THE ECOLOGY OF SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK

BOWEN MCBEATH

SECOND SINGAPORE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE RESEARCH CONFERENCE
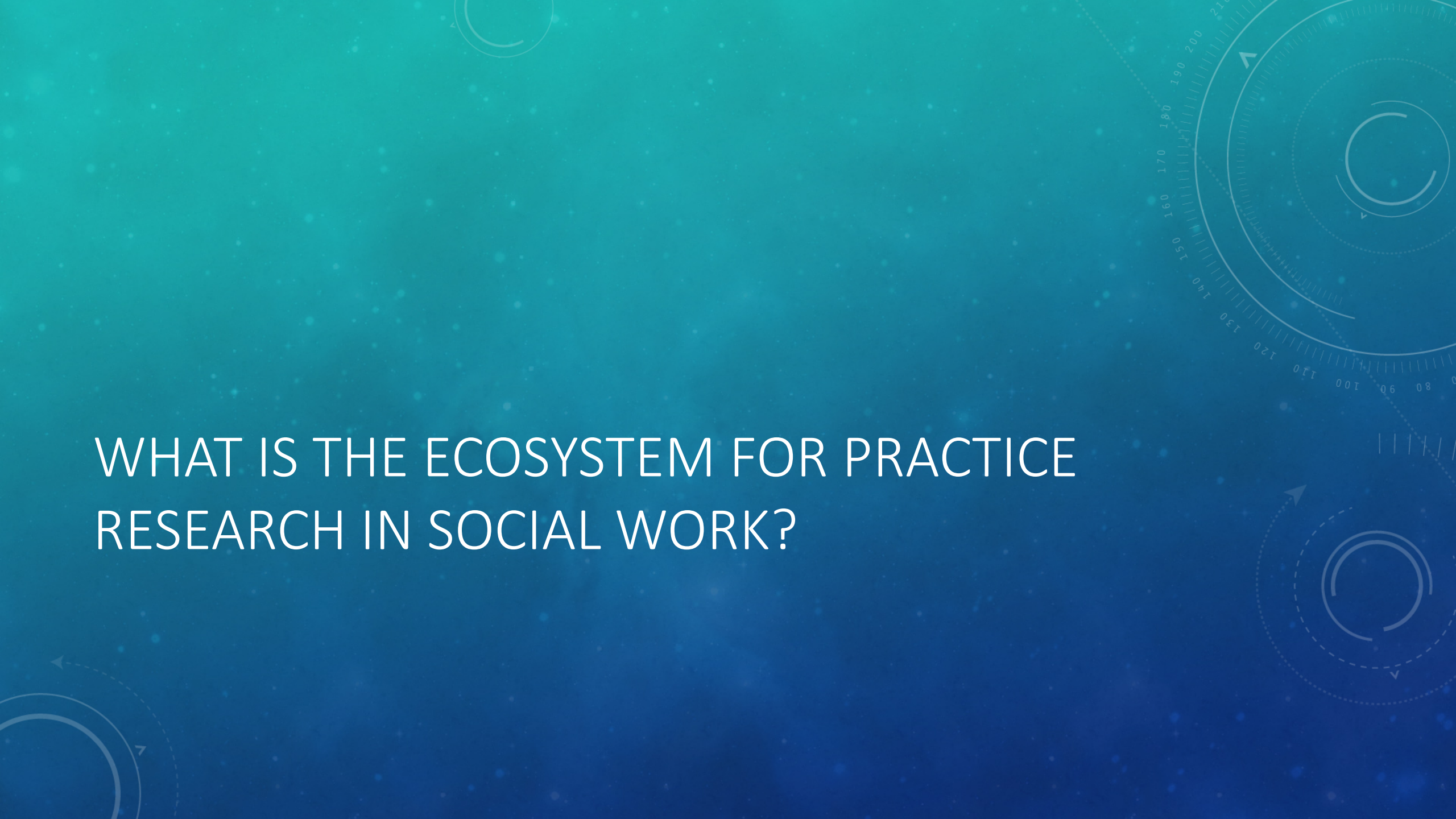
27 AUGUST, 2021

OVERVIEW OF PRESENTATION

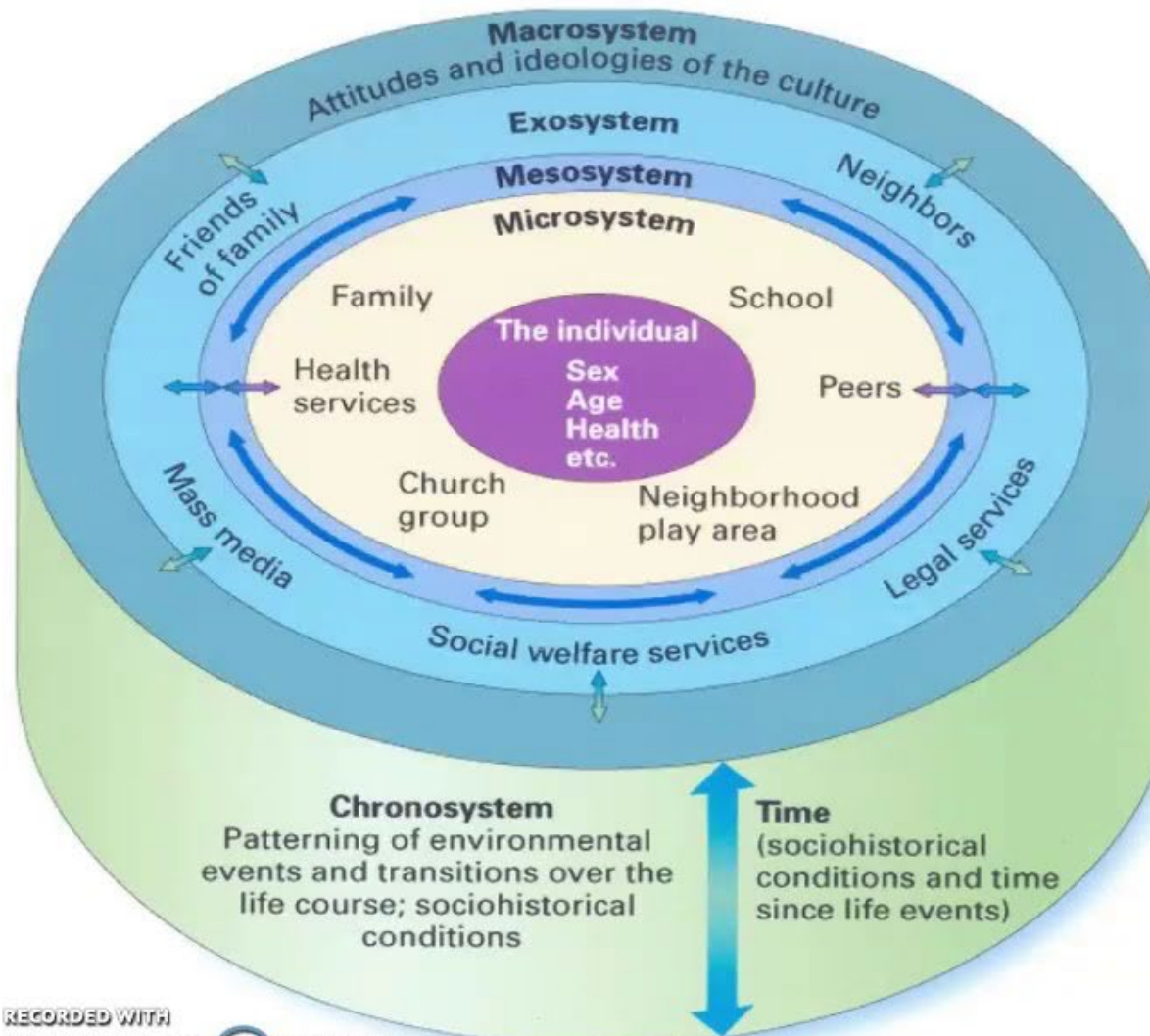*Question 1*: What is the ecosystem for practice research in social work?

Question 2: How do we sustain practice research in social work agency settings?

Conclusions: Towards a sustainable future for practice researchers

WHAT IS THE ECOSYSTEM FOR PRACTICE RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK?

BRONFENBRENNER'S ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

Exosystem

Link between two settings: One is an immediate setting, and the other is one where the person doesn't play an active role.

ORGANIZATIONS SHAPE THE ECOSYSTEM OF PRACTICE RESEARCH

1. Organizations *buffer, adapt, and innovate* in response to external forces.
   - Policy and funding influences.
   - Market influences.
2. Organizations *influence*.
   - External advocacy in response to marketization and neoliberalism.
   - Disparity reduction and equity in response to historic and emerging needs.
   - Dissemination and implementation of evidence-based practices and promising initiatives.
3. The subject is organization; the verb is *organizing*.
   - Grand Challenges and "moon shots".
   - Evidence-informed practice and practice research initiatives.
   - Capacity and workforce.

MCBEATH (2006)
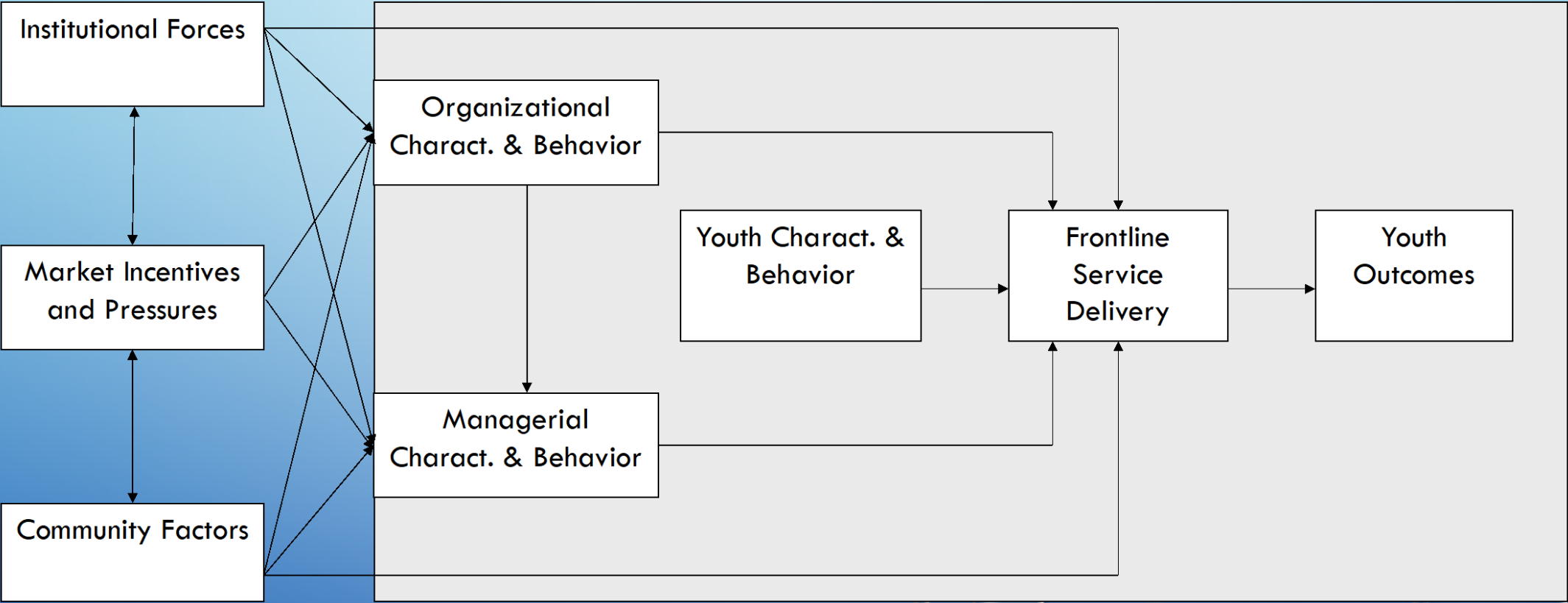
A PRELIMINARY MODEL OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE (2019)
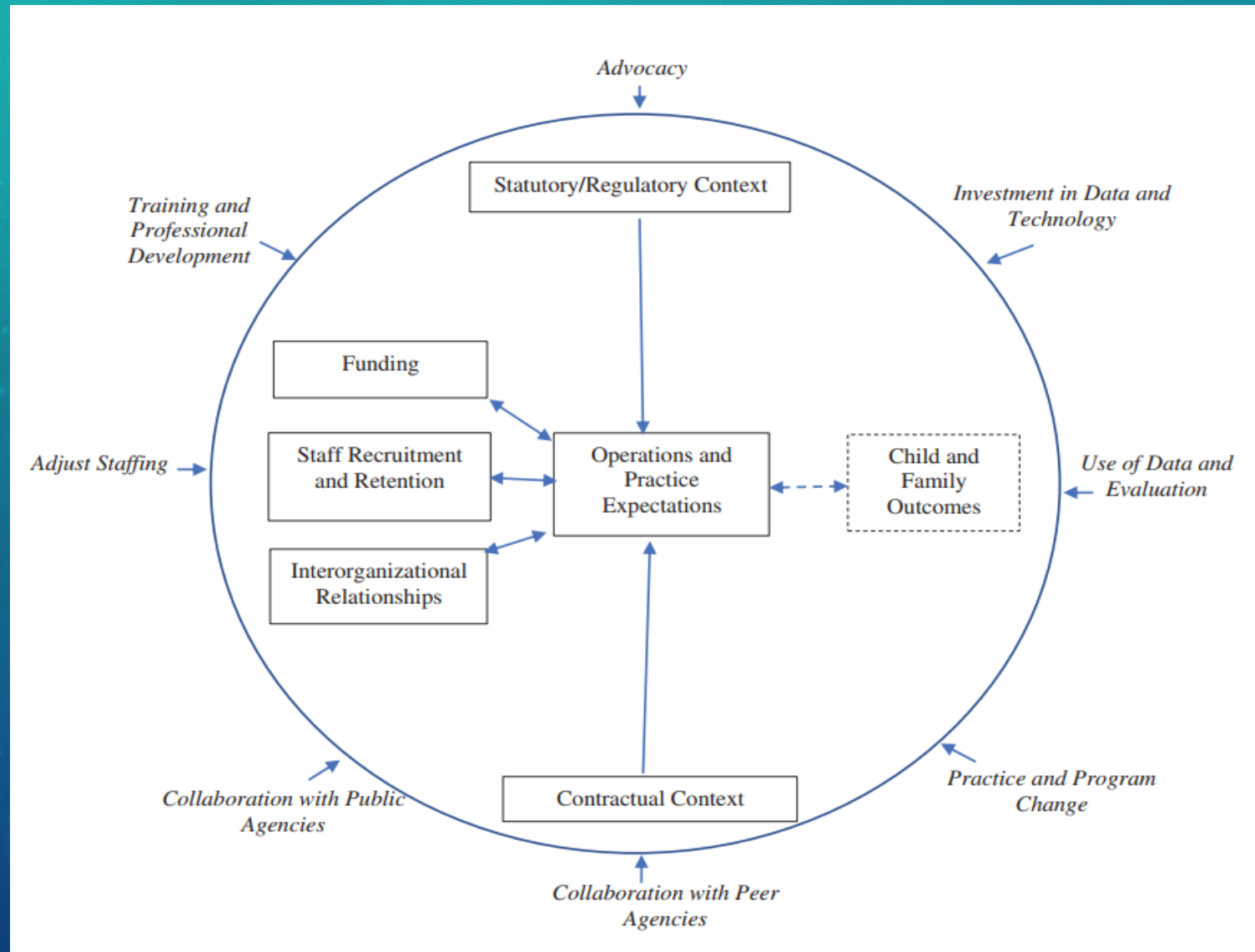
HOW DO WE SUSTAIN PRACTICE RESEARCH IN SOCIAL WORK AGENCY SETTINGS?

SUSTAINING PRACTICE RESEARCH: A FIVE-FOLD APPROACH

In order to sustain practice research initiatives, organizations need to be focused upon supporting service innovation and organizational improvement.

Institutional

Organizational culture & climate

Leadership & management

Workforce development

Social support

INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS FOR PRACTICE RESEARCH

Challenges	Support strategies
Research is viewed as top-down and less helpful for practice.	Reframe research around its value for social advocacy and organizational development.
No requirements or incentives for experimentation.	Incentivize model development and testing.
Few opportunities for testing novel practice approaches.	Interorganizational network development to promote research infrastructure and knowledge sharing.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND CLIMATE CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS FOR PRACTICE RESEARCH

Challenges	Support strategies
Lack of a learning organizational perspective emphasizing experimentation and critical thinking. Defensive, risk-averse culture.	*Formal*: R&D units; chief innovation officers; require clinical data-mining; establish practice research competitions. *Informal*: strengthen research networks anchored by link officers; institutionalize critical analysis of success and failure.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS FOR PRACTICE RESEARCH

Challenges	Support strategies
Leaders and managers do not champion practice research or create space for it.	Leaders and managers model evidence-informed practice by doing and facilitating practice research.
Unclear organizational and professional boundaries regarding service delivery, service user assessment, and data reporting.	Establishment of feedback loops to integrate program improvement within a quality assessment and performance improvement framework.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS FOR PRACTICE RESEARCH

Challenges	Support strategies
Practitioner research anxiety. Insufficient time, training, and/or interest in research. Lack of access to relevant, engaging research training and professional development.	Recruit staff with high innovation potential and robust research training (e.g., research requirements added to job descriptions). Staff trained to be bicultural practitioner-researchers. Sabbaticals and job rotations used to foster reflection and cross-pollination.

SOCIAL SUPPORT CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS FOR PRACTICE RESEARCH

Challenges	Support strategies
Lack of practice research support networks and dedicated (and trauma-informed) spaces to reflect on key service efforts.	Provide resources to develop and sustain learning communities, and organize service improvement efforts through them.

TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR PRACTICE RESEARCHERS

SUMMARY OF THESIS

1. It is important to understand the organizational context of social work practice. Specifically,
   - Evolving institutional and civic forces
   - Have powerful consequences for agency programs and services
   - Resulting in effects on social work practitioners
   - As well as micro-level effects on service users and desired outcomes

2. In this context, practice researchers should recognize:
   - The five-fold challenges facing practice research initiatives
   - The need to explore possible support strategies
   - The opportunity to align practice research initiatives within an overarching goal of service innovation and organizational improvement.

ENVISIONING AN ORGANIZATIONAL SETTING IN WHICH PRACTICE RESEARCH IS PRIORITIZED

What if the typical social work organization viewed itself as a "practice laboratory", in which key structures and processes supported:

- *Practice research:* Collaboratively exploring essential practice questions using diverse research methods.

- *Performance management via CQI:* Evaluating service delivery and outcome data rigorously.

- *A culture of innovation:* Creating "safe enough" spaces to foster dialogue involving diverse perspectives and welcoming non-traditional partners (e.g., service users).

- *A commitment to knowledge sharing:* Using research to inform practice and advocacy.

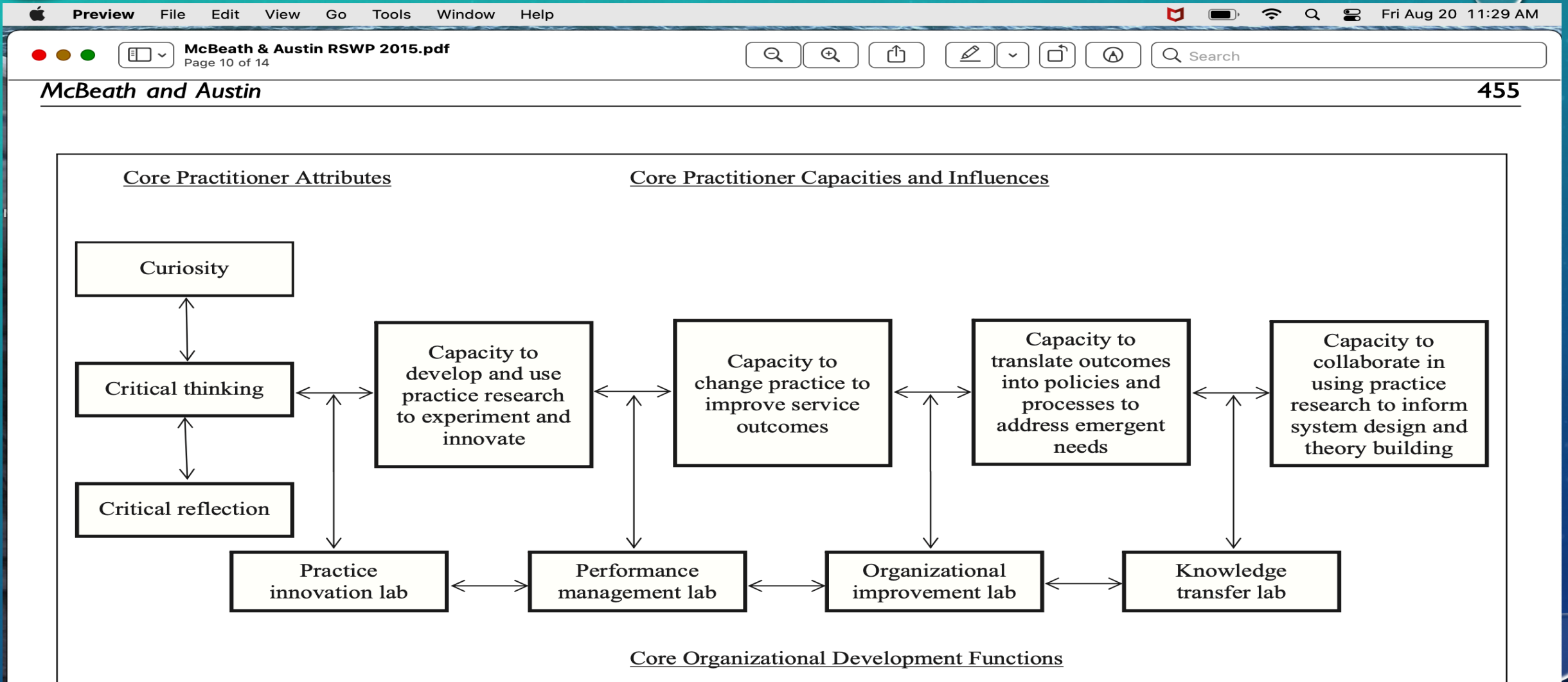# PRACTICE RESEARCH FOR ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Figure 3. Developmental and reciprocal influences of research-minded practitioners in changing practice to improve services and inform organizational processes and theory development

QUESTIONS INFORMING THE ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT OF PRACTICE RESEARCH

1. How could we *redefine organizational goals* to view practice research as *essential* for transforming practice and enhancing organizational sustainability?

2. Might we shift our understanding of our organization so that its focus becomes a "*design lab*" for the creative exploration and testing of progressive approaches to practice?

3. What opportunities exist to *bridge* the culture of practice and the culture of research within this organization as well as the culture of research within this organization and that of external researchers?

4. How might organizational leaders *collaborate* with service users and other key stakeholders to develop, evaluate, refine, and disseminate new service approaches?