I Power Dynamics and Professionalism

A study of service user and carer involvement in social work admissions in one U.K. University - power, professionalism and trust.

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In June 2002 the Department of Health upgraded social work training in England, resulting in the Diploma in Social Work being replaced by a new undergraduate and master’s level qualification. Amongst the many new requirements outlined for the new degree in social work was one that programmes approved to provide the new training must “Ensure that representatives of stakeholders, particularly service users and employers, are involved in the selection process (of new students). (DoH 2002:2).

The policy of involving service users and carers in social work admissions involves a confusing and sometimes contradictory palette of explanations employing vague concepts such as ‘empowerment’, ‘consumer’, and more generally, ‘power’ and ‘professionalism’. There is little research on the impact and outcomes of service user participation (Carr 2004, Ward 2006), partly due to the difficulties in defining and measuring what exactly social work does (Hugman 2009). This paper is based on a case study of service user and carer involvement in admissions in one, english university.

The paper argues that if we wish to understand the effects of involving service users and carers in social work admissions we have to understand the asymmetrical power relationships between professions and those service users and carers involved in the admissions process. The issue of power was a fundamental aspect of the study because implicit in the policy of involvement is the assumption that involvement will address these unequal relationships.

The paper will argue that the ideological perspective of those developing user and carer involvement is relevant to what these policies are likely to achieve. For example, user involvement can be linked to the politics of liberation through campaigns by new social movements but if can also be linked to the politics of the free market. Although sharing the same concern these two developments have competing ‘world views (Beresford and Campbell 1994:316). Understanding and explaining this ‘competition’ therefore was crucial within the study discussed here.

The study utilised the approach of Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1977, Bourdieu, 2000, Bourdieu & Waquant 1992) to enable this analysis. This approach allowed me to conceptualise the social space of admissions as being one which was characterised by competition over capital. It recognises that some actors have a predisposed advantage over others in their access to social capital within the field under study and considers what capital service users and carers can access within this field of social work admissions.
The advantages of this approach will be discussed and can be exemplified by considering the issue of trust. One of the results from this study was the importance of trustworthiness as an attribute sought for in potential candidates by service users and carers. This paper explains how Bourdieu’s approach assists us in conceptualising trust and why, in the unequal access to capital, trust relationships can be problematic as they were for many service users and carers in their past dealings with social services.

An Exploration of Mental Health Evaluations and the Experiences of Mothers with Children in Foster Care

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For mothers whose children have been removed and placed into foster care, the experience of navigating the child welfare system is influenced by a myriad of factors. These mothers are expected to form healthy, productive relationships with workers in the context of a significant power differential, within which their performance is judged in terms of their compliance with mandated services. Conversely, workers must contend with the complex process of assessing 1) what is truly in the best interests of children; 2) whether mothers have demonstrated adequate behavioral changes for their families to be reunited; and 3) the future risk of maltreatment. Due to the inherent challenges in making life-altering judgments about such nebulous concepts, referral for mental health evaluations is intended to aid child welfare workers in objectively and validly assessing mothers’ capacity to care for their children after the departure of child protective services from families’ lives.

Evaluators conducting parents’ mental health assessments are asked to make judgments of parenting capacity in the absence of specific indicators that define the minimum threshold of parenting skills (Budd, Clark, & Connell, 2011). Current models of assessment and standardized instruments are individually focused and less appropriate to evaluate the parent-child relationship and parenting skills (Azar, Lauretti, & Loding, 1998). Furthermore, instruments that comprise traditional psychological evaluations have not been systematically validated to assess the parenting capacity of mentally ill caregivers. Evaluations tend to occur in a single context; parents may function well in their homes, but less so in an office session with a clinician (Risley-Curtiss, Stromwall, Hunt, & Teska, 2004).

Current research estimates that approximately half of Americans will experience a mental health disorder at some time in their lives, with the initial onset typically occurring in childhood or adolescence. Approximately 65% of mentally ill individuals are mothers, and 52% are fathers. Estimating the prevalence of mental illness among parents with children in foster care, however, proves intrinsically challenging since this data is not routinely gathered, and parents are often evaluated after becoming involved with the child welfare system (Nicholson, et al., 2001).
The purpose of this paper is to explore the utilization of the mental health evaluation in the context of foster care practice. This will include a systematic review of available research on this topic, recognition of current gaps in the literature and implications for policy. In addition, there will be a discussion regarding the implications for practice-based research and exploration of recent studies utilizing this paradigm. Epstein (2001) defines practice-based research as “the use of research-inspired principles, designs and information gathering techniques within existing forms of practice to answer questions that emerge from practice in ways that inform practice” (p. 17). Therefore, the objective is to reflect what is occurring in natural practice environments.

Hidden population with “invisible” problems: How to establish a fruitful research partnership with the welfare system in a project on youths aged 18-23 with substance-related problems and bad housing conditions

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Reviews of international social work literature leave the impression that quality housing to an increasing extent has become a key factor in outreach social work and follow-up efforts directed towards youths who have substance-related problems. The view seems to prevail that good housing firstly may prevent social marginalization and negative health effects and secondly stimulate the youths’ motivation for school or work-life attendance. Yet, there often seems to be a wide gap between such good intentions and reality. The Norwegian Government’s vision is that any citizen shall have the opportunity to live in a place in which one feels safe and at home. But in reality in Norway, as in many other countries, is an apparent lack of appropriate housing for people in a disadvantaged situation.

Conclusions from a newly finished action research study suggest that an apparent lack of appropriate public housing is particularly the case for 18-23-year-olds in the initial phase of a potential substance user career. Besides, the regulations for financial support aimed at making young people competitive on the private housing market are partially contradictory and only to a very modest extent those regulations fit the needs of the youths in question. A third identified problem is that the new Norwegian welfare organization, aimed at serving adults, does not immediately allow for extra support to young people with a disadvantaged point of departure; and who therefore are extra vulnerable in the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. There are certain indications that youths in the described situation is developing into a kind of “hidden population”, which is ignored by the system.
However, whereas there seems to be common agreement around the existence of the two first challenges mentioned, it is not given that the problem is identified within the system as issue. There may be diverging opinions around the third challenge both as regards its existence, definition of the problem and as regards how it might be solved.

The paper, with the referred conclusions as a backdrop, will particularly discuss the potentiality for robust knowledge production around a problem that has so far not been identified by the system, at least not in a very explicit way.

**Key words:** Housing policy, disadvantaged young adults, substance abuse, rehabilitation, social inclusion.

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**How near is too near? Exploring the power dynamics of ‘practice near’ research in child care social work settings in England**

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‘Practice near’ research is an emergent approach to researching professional practice that has the potential to make a significant contribution to the development of practice research, to improvements in professional practice and to the reduction of the widely recognised and problematic gap between practice and research. It is possible to conceptualise ‘practice near’ research in two, not necessarily mutually exclusive, but distinctive ways. The more conventional conceptualisation of ‘practice near’ research as research on practice, involves the systematic exploration of an area of specific interest in the domain of professional practice and the generation and dissemination of new knowledge arising from such studies. More innovative approaches understand ‘practice near’ research as research in practice, which involves utilising practice approaches and interventions as research methods. This approach is characterised by a greater sense of immediacy and refers to the integration and application of new practice knowledge within the immediate research context - in this instance, reflective case discussion groups - and directly in the practice domain. As a new approach to practice research both understandings of ‘practice near’ projects raise important methodological questions.

This paper explores some of the methodological questions raised from two ‘practice near’ research projects in child care social work settings in England. Each of the projects were designed as combined research-continuing professional development (CPD) initiatives and involved using reflective case discussions, commonly used as part of CPD initiatives, as a research method. In the two projects a researcher facilitated reflective work discussion groups with child care social work practitioners from a range of child care settings. In the first setting the focus of the group discussions was determined by the funding body and explored social workers’ experiences of the impact of the integrated children’s services agenda on professional practices and relationships. In the second setting the focus of the discussion - exploring social workers’ experiences of communicating with children – was
determined by the researcher in consultation with senior managers from the participating local authority. The paper identifies three distinctive phases in the research process and methodological questions relating to the dynamics of power arising at each stage:

**Beginnings:** Identifying the research topic and *sharing the power*. How near is too near to practice? Who has control of identifying what is researched and how?

**Middles:** Managing the research process, facilitating the groups and *sharing the power*. What is the role of the researcher as group facilitator? How much influence should the researcher exercise?

**Ends:** Analysing data, identifying and disseminating findings and *sharing the power*. Are researchers too remote to implement effective dissemination into practice? How can this be addressed? To what extent can the ‘outputs’ from ‘practice near’ research be distinguished as contributing to research *in* and *on* practice? Does it matter?

Addressing these research conundrums and specifically the power dynamics embedded in these projects will strengthen the robustness and trustworthiness of practice research in the increasingly epistemologically restrictive and prescriptive arena of evidence-based practice and enhance its capacity to contribute to improving the quality of professional practice.