Doing Social Work Research

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Aidan Worsley would like to dedicate this book to his mother and father, Bill and Olive Worsley. Dad, I think of you every day.

Louise Hardwick would like to dedicate this book to Monica, Tom, Ursula, Molly and Leo.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

It's a little perplexing that relatively few social workers appear to be doing research into practice. Who better to interview service users or run a focus group of carers for the purposes of research than social workers? Who better to analyse complex situations and make a sound assessment based on the evidence? Surely social workers know more about social work than anyone else, possess the right value base and an enviable range of transferable skills for research that equip them commendably. And yet, research appears to be in its infancy for practitioners in the social care workforce. We would argue that research involving social workers (and service users) tends to be done *to* us rather than *with* us. Even less often is research actually done *by* us. This is perhaps even more surprising when we start to think more globally about the nature of social work.

'The social work profession promotes social change' (International Federation of Social Work, 2000). These are the very first words of an important definition of our vocation and they beg the question – in what ways do we really promote social change? Similarly, the (UK) Code of Practice has, as its first line: 'Social Care Workers must protect the rights and promote the interests of service users and carers' (General Social Care Council, 2004). The question of how we might respond to these fundamental challenges to our professional practice is given an answer: practitioner research. This book is written especially for every social worker, whether on a qualifying training course, post qualifying programme or simply a practitioner in the field. This book will also provide help to those throughout the social care workforce who are interested in learning more about doing research. It is a book designed to help people research their practice and roots itself in the kinds of research that a typical social worker might consider doing. It's a very practical guide, using examples drawn from practice throughout. But its main emphasis – and main hope – is that it is about *doing* social work research. We aim to inspire, enable and encourage the reader to engage in research because we think that is what is best for the profession and, more importantly, the many millions of service users and carers that social workers support, challenge and empower throughout their careers.

HOW THE BOOK WORKS

The whole point of this book is to encourage research by talking about it in a clear, uncluttered way, avoiding unnecessary jargon. It tells social workers what they need

to know to begin doing research and, in that sense, should be seen as an introductory text – although it will suit experienced as well as beginning practitioners. It is important that the reader is aware that a vast array of research methods texts exist which look in considerable detail at many of the areas we discuss. We therefore advise the reader to use this book in conjunction with others to deepen their understanding of key issues. Our focus is social work research. This book aims to demystify the research process by helping people engaged in social work practice learn about it. Case studies will help the reader examine the concepts, theories and methods than underpin research. The book has an abundance of activities that are based in real life practice, each one of which aims to bring alive important aspects of learning to be a practitioner researcher. In this way, reflection is encouraged and we hope the reader will become an active participant in the book. Each chapter ends with 'key points' that underline what one needs to take on board and suggestions for further reading. This is also a book for the many students – on qualifying and post qualifying courses and throughout the canon of social care awards – who are looking to learn about or begin research, perhaps as part of a dissertation or project. Each chapter has a section that specifically looks at how the activities it will go on to describe relate to the National Occupational Standards for Social Work. We felt this was important because it underlines that research is a core part of the practitioner's role but may also help in relating research activity to competency structures.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This isn't a book that is necessarily meant to be read from the beginning to the end. Rather, it presents the reader with self contained chapters that focus on specific aspects of research that will be especially pertinent to different people at different times, dependent upon their own approach to research. Having said that, the sequencing of the chapters follows a logical path through the areas that the practitioner researcher needs to understand in order to engage in research. The book has two main sections. The first section contains the first three chapters of the book. They cover the underpinning ideas that, as practitioner researchers, we need to understand so that we can appropriately contextualize our research – seeing it in the broader context of other research. They consider such questions as, 'what is special about social work research'? There have been many debates on this matter and we all need to arrive at an understanding of where social work research sits in relation to, for example, healthcare research. We also make the argument for the practitioner researcher – the challenging notion that as busy practitioners we should, to some extent, be researchers as well. It makes the point that in many ways, social workers *are* researchers and already possess many of the skills that the practitioner researcher will come to rely on. But we underline the point that these are *transferable* skills. A social worker is no more automatically a researcher than a researcher is automatically a social worker. Practitioner researchers need to harness the considerable skills they have and apply them appropriately to a new, different task. Whilst we would not argue this is always easy, a social worker should find that the transition to researcher practitioner is not too difficult because of the transferability of the typical skill sets they possess – and therefore well within the reach of the everyday social worker. In this sense our

prof-ession possesses strong foundations in developing its practitioner researchers. There is also a thorough examination of the ethics of social work research which considers the ethical principles we should adopt when going about our research. After all, social work research is likely to involve the vulnerable and disempowered. It is clearly not enough to simply have the skills to carry out research – especially in these complex areas. *How* we go about research in a way that affirms the values that under-pin our work is of fundamental importance.

The second section of the book takes the reader on a step by step, easy to read guide to doing social work research. It follows the typical path taken by most research projects looking at proposals, methods of doing research, analysis of data and writing up research reports. Thus, it looks at service user involvement in research, interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, observation and narratives. Each chapter draws on a range of research projects in social work areas to show how other people have man-aged the process and overcome the occasional obstacles that all research presents. They draw on a wide range of material from established research methods texts, through to contemporary journal articles, general social work texts and service user led projects.

Great emphasis is placed on developing the knowledge, skills and values that the practitioner researcher needs to generate knowledge in the workplace. We believe that this sort of activity is a part of the professional development of the social work and social care workforce. We believe that a critical, questioning approach to research informed practice – including researching one's own and others' practice – is funda-mental to the process of lifelong learning and keeping up to date. These are key components of good practice and, of course, are included in the National Occupational Standards and the Code of Practice.

The authors are both qualified social workers and have worked in various social work, social care, criminal justice and community settings before embarking on academic careers. They bring to this book all their practice experiences, but also the experience of teaching, supporting and enabling social work researchers for many years at many different levels. They have both been active researchers in the field of social work throughout their careers. Louise Hardwick is a Lecturer in The School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Liverpool and Aidan Worsley is Professor and Head of the School of Social Work at the University of Central Lancashire.

WHAT'S DISTINCTIVE ABOUT SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH?

OVERVIEW

This chapter will explore social work's knowledge base and the constellation of core values it draws on that predispose it towards enquiry that is both relationship-based and informed by a broader emancipatory mission. The questions 'What is research?' and whether there is a justification for practitioner research being seen as a valued perspective in its own right will be investigated. It is argued that, given the nature of social work practice, it is only to be expected that practitioners should seek research knowledge that both arises from, and reflects, the complexities of practice. It is also argued that practitioners themselves might contribute to this knowledge by engaging in research that can inform and influence practice and policy. To begin to understand the challenges facing practitioner research, we will look at the recent history of social work research's contribution to policy and the drive towards evidence-based knowledge and New Managerialism. We will suggest that practitioners who undertake research could provide both a situated understanding of the unique in each individual and circumstance and offer a challenge/critique of the practices, institutions and polices that militate against social justice. Doing research provides one route for practitioners to realise social work's emancipatory potential.

WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE?

The National Occupational Standards for Social Work draw on the international statement which identifies the social work profession as:

> A profession which promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers, 2001)

This is a statement on the commitment of social work to humanitarian values and the promotion of social change. It provides the nucleus from which issue and permeate the six key roles of social work, and any social work endeavour.

National Occupational Standards for Social Work

Key Role 1: Prepare for, and work with individuals, families, carers, groups and communities to assess needs and circumstances.

Key Role 2: Plan, carry out, review and evaluate practice, with individuals, families, carers, groups, communities and other professionals.

Key Role 3: Support individuals to represent their needs, views and circumstances.

Key Role 4: Manage risk to individuals, families, groups, communities, self and colleagues.

Key Role 5: Manage and be accountable, with supervision and support, for your own social work practice within your organisation.

Key Role 6: Demonstrate competence in social work practice.

These key purposes combined with the humanitarian values in the International Federation's statement mean that for the social worker the service user is not just an individual in a social situation who is the subject of engagement, assessment and practice. The service user is also a unique individual in complex and uncertain circumstances that are influenced to a lesser or greater extent by collective socioeconomic forces. These forces demand acknowledgement and understanding if social justice and inequality are also to be addressed. Nonetheless, this collective emancipatory mission has been an area where the social work profession has struggled to move significantly beyond the rhetoric (Jordan, 2004) despite this fusion of regard for both unique and collective inequalities providing social work with its distinctive nature (Bisman, 2004; Webb, 2001). This is made even more challenging because social work is a highly complex and sometimes apparently contradictory pursuit. It is an adherence to this value base that helps navigate the practitioner through the quagmire that characterises practice. As Jordan argues:

> … social work occupies an ambiguous role in society, negotiating with individuals in ways that try to validate their claims to autonomy, but from a position inside such institutions as public agencies, civil society organizations, churches or local groups, and one which involves a duty to criticize and challenge those very institutions, from the perspective of freedom, equality and justice. (2004: 12)

At an individual level of engagement the practitioner must always seek to facilitate a relationship which can enhance well-being and be characterised as 'relationship-based practice', an awareness of 'the uniqueness of each individual's circumstances and the diverse knowledge sources required to make sense of complex, unpredictable problems' (Ruch, 2005: 111). Social work also needs to move beyond the individual circumstance to understand and find ways to express concern for the societal inequalities and injustice that feed these individual circumstances. Practitioner research has the potential to express both these sets of values.

SOCIAL WORK KNOWLEDGE

Social work has always been multidisciplinary in its knowledge base and practice, drawing on, for instance, sociological thinking and research, psychology and social

policy, and experiential knowledge (reflection). Through sociological thinking social work is offered an understanding of social differences and inequality such as class, disability, race, gender and age in the context of the laws and rules laid down by society. The sociologist gaze is bifocal – distinguishing between social presentation and social reality. Through psychology, social work is offered a knowledge of the processes that will influence and impact on individual behaviour and develop an understanding of personal attachments and relationships and how the nature of these can influence an individual's behaviour. Through social policy, social work is offered an understanding of the processes involved in the state distribution of resources amongst individuals and groups to meet welfare needs and how this is organised through a range of institutions from 'the family and the community networks in which the family exists, the market, the charitable and voluntary sectors, the social services and benefits provided by the state, and, increasingly, international organisations and agreements' (Baldock et al., 2003: xxi). Experiential learning is also important to social work knowledge because social work practice not only relies on technical expertise (theories and methods that can inform interventions and the legal and procedural requirements of the profession), but also on a tacit understanding that is a complicated combination of personal judgment, past experience and theoretical knowledge.

REFLECTION IN SOCIAL WORK

Experiential learning is explored in the work of Donald Schön who has analysed how professionals learn by focusing on what he calls 'the swampy lowlands' of professional practice (Schön, 1983). These relate to the inner resources professionals draw on when they find themselves having to make decisions in complex and/or controversial settings. For a social worker the obvious area for these kinds of decisions is regulatory practice, as for example the decision to take care proceedings under Section 38 of the Children Act (1989). However, less obvious situations – like the decision to follow up an intuition that may prove rooted or groundless – also requires complex decision making. Schön is fascinated by the inner resources and processes that influence how professionals can make these difficult complex and contingent decisions.

Schön has suggested that the professional develops a kind of 'artistry' which is different from their technical expertise. He has argued that this type of problem/situation cannot be dealt with by simply applying a technical competence. Instead, the professional has to build a 'repertoire' of past scenarios, precedents and case studies that can be drawn on to inform an understanding of the 'here-and-now' situation. These are accessed by applying knowledge from literature and research but additionally, and more significantly, by applying knowledge from the interpretation of experience. This process only becomes 'artistry' when the professional engages in a meaningful reflection on their past experience and practice. Reflection on practice involves:

- recapturing the situation;
- thinking about it;
- mulling it over (alone or with others);
- evaluating;
- acting on that evaluation. (Boud et al., 1985)

For Schön simple reflection is not sufficient as it ignores the social and situational nature of experience. Together with his colleague Argyris he argued that simple reflection will only produce 'single loop learning' (Argyris and Schön, 1974). With this kind of learning an individual will simply reinforce and defend old habits and behaviours because it fails to challenge their underlying assumptions, preconceptions and belief systems. You will doubtless be familiar with the attitude 'This is how I've always done it and no one has come to any harm'. For example, when reflecting on something like an altercation with a difficult colleague a practitioner may reflect that this colleague is always difficult and aggressive when asked for information when passing on the corridor. Single loop learning would be content to explore the problem as simply lying with the colleague. This approach lacks the critical reflection that challenges taken-for-granted understanding and problematises the process and motivation.

Alternatively, a competent professional will engage in 'double loop learning' which will challenge all previous understanding in a 'progressively more effective testing of assumptions and progressively greater learning about one's effectiveness' (Argyris and Schön, 1974: 86). This double loop learning may, for instance, question the appropriateness of asking for information on the corridor, why appropriate systems for information sharing are not being utilised, what the consequences of affixing the label 'difficult' on that colleague are likely to be. The process of critical reflection required for 'double loop' learning is inevitably difficult to achieve alone. The would-be learner can be the last person to recognise when their understanding is limited by long-held preconceptions that might go back to childhood because they are so enmeshed in the situation as to be incapable of objectivity. To avoid this Schön suggests what he calls a 'reflective practicum', where people come together to analyse an issue or problem and explore it from many different dimensions, including the individual's emotional response. Argyris and Schön developed their ideas on reflection from an educational discourse where they fundamentally questioned the value of professionals only using theoretical and technical knowledge for their practice. These ideas complement and cross-fertilise with reflexive knowledge, which is also important to the social work practitioner.

REFLEXIVITY IN SOCIAL WORK

Although reflexivity is a similar concept to reflection, it developed out of a social science discourse and has been used as an approach in social science research. It relates to researchers reflecting on the research process and locating themselves in this process (Fook, 2002). Reflexivity involves a more sophisticated exploration of the processes at play facilitating an emergent understanding of social situations that takes into account the social context, experience and values of the researcher (Powell, 2002). Sue White advocates using reflexivity in social work practice as well as research as a means 'of destabilisation, or problematization of taken-for-granted knowledge and day to day reasoning. Treated in this way, reflexivity becomes a process of looking inward and outward, to the social and cultural artefacts and forms of thought which saturate our practices' (2001: 102). This process of taking time to problematise all aspects of a situation avoids the rigidity which rides roughshod over the nuances of the particular. It also allows an opportunity for destabilisation and self-awareness rather than blindly acting on the basis of policies and procedures, research findings or strategies.

Since a reflexive approach takes account of values and questions taken-for-granted assumptions it is an approach which sits very comfortably with the situated and value-based requirements of the social worker practitioner. As Ruckdeschel and Shaw argue, ' … all forms of social work practice can benefit from a reflective stance … [but] reflective practice is of limited use unless the products of reflections are shared' (2008: 299). An effective method of ensuring that these reflections are rigorous and shared is available through the practitioner engaging in research.

WHAT IS RESEARCH?

Before we can focus in on practitioner research we need a brief examination of what we mean by research itself. All research involves the use of rigorous and systematic methods to explore questions, problems and topics with the aim of gathering data that will inform greater understanding. The discovered data and understanding may be very specific, or general, depending on the type of research being undertaken and the type of data sought. Research can range from basic/scientific to an applied social investigation. Generally speaking, with basic research the investigation will be driven by the researcher's interests and will be unrelated to immediate practical questions, problems or topics. In contrast, applied social research is more likely to be driven by social interests and be closely related to immediate practical questions, problems or topics (Stoecker, 2003).

Underpinning any research endeavour are key values associated with different research approaches and paradigms and these in turn will impact on the types of investigation undertaken. Positivism is an epistemological approach (theory of knowledge) which advocates the application of scientific methods to the discovery of social reality. This approach aims to reduce any possibility of contamination coming from the researcher themselves (researcher bias), the research equipment, the methods used, and the setting/laboratory or field setting, and is associated with the scientific methods found in the natural sciences. In contrast, the interpretivist approach requires researchers to investigate the subjective meaning of social reality. This approach is predicated on the belief that the social world is fundamentally different from the physical world and cannot be understood in all its complexity though the use of scientific methods.

There are two general approaches to gathering data – quantitative and qualitative – and these are not mutually exclusive. With the quantitative approach a researcher is more likely to remain objective and distant from the process and gather data which is often in the form of numbers. The data are analysed and interpreted using measurement and can be presented in the form of tables and charts. The types of methods associated with this approach are surveys, questionnaires and structured interviews. The qualitative approach is designed to allow for more complexity to emerge in the findings, thus allowing the intricacies of a situation to be acknowledged. Findings and data are often presented as prose. The interpretation of findings is more likely to be offered by the researcher and is therefore open to alternative interpretations, whereas with quantitative data the measurements and calculations will often speak for themselves. This approach lends itself to small-scale research that adopts methods of observation, unstructured interviews, focus groups and the use of narrative (Denscombe, 1998).