

VI Ethical and Political Concerns in Practice Research

Recruitment and Ethics of responsibility when researching marginalised communities

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Social work research and practice is necessarily concerned with these issues of power, inclusion and exclusion (Sheppard 2006). Most research and frameworks of knowledge present a site of struggle for minority groups as they are often misrepresented, pathologised or problematised (Said 1995, Tuhiwai Smith 1999, Jensen & Lauritsen, 2005). In addition, most marginalised groups, particularly minority groups, continue to be excluded from research or reduced to mere objects of research (Jensen and Lauritsen 2005, Mullender and Hague 2005, Sheikh 2006). Thus, while research and knowledge production with marginalised groups can be an empowering process (Ungar and Nicholl, 2002), research with such groups also raise particular issues of power and require ethical decision making. While, there have been increasing dialogue and debate around inclusion of marginalised groups through (Eide & Allen, 2005, Yancey et al. 2006), the power dynamics that arise in the processes of recruitment have been limited. In addition, ethical concerns have been bureaucratised and consideration of ethics have been reduced to administrative tasks scrutinised by review committees.

This is inadequate for several reasons including the notion of what is ethical differs between distinct social groups; and the generalised approach leaves little room for engagement with ethical issues as they arise in the research field and to which the researcher must respond. In this paper, we uncover the power dynamics of recruiting minority groups in terms of:

1. Accessing participants through gate-keepers,
2. Ethical scrutiny by gatekeepers,
3. Deal making with gatekeepers and
4. Researchers' positionality.

The article considers these issues from the perspective of two different (and differently positioned) researchers with interests in different issues; one with a minority group, the other with migrant communities. Two accounts are presented to highlight how similar conceptual problems exist across all research scenarios but require different approaches and decision making by researchers based on the site specific characteristics of the research process. We argue that research requires ongoing engagement with issues of power and ethics. Rather than being managed as a one off process, ethics are part of an ongoing investigation of power throughout the research process (including recruitment)

requiring ethical decision making through critical judgement and reflexivity (*phronesis*) (Flyvberg 2001). Throughout the analysis we show how site-specific strategies can contribute to positive and often distinct encounters. We seek to contribute to current debate on research ethics with marginalised groups and to recognise research as one with professional aspirations where particular skills, wisdom and expertise are required.

The challenges that Flemish government faces in stimulating policy research

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In Belgium, the Flemish government organizes the domain of Welfare, Public Health and Family for the Flemish community in Flanders and Brussels. We finance a thousand of services who work daily to improve the population's welfare and health. The Flemish government takes strategic actions to support the services in delivering the highest possible quality of prevention and care and attaining the best outcomes. One of these actions is conducting practice research on the delivered services.

We focus on different levels of practice research. Our first ambition is to describe and reveal methods for prevention and care which are used in Flemish services. A second step is to give a theoretical foundation to these methods. In a final step, practice research tries to assess the effects that can be achieved by these methods.

We have several arguments to invest in practice research. The obvious introduction of foreign methods for prevention and care is a frequently heard complaint. Describing methods that are developed in Flemish services and evaluating their outcome-effects is a useful way to shift the attention from foreign methods to our own valuable methods, some of which are at least as effective. Practice research is also a useful tool to improve the quality of these methods. This could open doors to put Flanders on the map, and perhaps to export our methods abroad.

The Flemish government took this policy decision in 2007. Initially we tried to implement those forms of practice research top-down. This evoked a lot of resistance, because different stakeholders (purveyors, management and practitioners) associated this ambition with unwanted side effects. They were afraid that practitioners would be limited in their freedom of action. They were suspicious that the Flemish government would only finance services who use methods that have been approved by practice research.

But gradually this resistance fades away now that all stakeholders realize, from own experienced bottlenecks, that practice research is a useful and indispensable tool to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of methods for prevention and care. Cautiously stakeholders are joining government's ambition to invest in practice research. So our formal top-down ambition is shifting to an initiative that is supported bottom-up; more and more services ask to help them in conducting practice research on their methods. The

Flemish government tries to support this practice research by different means. We finance a few ongoing studies that focus on describing and evaluating methods for prevention or care. Secondly, we try to spread the knowledge about conducting practice research among interested services and put them in contact with institutions skilled in practice research. Thirdly, we set our first steps on creating a knowledge platform that connects all existing digital initiatives that share knowledge gained by practice research. This unique platform has the goal to dispatch users quickly and efficiently to the knowledge they are looking for. In this presentation, we'll present and explain the Flemish approach more detailed. In order to stimulate discussion and exchange knowledge on how other governments and organizations deal with similar challenges on implementing practice research.

Practice Research and the a new knowledge-based practice in Swedish social work

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The report from 2008 *Evidence-based practice in social services – to the benefit of the operator* (SOU 2008: 18) states that the knowledge base in the social services in Sweden are undeveloped and that social service is not enough conducted on the basis of knowledge of the effect of different actions, approaches and methods. This report, among other reports and studies, has formed a starting point for a far-reaching effort to develop social work that is now taking place in Sweden. This effort towards a strengthened knowledge development and a so-called “evidence-based practice” (EBP) in Swedish Social Work practice are stated by the Swedish government (Social Ministry) and the organization for Local Authorities and Regions (SKL).

In a study conducted during 2009-2011 this intervention is studied. The study includes interviews and informal discussions with actors at national and regional level, involvement in and observations of conferences, meetings and seminars as well as text and document analysis.

The study analyzes *how* the Swedish government (Social Ministry) and the organization for Local Authorities and Regions (SKL) carry out the implementation of “the new” knowledge based practice of Social Work. The study tries to clarify ideas, structures and underlying aims of the implementation. The study also stresses questions about how the Swedish social work will develop.

The research shows that *how* the Social Ministry would like the development is not always what is happening in the local practice. The local practice has it's on logic and shows a complexity in the understanding and use of knowledge. The use of knowledge for example always seems to depend on its (discursive) context.

The Swedish social work, both in practice and scientifically, are changing. This reflects

today's changing conditions (both organizational and relational, between the individual and society) for welfare production. This situation can be understood as a social phenomenon and as a social construct created by political, economic and social conditions where different groupings with great power and influence has a significant role. This research gives us knowledge about human services organizations and their internal logic and the connection between knowledge, power and control, and today's society with its liberal overtones (cf. NPM and audit society).

In special focus in this paper are to discuss how local social work organisations and professionals understand and carry –out the aims of this implementation of “the new” knowledge based practice of Social Work in Sweden. A second aim of this paper is to discuss if and if so how different kind of Practice Research can support and strengthen this efforts.