles
- Working relationships
- Writing

1. OCCUPATIONAL ROLES OF RESEARCHERS

- *Practitioner-led*: largely working in social work agencies and community-based social care agencies, with few in academic posts

- *Partnership*: a majority of the projects were undertaken within a health service context, often informed by an established culture of audit and accountability. Researchers were predominantly drawn from clinical psychology, psychiatry, occupational therapists, with 30 of these also in associated academic posts. A significant number focussed on dementia studies.

1. OCCUPATIONAL ROLES OF RESEARCHERS

- This may not apply in a direct way to you.
- But I do think that there will be – and ought to be – a variety in the kind of occupational roles that are drawn to more active partnership with university colleagues.

2. WORKING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCHERS

- *Practitioner-led* studies were primarily under the control of the practitioner-researcher, often working alone. In cases where academics also were involved, it appeared to reflect arrangements where the practitioner/s took a clear lead and majority position. The role of academics was rather like that of support and resource.

- In *Partnership* studies a typical pattern was of a small team that included, and sometimes was led by, researchers. The person or people having a primarily practice identity did not hold the lead in many of these studies.

- Note: the practitioner/academic distinction makes less sense where researchers hold roles that cross traditional practice and academic boundaries. That may not apply here – but it will if health is involved.

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2. WORKING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RESEARCHERS

- Again this variation is natural. But it will be vital that expectations are agreed clearly before embarking on projects

3 WRITING RELATIONSHIP AND 'VOICE' IN PUBLISHED OUTPUTS

- Whether to publish will itself be a decision. It assumes something about what is the right audience for a project.

- 'Partnership' projects are more likely to lead to writing for outside audience.

- This is a topic where disagreement through unresolved expectations is most likely to occur. Should we write? Who for? Who writes? What 'voice' is needed and appropriate?

- We found a clear difference in the writing voice of articles from practitioner-led and academic partnership projects.

STAND-ALONE OR STAGED PROJECTS

- Reminder. This is the second general way in which practice research might reasonably vary

- It is a question about the scale and duration of a given practice research project – about *time*. It applies whatever the decision made regarding the previous point.

- I raise it because it seems to be assumed that practice research projects will be one-off, even when they are linked to other projects (*see next point*)

STAGED PROJECTS

- I want to persuade you that some practice research may be best approached over two or perhaps more stages.

- One reason for this is pragmatic, especially in the case of 'solo' projects. They are very demanding. Staging work can make something feasible. Though I would advise making the outputs of each stage something of value in themselves in case the full succession does not deliver!

- Second, there is a whole set of questions and problems that are better dealt with over time rather than as a 'cross-section' of practice. E. g. when something takes a long time to unfold; when something happens only occasionally; when we are interested in understanding the way something/someone changes.

- Careful thinking and planning will be needed to support such projects.

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FREE-STANDING OR NETWORKED

- I have thought of stand-alone and staged projects as 'free-standing' in sense of not being part of any wider set of projects.

- One helpful development in the last decade has been networked projects. Examples can be found in New Zealand, Denmark, Scotland and England.

- Basic idea: a group of simultaneous, often modestly funded, moderated and mentored projects where, within a broad theme, each one follows one topic. Often with project meetings.

FREE-STANDING OR NETWORKED

- I think there are gains to this kind of collective practice research.

- But

- It is more resource-hungry.

- It can raise difficulties of ownership.

I HAVE NOT SAID ANYTHING ABOUT…

- ….University-led projects that focus on understanding or evaluating social work practice.

- These are, of course, a kind of practice research. But not something that, as I understand it, falls within our brief.

- But it is likely that research ideas may emerge that come, as far as we can tell, from within the university.

- I think this is a question that would need to be resolved through the management of the initiative

WHAT IS GOOD PRACTICE RESEARCH?

WHERE HAVE WE GOT TO?

- It may be worth recapping some of the questions this leaves with us – in no special order.

1. Should publication be a goal, and if so in what form?
2. Who owns the results?
3. What kinds of problem will it address?
4. Is research training needed?
5. How should priorities be set?
6. Collective and individual agenda.
7. How should questions of research ethics be dealt with?
8. How should practice research relate to/enable service user concerns?

WHAT IS GOOD PRACTICE RESEARCH?

#8 USER CONCERNS

- When I spoke to Lars Uggerhøj I asked him what he thought were the big questions facing practice research. He said:

- 'The third thing I would like to mention is to get much more experience in involving service users in the process. We have very little experience in this – we do have Peter Beresford's discussions and experiences, but this is a specific angle and a UK angle and we need more global experiences in this area.'

- *Peter Beresford has done more than anyone to develop a case for user-led research.*

- *It has implications in part at management level.*

HOW DO PRACTITIONER PRIORITIES COMPARE WITH SERVICE USER RESEARCHERS?

Research problems that service user researchers believe to be important seem to be:

- COPING
- IDENTITY
- INFORMATION NEEDS
- SUPPORT NEEDS

- SELF-HELP
- CARERS
- WOMEN'S ISSUES
- RIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES.

- (SOURCE: MENTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION [UK] 'STRATEGIES FOR LIVING' PROJECT)

WHAT IS GOOD PRACTICE RESEARCH?

THE EXPERIENCE OF DOING PRACTICE RESEARCH

- I think it may help if for the rest of this lecture I say something about the 'trials and joys' of doing practice research as a practitioner.

- Again I have spoken about this last year but I think the evidence is important. I am talking here about social work practitioners who were doing stand alone projects as part of a funded network all in one national children's agency in Scotland.

- I know this will not generalize to all practice research but we have very little evidence on which to go. And I want to encourage yet forewarn interested practitioners

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS QUESTION

- helpful to distinguish between the experience of such research at each stage – i.e. in a *linear* way – and those issues which cut across *horizontally* at all stages.

LINEAR

For example:

1. What predisposes people to become engaged in practice research?

2. What understanding are they likely to bring with them to their involvement and how might this understanding shift and change during their projects?

3. What are the push and pull factors that lead down pathways to diverse research topics?

4. How does the interplay of agency managers, cohort colleagues, practice colleagues, university faculty and tutors serve to support, encourage (or discourage), focus, shape, sustain and (re)direct projects?

WHAT IS GOOD PRACTICE RESEARCH

HORIZONTAL

1. Practice researchers engage with a language and culture that is strange yet potentially rewarding for practice and research. They find themselves located in a culture that lies between 'practice' and 'research' but is fundamentally shaped by and challenges both.

2. Practice researchers are typically engaged in negotiating an uncertain world, which is at its heart an effort to learn what it's about.

3. The location of practice research as lying both within and outside of core professional work poses difficult challenges of moral accountability for their work within their practice cultures.

WHAT IS GOOD PRACTICE RESEARCH

HORIZONTAL (CONT)

4. Involvement in practice research stirs reflection on the meaning and value of professional work. For some practitioners this may be overly demanding in the context of the perceived constraints of their core work.

5. Networked Initiatives inevitably raise questions of ownership.

6. The nature of practice research is something that emerges from the experience, rather than something that prescribes it in advance. It is only in the doing of practice research that its critical identity takes shape.

WHAT IS GOOD PRACTICE RESEARCH?

WHO WILL GO FOR IT? GETTING IN INVOLVES MOTIVATION, CAPACITY AND OPPORTUNITY

- Personal *motivation*.

- Personal and professional *capacity* to carry forward the research.

- Timely *opportunity*

- And NONE of these is easy to anticipate

MOTIVATION

- It does require the individuals to be hugely motivated, hugely proactive really. (Jean)
- I want to make sure it's a good piece of work so I will work really hard to do that, I won't just produce any old thing, that's how I feel, that's just about me about my personality (Shona)

CAPACITY

1. the role of academic support;
2. the nature of pre-existing capacity;
3. the significance of clusters of related projects

- individual capacity may not be recognized in advance, and indeed will often be latent, waiting, perhaps, to be illuminated by the conjunction of motivation and opportunity

THE AMBIGUITY OF ACADEMIC SUPPORT

- 'One sad thing for me is I wanted to – I don't know whether to say it, or if it is the place to say it but – I wanted to use the children as asking the questions to other children and I really, really wanted that. I have been counselled out of it!

- *Have you? By your tutor?*

- Yeah. I just had two wonderful - an eight and a nine year old, who I think could ask these questions. And really it was about confidentiality and how they would maintain confidentiality within the families. But I think it is a real pity.'

OPPORTUNITY

- Opportunities are as much *made* as *given*, and what may seem an opportunity to one person in an organization may be interpreted differently by someone with different interests in the same organization.

- An element of serendipity – unplanned good fortune

WHERE DO TOPICS COME FROM? *PRACTICE PUZZLES*

- For practitioners their research was often a lens that facilitated a focus on fairly major, but sometimes partly unrealized, and long contained career/life issues. A focus group member described the operation of family plans, observing

- 'I find that plans are not followed by various groupings and so … I wondered why that was and was that something we could really work on. So irritation prompted me really. But it was something that you could really use and I think I really thought that too.'

- I believe the weight of these personal commitments, puzzles and investments may be underestimated in organizational deliberations about practice research projects.

NEGOTIATION PROCESS

1. Weak position when negotiating – we saw example about ambiguity of academic support.

2. Entailed a process of focussing and downsizing:

- Alison: well I had a topic in mind that would have been very difficult to do and I don't know how you would have done it but it is still an area that I am interested in so...

- *What was that?*

- Alison: Well I didn't tell them. But it was really about working with families where there is a paedophile living within the home or there is somebody who has abused a child living within the home

- *And you didn't put that forward as an idea?*

- Alison: No I didn't, no. I just thought it would have been very complex and how would I do it and it was also about getting people's consent and I think it would have been quite difficult…

WHAT IS GOOD PRACTICE RESEARCH?

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

1   Practice researchers engage with a language and culture that is strange yet potentially rewarding for practice and research. They find themselves located in a culture that lies between 'practice' and 'research' but is fundamentally shaped by and challenges both.

- 'People speak in a different language; people use different words for different things'. Alison

- Shona. 'It's something that I haven't ever done before, so to be able to talk about, undertaking a piece of research or a study in this way, I quite like that. I quite like to be learning new things and we talked before about the language, the process and that was all new to me, and then being able to see it through and I'm quite excited at this point in time about getting it written and completed and that's about a sense of achievement for me.'

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AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

2 *Practice researchers are typically engaged in negotiating an uncertain world, which is at its heart an effort to learn what it's about.*

- When we listen to Alison's comment that 'I tried to put as much wording in of what people had actually said because I thought that's what it is about', we are hearing someone tentatively endeavouring to identify the essential nature of practitioner research.

- So also in a focus group comment:

- 'The bit I wonder about is have you ever had a semi-structured interview and you go off on a tangent because it is interesting – do you have to do the same with all of them? Because you could end up with 5 totally different interviews, so I am a bit confused about that.' (FG2)

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DIFFICULT ACCOUNTABILITIES

- *3*
- 'I felt my colleagues, there was that kind of sense that I feel like I'm skiving.'
- 'They maybe thought I was swanning off for days to work from home and all the rest of it.'
- ('skyving' and 'swanning off' both have the sense of avoiding commitments in a thoughtless way)
- *Have there been advantages taking part?* It doesn't feel like it at the moment, it just feels like a millstone to be honest (Lesley)

MEANING AND VALUE

4 A focus group exchange between 4 social workers:

- C: I think we have been lucky that Children 1st invested in doing it and gave us the opportunity to do it

- A: We have been lucky

- D: I also think, despite my moaning, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. It's not something I regret doing

- A: So glad I did it

- D: Yes absolutely. In the main, it's been positive

- B: We have focused on challenges and learning and things but I would agree that, you know, looking back I would do things differently but I'm still glad that I did it.

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MEANING AND VALUE – A PROJECT UNFINISHED

- *a project unfinished predominated for some, and the sense that the wider agency programme had been foregrounded at the expense of the individual projects.*

- 'I really wanted something for the kids who took part in that, you know this wasn't really necessarily something for me but it was more about the kind of process that they took part in and that feels like that's kind of disappeared and that it has been something more *corporate*.' (FG1)

- 'It's just I feel as if I've kind of gone in and done it and I go away to Edinburgh and I disappear every so often to do things like this and I come back but you know nobody's really aware of what I've done. And I kind of think that's a shame because it feels like it's been a major piece of work for me – for *me*. …I look at and I think I can't believe I actually did that but it feels like it's disappeared into the air somehow.'

(Edinburgh was the location of the agency's head office)

WHAT IS GOOD PRACTICE RESEARCH?

IDENTITIES

5   The nature of practice research is something that emerges from the experience, rather than something that prescribes it in advance. It is only in the doing of this kind of practice research that its critical identity takes shape.

- Practice research can, in Gillian's words, 'open up so many possibilities I had not thought of'.

- 'I think what I am and what I would like to be are different. I am a practitioner and that is my job, so that's what I have to do and I'm bound by the context of that because that is my income, that is my livelihood. I would like to be more of a researcher. It's opened up a whole range of things that I've never done before and so I would like to pursue maybe ways of combining the two.'

RECOMMENDATIONS

- I have made or implied quite a lot already. For example:
1. Commit to an understanding of practice research that does not set it in a deficit model as a rudimentary or 'thin' version of academic research. Some kinds lie in an interesting position somewhere between research and practice
- A final word from Lars Uggerhøj: 'I think this is a challenge for practice research, both for practice research researchers to be sure that this approach meet criterions for qualified research, but also how to convince the rest of the research world that this is an acceptable and qualified research approach – and not 'research light'.

WHAT IS GOOD PRACTICE RESEARCH?

RECOMMENDATIONS

2. Practice research should not be seen as a homogenous form of inquiry
    - resist too straightforward distinctions of naïve versus mature; simple versus complex; and even practitioner-led versus partnership models of practitioner research
3. Value a range of studies and methodological diversity
4. One strand of practice research should take place through different kinds of networks, including funded networks and informal partnerships.
5. Good practice research should address issues of both local application and wider interest
6. Establish *appropriate* dissemination and utilization plans for each project.
7. Enable appropriate forms of written product

WHAT IS GOOD PRACTICE RESEARCH?

THE END

If you want to see more about three different research projects on this theme in which I have been involved go to:

https://www.york.ac.uk/spsw/staff/ian-shaw/#tab-3

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