

HELSINKI STATEMENT ON SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE RESEARCH

Background on the International Network on Social Work Practice Research

In 2008, a group of international social work researchers met in Salisbury (UK) to agree a statement on the importance of practice research in social work. This became known as the Salisbury Statement on Practice Research.

The Statement arose from a concern that the contemporary emphasis on evidence-based practice was not producing the means to improve practice. Social work and its clients might therefore be better served if we gave a stronger emphasis to practice priorities and to more active engagement with practitioners as researchers.

This is reflected in the description of practice research:

Practice research involves curiosity about practice. It is about identifying good and promising ways in which to help people; and it is about challenging troubling practice through the critical examination of practice and the development of new ideas in the light of experience. It recognizes that this is best done by practitioners in partnership with researchers, where the latter have as much, if not more, to learn from practitioners as practitioners have to learn from researchers. It is an inclusive approach to professional knowledge that is concerned with understanding the complexity of practice alongside the commitment to empower, and to realize social justice, through practice. Practice research involves the generation of knowledge of direct relevance to professional practice and therefore will normally involve knowledge generated directly from practice itself in a grounded way. (Salisbury Forum Group, 2011: 5)¹.

Since 2008, there have been many changes in the practice of social work and social work research, and in the social structures underpinning social welfare.

In 2012, a group of social work researchers met in Helsinki to re-examine and update the Salisbury Statement². This section summarizes these changes as an introduction to the revised Statement.

The changing landscape of practice research

Practitioners and researchers are united by the desire to improve social work practice. In part this is a constantly renewing search for better and more effective ways of helping people, driven by a motivation to ensure that people receive the best possible help. In part, too, there is little doubt that some areas of practice are poor, and that research has a role to play in identifying the reasons and ways of removing unsatisfactory practice. In particular, social work with extremely vulnerable and

¹ <http://www.socsci.soton.ac.uk/spring/salisbury/>

² This statement is compiled by the 2nd International Conference Scientific Committee Ilse Julkunen, Chair (Finland), Michael J. Austin (USA), Mike Fisher (UK), and Lars Uggerhøj (Denmark)

powerless people is often found wanting, whether they are children in need of protection, adults with learning difficulties or older people at risk of mistreatment.

This is the context in which evidence-based policy and practice appeared to offer the hope of greater certainty about what works, but this has rarely been delivered. In many areas, we do not have the volume or the quality of research to know conclusively what is effective.

The financial crisis that has engulfed many Western welfare states has reduced expenditure on services and on research. Thus, at a time when it becomes even more important to know what is effective, we have less research to inform these decisions. We need relevant knowledge for better practice in complex and uncertain situations.

This reinforces the need to tap into the intelligence held by practitioners about priorities for research and about the best ways that research can improve practice. For example, the development of 'data-mining' has shown how practitioners can use routinely collected practice information to improve practice.

The theme of the 2012 conference included reference to creating 'robust' practice research. Conference papers gave considerable attention to what 'robust' might mean in practice research and we draw on these understandings later in this statement.

Another development since 2008 is that the number of studies of practice research initiatives has significantly increased. Studies have shown the changing relationship between university and practice-based research, and underline the need to raise standards in practice research. Studies of Nordic practice research explore the range of relationships between research and practice, and studies in North America reinforce the need for organisational supports for research-minded professionals.

In Finland the development of national policy and organizational structures to support practice research have been described. The book *Practice Research in Nordic Social Work* has described the developments in the Nordic countries and reflects the strong focus on bridging the gap between the academy and practice.

This increasing research effort brings the possibility of both understanding more about the range of activities within practice research and of developing better theory about how practice research can help. At the same time we need to include analysis of welfare restructuring and economics, so that we understand how to promote practice research in the context where expenditure on social services is under pressure.³

³ Fisher, M. (2013) Beyond evidence-based policy and practice: reshaping the relationship between research and practice, *Social Work and Social Sciences Review*.

Epstein, I. (2010) *Clinical data-mining: Integrating practice and research*. New York: Oxford University Press. Epstein, I.

(2011) 'Reconciling evidence-based practice, evidence-informed practice, and practice-based research: The role of clinical data-mining', *Social Work*, 56(3), pp.284-288.

Shaw, I. and Lunt, N (2012) 'Constructing practitioner research' *Social Work Research* 36, (3): 197-208. doi: 10.1093/swr/svs013. (The following link is provided for personal use only.)

<http://swr.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/svs013?ijkey=q27VdoPVU9WYw3W&keytype=ref>

Shaw, I. and Lunt, N. (2011) 'Navigating Practitioner Research', *British Journal of Social Work* 41 (8): 1548-1565.

doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcr025. Shaw, I. (2012) *Practice and Research* Aldershot: Ashgate Publications. pp10-17.

Uggerhøj, L. (2011). Theorizing practice research in social work. *Social Work and Social Sciences Review*, 15(1), 49-73.

Uggerhøj, L. (2011). What is Practice Research in Social Work - Definitions, Barriers and Possibilities. *Social Work & Society*, 9(1), 1-20.

Austin, M. J., Santo, T. S. D., & Lee, C. (2012). Building Organizational Supports for Research-minded Practitioners. *Journal of Evidenced-Based Social Work*, 9, 1-39.

Evolving Philosophies and Methodologies of Practice Research

Practice research is not a specific research method but rather a meeting point between practice and research that needs to be negotiated every time and everywhere it is established. In essence, practitioners are not going to become researchers, nor researchers practitioners. What is critical and interesting is an exchange of perspectives, rather than an attempt to say that practice research must only be undertaken by practitioners.

The theoretical and methodological framework for practice research calls for flexible and collaborative structures and organisations. Therefore practice research cannot be captured by a single philosophy or methodology, but will rather connect itself towards philosophies and methodologies defining practised based knowledge and supporting flexible organizations and understandings. Two natural elements underlining these approaches are ‘Science of the concrete’ and ‘Mode 2 knowledge production’.

As defined by Danish researcher Bent Flyvbjerg,⁴ ‘the science of the concrete’ is a pragmatic, variable and context-dependent science comprised of the following key elements:

- *getting close to reality* (the research is conducted close to the phenomenon studied),
- *emphasizing little things* (research studies the major in the minor),
- *looking at practical activities and knowledge in everyday situations*
- *studying concrete cases and contexts* (research methodically builds on case studies),
- *joining agency and structure* (the focus is on both actor and structural level) and
- *dialoguing with a polyphony of voices* (the research is dialogical with no voice claiming final authority)⁵

The *science of the concrete* includes dialogue with those who are studied, with other researchers, and with decision-makers as well as with other central actors in the field. In contrast to the traditional research approaches guided only by academic norms, practice research using both practitioner and researcher frameworks and findings are discussed and evaluated by a number of partners, including lay people. This process takes place in public spheres and involves an interaction between many actors, each of whom represents different interests and contributes a variety of competences and attitudes.

Mode 2 knowledge production is characterized by application-oriented research where both frameworks and findings are discussed and evaluated by a number of partners – including laypeople – in public spheres. Mode 2 knowledge production takes place in an interaction between many actors, each and every one of whom represents different interests and contributes a variety of competences and attitudes. It is characterized by a relatively flat network- and collaboration-

Julkunen, I. (2011) ‘Knowledge-Production Processes in Practice Research - Outcomes and Critical Elements,’ *Social Work & Society*, 9, 1, pp.60-75.

Marthinsen, E & Julkunen I (2012) Practice Research in Nordic social work: Knowledge production in transition. London: Whiting & Birch.

Saurama & Julkunen (2011) Approaching practice research in theory and practice. *Social Work & Social Science Review* 15 (2)

Driessens, Saurama & Fargion (2011) Research with social workers to improve their social interventions. *European Journal of Social Work*, 14(1), March 2011, pp.71-88.

⁴ Flyvbjerg, B. (2001) *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*, New York: Cambridge University Press

⁵ modified from Flyvberg 2001, cf note 9. 132–139.

oriented structure and is marked by organizational flexibility.

There are a variety of interests within mode 2 knowledge production and research that constitute different expectations of, and demands on, knowledge, development, research design and findings. Instead of solving possible conflicts among different stakeholders, mode 2 knowledge production acts within and together with different needs and interests. To develop mode 2 knowledge production, all partners must accept ongoing reflection on differences. Mode 2 knowledge production is, in brief, focusing on solving problems in specific contexts of practice. In this way, research is controlled by specific tasks, not by the free choice of the researchers.

Although not completely alike, the understandings and definitions of ‘science of the concrete’ and ‘mode 2 knowledge production’ are closely connected to understandings and definitions within practice research – especially when focusing on elements like context-based, dialogue-oriented and partnership-focused research and knowledge production. Both approaches are in that way inspiring in the processes of understanding, defining and developing practice research.

Practice Research as a negotiated understanding

Practice research represents a middle ground position between the traditional research done on social work practice (by researchers primarily) and practice research (by practitioners primarily) where: 1) research that focuses on traditional research *in* social work can be defined as *research on social work*; 2) research that focuses on processes controlled and accomplished by practitioners can be defined as *practitioner research*; and 3) research that focuses on collaboration between practice and research can be defined as *practice research*. Based on this understanding, it is possible to place practice research in the middle of a continuum from the ‘traditional’ *research on social work* to *practitioner research* or from research to practice.

In this way practice research is both part of traditional research and part of practice. It may include practitioner research, but it has its own position in between research on social work and practice. And practitioner research as well as research on social work can be part of practice research as negotiated by the partners.

Based on an understanding of science of the concrete, mode 2 knowledge production and the middle ground position, The evolving definition of Practice Research can include:

I. A focus on:

- a critical research that describes, analyses and develops practice;
- a process where curiosity, critical reflection and critical thinking from both researchers and practitioners is in focus;
- a close, binding, committed and locally based collaboration between research/research settings and practitioner/practice in planning, completion and dissemination of the research;
- a participatory and dialogue based research relevant for developing practice and validating different expertise within the partnership;

II. A methodology that represents:

- research based on generally approved academic standards;
- research built on experience, knowledge and needs within social work practice;
- research where approved research institutions take a major role and responsibility in the research process;
- research where findings are disseminated through dialogue with practice and reflecting learning processes in practice;
- research that, within a social work context, produces, analyzes and describes concrete issues

through the use of empirical and theoretical studies that challenge practice in new ways.

Both research and practice play a role in posing questions and searching for answers. Everyone (researchers, practitioners and service users) can contribute to the production of knowledge based on a negotiated understanding that each partner can assume a specific and necessary role in the collaborative process.

Practice Research and the Goal of Robust Research

The character of social work can be described as working with ever more ambitious agendas, increasing numbers of actors and stakeholders, and more complex processes of change. It is crucial to perceive social work practice as shaped by context and structural conditions as well as playing a role in shaping itself and its surrounding conditions. Practice research that aims to generate socially relevant knowledge needs to reflect local, national, regional and international contexts.

Social work practices are historically formed and shaped by values, knowledge, emotions and purposes of the institutions in which they are located. Practices are complex and undergoing constant change, and this underpins the understanding and analysis of PR. It is not just a question of studying how things have got this way and how they work, but specifically how we can make them better and under which conditions, to facilitate or ensure improvements, which in turn, changes the composition of affected actors and their networks.

Based on ‘the science of the concrete’, practice research is pragmatic, variable and context-dependent. This context-sensitive approach with its focus on the concrete can be considered a precondition for a social robust knowledge production. It combines an interest in describing, explaining and theorizing about practice, using knowledge as a means of improving practice, and active participation in testing and exploring new ways of working. Thus, we ensure that the outcomes are relevant *in* and *for* practice while at the same time expanding and promoting generic knowledge.

‘Socially robust knowledge’ is a central element in the notion of Mode 2 science. The concept of robustness was originally developed for the analysis of science and academic knowledge production in modern knowledge societies. It was based on the emergence of both a new mode of knowledge production and an increased permeability of science. It raises the issue of we can build up a knowledge base that is robust enough? This goes beyond the question of effectiveness. The clue lies in the strong contextualisation and the relational dimension of socially robust knowledge.

In promoting socially robust knowledge we need to support reflexive analysis and deliberation about values and interests aimed at praxis. Robustness emphasises not only the research process but also the practice context, cultural differences, and the changes that knowledge production facilitates, echoing the emphasis on research where findings are disseminated through dialogue with practice and reflecting learning processes in practice. This adds a political and normative flavour into the process. Achieving social robustness in practice research may include:

- Negotiations throughout the research process
- Incorporating the dissemination elements into the research strategy
- Taking into account the embedded values and emotional and political dimensions
- Being strategic about choosing collaborative partners
- Validating the outcomes in large and external networks

The critical issue is to identify possible actors and stakeholders who may be ready to associate and invest in common opportunities, possibilities and/or themes from the ground up. Rather than a process of working in a closed inner circle and then opening up, it is question of deliberately inviting different actors in and encouraging debate from the outset, including service users.

Building on the Past to Explore the Future

This Helsinki Statement represents an innovative process of capturing the highlights of previous international conferences in order to provide a foundation for our next international conference (June 9-11, 2014 in New York City, USA). In its four short years of existence (2008-2012), a talented and farsighted group of social work practitioners and researchers have laid a new foundation for practice-based research that is rooted in the everyday experiences of social workers and those they serve. The Helsinki Conference in May 2012 provided an important venue in a Pre-Conference format for featuring the work those engaged in practice research at the Mathilda Wrede Institute for Social Work Practice Research (Swedish) and Heikki Waris Institute for Social Work Practice Research (Finnish) – both affiliated with the Helsinki Department of Social Services and the University of Helsinki. Visits to the Institutes provided opportunities to demonstrate the involvement of service providers and users in the design and implementation of research projects as well as the role of social work research faculty located at local universities.

The theme of the overall Helsinki Conference focused on the process of generating more “robust” research that parallels and augments the rigor and practice utility of other more academically-based models of social work research. In this regard, it featured the contribution of Epstein’s approach to “mining” existing administrative and case record data routinely found in social service organizations. In addition, the conference gave attention to how practice research might be “framed” within the theoretical context of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) associated with the pioneering research of Engeström at Helsinki University. Energized by those provocative approaches, the conference moved forward the philosophy and methodology of practice research, raising new issues about how theory informs practice and practice informs theory.

This Helsinki Statement is designed to provide some guidance in the planning of the 3rd International Conference on Social Work Practice Research in 2014. Several themes emerged from the Helsinki Conference that would benefit from further attention and analysis. Some of the major themes include:

- I. Engaging a wider audience of interested practitioners and researchers around the relevance of social work practice research related to:
 - Deliberating public policy; how do findings from practice research get translated into new, more service user relevant policies and practices?
 - Deliberating the changing context of practice; how could practice research inform the impact of merging health and social services in numerous governmental locales around the world?
 - Involving senior management in order to develop the necessary organizational supports for social work practice research;
 - Inviting other research colleagues to adopt trans-disciplinary approach to the dissemination and utilization of social work practice research; what are some of the best ways of disseminating social work practice research through a multi-actor approach?

II. Engaging a wider audience of social work educators and researchers regarding the role of social work practice research methodology in the educating of future practitioners related to:

- expanding the domain of social work practice research to actively include service users and engage in inter-disciplinary dialogue about the connections to survivor research carried out primarily by service users
- engaging in the process of transforming practice questions into practice research questions through the active use of critical reflection and critical thinking (educating the future research-minded practitioner)
- engaging researchers in the exploration of applied research methodologies in order to locate them within domain of social work practice research