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Learning from each other: collaboration processes in practice research

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Practice Research is a meeting point between practice and research where both common understandings and different interests meet. Therefore, Practice Research has to be understood as a process in which negotiation is a central part of developing research initiatives. In these negotiations, neither practice nor research must fully give up their special interests. Both partners must maintain equal share so as to make it possible for them to hold on to their interests; to open up new understandings, new traditions, and new learning processes; and to make it possible for them to learn from each other as a part of the process. Although the overall goal in Practice Research is to qualify social work, the balance – or the conflicts – between the different partners is both an interesting and a challenging issue in Practice Research. Based on the position of Practice Research, the article connects the theoretically based definitions and described methodological approaches with concrete experiences from Practice Research, and answers such questions as: ‘How is it possible to plan the research together, to agree on the research questions, to discuss findings?’, ‘How is it possible to have a critical discussions and to define and discuss the concept of Practice Research?’ Such discussions are normally carried out only among researchers but, in practice, research goes together with practice. To establish the meeting point between research and practice in social work, researchers and practitioners must be open to having their traditional understandings of what social work entails disturbed, to accept ‘the other’, and to work with ‘otherness’ as a positive part of the collaboration.

Keywords: practice research; negotiated research; disturbance and otherness in research; mode 2 knowledge production; science of the concrete; practice research continuum

Introduction

Practice Research is a meeting point between practice and research. In this article, the focus will be on the collaboration and the meeting between practice/practitioners and university-based researchers. This will be described and analysed from the position of a researcher. The collaboration between these partners is a meeting point where both common understandings and different interests meet. Therefore, Practice Research has to be understood as a process in which negotiation is a central part of developing research initiatives. One could say that negotiation is the centre of the process. In these negotiations, neither practice nor research must fully give up their special interests. These different interests are important for both – and significant to society as well. These interests are so important and significant that the quality of their function in society depends on the possibility of retaining the different interests. However, it also

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states that collaborating practice is not going to fully adopt research – to become research – and research is not going to fully adopt practice – to become practice. From this understanding, both parts need to maintain their different interests whilst finding a common path. Both partners must maintain equal share in order to make it possible for them to hold on to their interests; to open up new understandings, new traditions and new learning processes; and to make it possible for them to learn from each other as part of the process. This is a major challenge for researchers and practitioners because it requires new positions and new roles for both, and expands the traditional top-down learning process by supplementing it with bottom-up processes.

Based on the position of Practice Research (Epstein 2001; Fisher 2011; Uggerhøj 2011a), this article will connect theoretically based definitions and described methodological approaches of Practice Research (Flyvbjerg 2001; Kristiansson 2006; Uggerhøj 2011b) with more concrete experiences from a Practice Research project concerning the collaboration between university-based researchers and practitioners based in municipality departments of social work (Kildedal et al. 2011). The discussion will take as its starting point experiences from a comparative study among service users in Norway and Denmark. This study was undertaken through a partnership between two universities and three different municipalities in the two countries. The article will connect present concepts, dilemmas, models and central issues regarding Practice Research to partnerships and collaboration in Practice Research by way of the specific experiences gleaned from the aforementioned project and the processes it involved.

Hence, the main focus of the article will be on a description of the procedures and experiences learned from the process within this Practice Research project – ‘How was it possible to plan the research, to agree on the research questions, to discuss data, to discuss the analysis, to discuss the findings, and what kind of barriers turned up?’ ‘What made it possible not only to plan the research but also to have a critical discussion of the analysis, the theoretical approaches, the use of research methods, and the way of setting up findings – and to define and discuss the concept of Practice Research?’. Such discussions are normally carried out exclusively among researchers, and not amongst and together with practitioners.

Practice Research is negotiation

As indicated above, Practice Research is not just a research approach or a specific research method; it is, in itself, a meeting point between practice and research. This also emphasises the point that Practice Research is not a goal but a process – it is not an end but a means. The experience gleaned from the Practice Research project presented in the next section is that research for practitioners is but one way – and not the only way – to qualify practice. Many other aspects are included: political issues, professional cultures, earlier experiences and so forth – and these will influence the processes in practice as much as research findings. Although Practice Research can be defined and positioned (Uggerhøj 2011a, 2011b), it is when being practiced that it really defines and positions itself. If Practice Research is looked upon as a meeting point between partners with different interests, goals, understandings, and knowledge, all partners must approach the process with an open mind and be ready to be flexible and pragmatic without giving up their own specific interests. The open-minded approach from the partners also indicates that Practice Research itself has to be pragmatic and flexible. Of course, this flexibility and pragmatism is not just connected to the different interests the different partners in different Practice Research initiatives

must have but is also connected, at the same time, to the specific problem in the specific local context. Based on this understanding, Practice Research must be looked upon as an ongoing process of negotiation between the partners covering questions like: ‘What is the social problem?’, ‘To whom is this a problem?’, ‘Why does it need to be investigated?’, ‘How is it going to be investigated?’, ‘Who is going to investigate it?’, ‘What kinds of analyses are needed?’, ‘How are findings presented and to whom?’, ‘How is the research process connected to the learning process?’ These questions were part of the preliminary – and the ongoing – discussions in the research project described later in this article. This experience taught all partners to accept the need to start from scratch, instead of – in the very best meaning – planning parts of the research process in advance. To answer these questions, and to make it possible to work on these answers, the involved partners must meet to discuss how to connect the different needs within the partnership. In this way, neither research nor practice has the power to decide alone. Everybody has to have a say in the discussion. To put it another way, Practice Research has to be negotiated every time and everywhere it is established. By this, I am not saying that traditional processes in research and in practice are not needed, or that the learning processes have to be equal and parallel all the way through. As indicated above: quite the contrary. In looking at traditional learning processes, top-down processes are still needed in society – and therefore in both practice and research – but in the complex area of social work, there is a need to establish new kinds of processes in which knowledge production is also based and established bottom-up from practice (Illeris 2006; Kildedal et al. 2010). I am not afraid that traditional top-down knowledge production will survive, since this process has been, and still is, supported by powerful actors in the field. The challenge for social work, and for social work research, is to develop and support bottom-up knowledge production or a mixture between the two processes.

To focus on bottom-up processes, and to make negotiation a specific issue (as indicated in the above questions), research has to show more interest in where social work actually takes place. In the words of Gredig and Sommerfeld, ‘[i]f we want scientific knowledge, and especially empirical evidence, to play an effective role in professional action, then we have to focus on the contexts where the processes of generating knowledge for action actually take shape, that is, on the organisations engaged in social work’ (Gredig and Sommerfeld 2008, 296). If research is not interested in, and has a specific respect for, where social work actually takes place, the voice of practice will not be real, and the negotiation process unequal. Naturally, interest and openness has to go both ways. Social work practice also needs to be interested in and have respect for positions, methods, theories and perspectives within research. Whilst, according to the Salisbury’s (2009) statement of Practice Research, the researcher in a Practice Research process has to be practice minded (i.e. interested in where social work actually takes place and in how social work is understood and practised from a social worker perspective), the practitioner also has to be research minded (e.g. to be challenged by the research approach and to be open to critique). According to Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee (2012), to act as research minded, practitioners need to be curious, reflective and critical. By this Austin, Dal Santo, and Lee emphasise that practitioners must have an interest in looking critically at their own practice and, I would add, to have an interest not only in consuming findings but also in working on findings in learning processes. This observation could be seen as parallel to Laursen and Steager’s (2011) understanding of the learning processes as ‘disturbing feedback’. If learning processes are to focus upon the possibility of change and development in everyday actions, not only must it

disturb – be critical towards – everyday practices, it has to be disturbing to traditional research practice as well (Laursen and Steager 2011).

The notion of social work or society needing negotiated knowledge, or knowledge and input from different perspectives, is supported by Flyvbjerg when he notes that no individual is skilled enough to give sufficient answers; meaning that neither research nor practice alone can come up with all the answers. It is only possible to produce usable answers or findings if they are developed as an input in an ongoing dialogue between partners; a dialogue where no voice in the partnership can claim final authority (Flyvbjerg 2001). Research and findings from research are not oracles that can give answers to all questions in practice, nor to come up with the right solutions. Rather, research and findings are part of the solution and one angle of the answers. The description of the research project presented below would seem to support this understanding, since the research questions, design, analyses, and presentation of the findings would not have been adequate were it not discussed between the different partners and their different knowledge and understanding of the issues involved. Following Flyvbjerg, even the findings coming out of this collaboration are not sufficient to give an overall answer; rather, they have to be connected to many other factors and partners in the specific social work practice.

It may sound easy and obvious to focus on social work where it actually takes place, to use the knowledge from research, to be critical and to be interested in disturbing feedback. Nevertheless, the knowledge coming out of specific collaborations between practice and research is that it will challenge traditions and understandings, both within practice and within research, all the way through the collaboration and the negotiation process, and it will challenge the collaboration skills since both partners will not only meet the usual suspects but also alien partners.

A Practice Research experience

To dig a little deeper into the issue of collaborating, negotiating and learning processes in Practice Research, I will use a practical experience of Practice Research (Kildedal et al. 2010, 2011). This example demonstrates how to be respectful towards each other, how to use knowledge from practice and research, as well as showing that negotiation is not episodic but is ongoing throughout the Practice Research process. Taken together, what this underlines is that the development of specific Practice Research projects has to build on dialogue, and that the definitions of Practice Research must relate to theoretical backgrounds that are context oriented, that have a bottom-up approach and that involve a number of partners representing different interests. Such a theoretical approach is comparable with Flyvbjerg's (2001) 'Science of the Concrete' and with Kristiansson's (2006) 'Mode 2 Knowledge Production'. These will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

In 2005, the social work research network at Aalborg University established an agreement with the municipality of Aalborg. The goal of the partnership was, and still is:

- to enhance practice qualifications exercised within regional or municipality settings;
- to establish a research-based development of practice;
- to create a platform for research in practice within the field of social work;
- to establish exchange of experiences among practice, research and education;

- to establish relevant training and education within the area of social work;
- and to develop new types of research, education and practice (Ebsen and Uggerhøj 2007, 3)

Following the goal, it is expected that it will be possible to support knowledge-based learning processes in everyday social work practice and to develop research closely connected to practice in social work. As stated by the department of social services in the municipality of Aalborg, the goal is 'to qualify social work by giving the social workers more knowledge of what is actually going on when they do social work, what the consequences of their initiatives in social work are, and how their actions towards families are experienced by the families and seen by fellow professionals' (Kjærdsdam 2009). During the course of the following year's researcher from the Department of Sociology and Social Work at Aalborg was involved in different kinds of investigations and evaluations: in learning programmes set up by the department of social services; in presenting findings, methods and theories for social workers; and in giving feedback on papers, internal evaluations and new experiments. The agreement has also involved a co-financed PhD student, student jobs and field placements for both bachelor and master students in social work, as well as co-teaching in university-classes and co-presentations at conferences. In looking back at these initiatives, it is obvious that they are all different from what would normally be initiated at the university. Researchers would seldom be acting as much in the processes of qualifying the everyday work of social work; teaching would contain other and more theoretically orientated issues and the doctoral process would be much more connected to the university than to practice. All these matters, big or small, have been negotiated between representatives from practice and from the university, and both partners have had to bend towards each other to let ends meet.

In 2008, researchers from the University in Agder in Norway approached the social work research network at Aalborg University to suggest a comparative study involving different municipalities in Norway and Denmark. As part of the Norwegian HUSK project (Bliksvær and Gjernes 2011), the University in Agder was already collaborating with two Norwegian municipalities about developing so-called family investigations. One of the main goals in the HUSK project was to establish a more binding collaboration between practice, research, education and service users (Bliksvær and Gjernes 2011). Knowing that Aalborg University had a specific collaboration agreement with the municipality of Aalborg, The University in Agder became interested in studying and comparing the family investigations in the two countries.

In both Norway and Denmark, there is an obligation to establish an investigation of the family if action is going to be taken towards severe family problems. According to the legislation in both Norway and Denmark, families are supposed to be involved in the investigation process. In addition, the Danish legislation underlines that the investigation must be used to support families with regard to their own life and to present problems in a new light (Lov 1992-07-17-100, Lov 1967-02-10, Lov nr. 453 1997 and Lov nr. 1117 2007; Kildedal 2011). Hence, the University in Agder suggested that special attention be placed upon the process of involving families in the investigation.

As a natural part of the partnership, a meeting with the municipality of Aalborg was set up to ascertain whether they were interested in this issue, if they were interested in joining the research programme and to start the very first negotiations of the project. Although having an overall agreement, the experience from the collaboration is that it is necessary to discuss and negotiate the specific programme or initiative

whenever new ideas emerge. What this emphasises is that negotiation is not something coming up later in the process, but will be a part of every meeting and from the very beginning of a new collaboration. After meetings between and acceptance from all partners in the specific project, a frame for the collaboration process was established.

Since both universities had ongoing collaborations and agreements with the municipalities involved, it was decided that the research process should involve all partners all the way through – from setting up the research questions, through the collecting and analysing data, to discussing the findings. This made it possible to both acquire new knowledge of family investigations to be used in future practice, and to try out, test and develop Practice Research. Stated otherwise, is raised the possibility of inaugurating learning processes for all partners, and to establish processes where partners would learn from each other.

To set up the research questions, it was decided to focus on issues that both the municipalities and the social workers found interesting. As noted, all three municipalities were interested in knowing more about how families experience being part of family investigations; since they were all obliged to involve families, each municipality had been working on qualifying the investigation processes and the collaboration with and involvement of service users (Kildedal, Nordstoga, and Sagatun 2011). Another interesting issue was that all municipalities stated that they found it unhelpful to have only so-called ‘negative research findings’ in social work. Instead of selecting a random sample of families, the municipalities suggested researching families that were expected to be satisfied with the collaboration concerning the family investigations so as to make it possible to know more about what families find interesting and positive in the collaboration, instead of just having findings on how bad practice is (Sagatun 2011). In this way, the very early discussions showed that negotiations were not only approaching overall issues, but also the exact research questions and the selection of informants – elements normally taken care of and decided by researchers and research institutions alone. Instead of the traditional distance between researcher and what is researched, the collaboration required a very close dialogue-based connection in the research design, which involved all partners and accepted that different positions needed to be discussed and negotiated – thereby connecting the frame of the collaboration to the understandings of ‘Science of the Concrete’ and ‘Mode 2 Knowledge Production’.

To make the process of collecting and analysing data part of the collaboration – and not just part of the research – it was decided that social workers from all three municipalities should meet two or three times with the researchers during the process in order to plan the research and to discuss the data, the analysis of the data and the findings (Kildedal et al. 2011, 171–173). The meetings between social workers and researchers made it possible for both partners to make the learning process commence from the beginning, and to make the process continue all the way through the programme.

After having negotiated the frame of the research, it was decided to meet when we, as researchers, had some provisional findings, and to discuss these with the social workers and management from the municipalities. A seminar was set up at Aalborg University at which most of the social workers and managers involved in the programme were present. The researchers presented the provisional findings, which was followed by comments and reactions from the social workers and managers from both Norway and Denmark. Students from the university were hired to make notes from the

meeting, making it possible for the researchers to discuss the comments and suggestions when going through the data and the analysis again afterwards. As it turned out, the presentation for, and the discussions with, the social workers gave the researchers new angles to understand data.

The seminar also made it possible to discuss the analytical approach. For social workers, some of the theories used in the analysis were unknown or social workers were critical towards the use of some theories and analysis. Through the discussions, both parties gained a new understanding of the different meanings and approaches, which turned out to be beneficial not only at the meeting but also to the understanding of the overall findings and analysis produced later in the process. The ongoing information, negotiations and discussions of the programme and the findings made it possible to disseminate the information of the findings at an early stage, and not at the very end when the final rapport is presented; it also made it possible for practitioners to understand the findings much better.

The next part of the process was to present the first draft of the final rapport. A new seminar was set up in Norway. However, not just the findings were presented by the researchers; instead of just listening to researchers presenting their findings, the social workers involved were asked to give critical feedback on every chapter of the rapport. The feedback of each chapter was given by two social workers: one from Norway, one from Denmark. In this way, the seminar made it possible for practitioners not only to be consumers of the findings but also to be tuned into the findings and the analysis thereof, and to give critical respond and supervision to the researchers and to each other. The seminar also made it possible to have a critical discussion of both the findings concerning family investigations within the municipalities and of the analysis, the theoretical approaches, the use of research methods and the way of setting up findings, thereby helping to define, discuss and develop Practice Research. Again, such discussions are normally carried out only among researchers and not together with practitioners.

The whole process made it possible for both researchers and practitioners to learn from the very beginning to the very end. Although mixed together, two parallel processes were established: on the one hand, this concerned new knowledge about family investigations; on the other, it concerned the development of research in close connection to practice – and one process was qualified by the other. When discussing the findings, everybody learned more about barriers and possibilities in Practice Research. When discussing positions, methods, analytic approaches and theories in Practice Research, everybody learned more about the findings. The process also showed that it would have been impossible to decide the content and the frame at the beginning of the programme. Although some overall intensions were discussed and planned at the start of the programme, it was necessary to have ongoing discussions and negotiations – both because new problems arose and because the ongoing dialogue made it possible to overcome misunderstandings and to answer questions; the very simple question of why research is so slow (see Kildedal et al. 2010, 2011 for a more specific presentation and discussions of the findings and the process). To make it possible for the process not to be directed exclusively by the researchers, a number of small connections were made through e mailing, telephone calls and small meetings; all of which made it possible to go into the planning of the seminars and into developing the feedback processes. If all these small decisions were to be taken at ordinary meetings between all partners, there is the risk that they would never be carried through or that one partner – and probably the researcher – would take over.

Science of the concrete, mode 2 knowledge production and Practice Research

The discussion in the introduction of the article, and in the description of the Practice Research process presented above, might have given the impression that Practice Research is non-theoretical or that it is vague, and so forth. This is not correct. As I will discuss in the next section, and as already mentioned above, there are definitions and associated theories helping to understand what Practice Research is and how to position it. But if negotiation is a central part of the process, positions and theories in Practice Research have to be open. If Practice Research is not open there will, literally, be nothing to negotiate about. Although theories/definitions and negotiations could contradict each other, such theories and definitions could be looked upon as helping tools in the negotiation process, in the need for critical discussion between and amongst partners, and as a way of helping partners not to have to start from scratch every time. The focus of this part of the article will, therefore, be to briefly outline some of the theories and definitions connected to Practice Research as helping tools for research and practice in the negotiation processes (Uggerhøj 2011a, 2011b).

Not being an exact phenomenon, Practice Research can be looked upon from different angles, from different positions, and with different interests. A natural connection that both widens the understanding of Practice Research and helps to position it is what the Danish researcher Bent Flyvbjerg refers to as ‘the science of the concrete’. Science of the concrete is defined as a pragmatic, variable, context-dependent and praxis-oriented science containing a bottom-up knowledge production (Flyvbjerg 2001). According to Flyvbjerg (2001, 132–139), key elements in this approach include getting close to reality (the research is conducted close to the phenomenon during the phases of data, analysis, feedback and publication of results), emphasising little things (research focuses upon the major in the minor), looking at practice before discourse (research focuses on practical activities and knowledge in everyday situations), studying concrete cases and contexts (practices are studied in their proper contexts), joining agency and structure (focus is on both actor and structural level) and finally, dialoguing with a polyphony of voices (the research is dialogical, including many voices and with no voice claiming final authority). Flyvbjerg also states that theory has a minor position and context a major one in science of the concrete. From his position, research cannot provide straight and simple answers, as is often seen in more traditional research processes. Rather, research needs voices and answers from partners to be able to come up with adequate answers.

From this understanding, science of the concrete constitutes both a theoretical and a methodological framework and position for Practice Research in social work by pointing out central elements that need to be implemented in the process (Uggerhøj 2011a, 2011b).

Another natural relation is the connection to ‘mode 2 knowledge production’, which is characterised by application-oriented research, where both frameworks and findings are discussed and evaluated by a number of partners, and in interaction with many actors representing different interests. According to Kristiansson (2006), 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; all of which underline the need for ongoing negotiation. As the descriptions and definitions of science of the concrete and mode 2 knowledge production show, there are several elements connected within, and which help to position, Practice Research (Uggerhøj 2011a, 2011b). These elements almost seem to jump out of the experiences detailed in the above-described research.

They also emphasise that Practice Research can be looked upon and defined from different positions. I have attempted to describe the similarities and differences of these positions in earlier articles (Uggerhøj 2011a, 2011b). The definitions given below are further developments of the definitions presented in said articles. It seems that at least three approaches of Practice Research can be characterised. The first approach is characterised by research focusing on traditional (practice) research *on* social work. Research questions, research design, data collection, analysis and information about the research and the findings are led, directed and carried through by external researchers. Although such projects focus specifically on social work and processes within social work practice, such research is not built upon a partnership between practice and research; consequently, the practice has no real say in these projects. This approach can be defined as *Practice Research on Social Work*. The second approach is characterised by research focusing on processes controlled and accomplished by practitioners (Ramian 2003), where practice is the research institution (instead of the university). This approach can be defined as *Practitioner Research*. The third approach is characterised by research focusing on a close and binding collaboration between practice and research. Here, both parts primarily do ‘what they are best at’ – social workers primarily do social work; researchers primarily do research – but every part of the research is developed and decided as part of a partnership between practice and research. This approach can be defined as *Practice Research*. Although defined as different approaches, it is necessary to underline that the three definitions are not incompatible, and that they may be combined in specific research programmes. In the research project discussed above, the basic approach was *Practice Research*, but it could easily have involved *Practitioner Research* if the decision had been to let practitioners participate in the data collection and analysis, or to let them do independent parts of the research.

From this understanding of the different approaches, it is possible to place Practice Research in the middle of a continuum going from the ‘traditional’ *Practice Research on Social Work* to *Practitioner Research* or from research to practice (the model presented below is a further development of Uggerhøj 2011a). To understand the position of Practice Research, we also needed to understand the diversities and the similarities between research processes and practice processes in social work. The research process contains a line of elements making sure that all stages are connected to the fundamental basis of the research question that conclusions have been analysed thoroughly, and that new perspectives and questions grow out of findings and conclusions – and not vice versa. The practice process is, just like the research process, a model to qualify findings and discussions, and to qualify actions in social work. Practitioners may use the model to make sure that the definition of the problem has been accomplished before action is taken, and that improvements can only be made after reflecting on the actions. Although different, both processes have the same goal and, in spite of their differences, they have stages that are parallel and can be connected. Figure 1 shows the continuum and how the different approaches are connected and divided.

Figure 1 points out that *Practice Research on Social Work* – although necessary to social work – is not necessarily a part of the learning and development processes in social work practice, while *Practitioner Research* is directly connected to the performance of social work practice. In *Practice Research*, the traditional stages of research are followed, but they are connected to the parallel stages in practice processes in an ongoing process: the research question cannot be generated without connecting it to actual problems in practice; in addition, data collection, analyses, conclusions, perspectives and new questions cannot be generated without connecting and involving explanations, reflections,

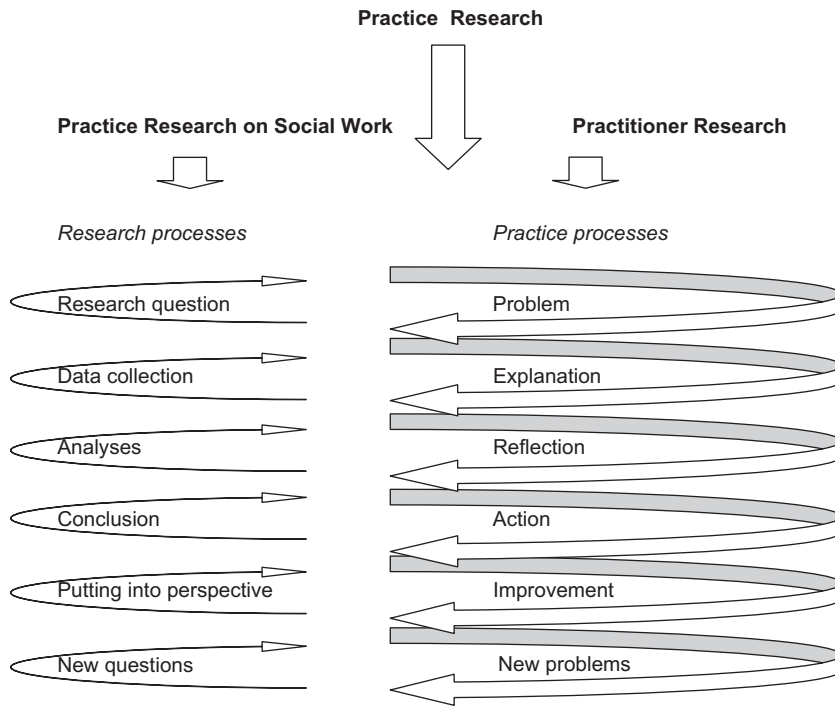


Figure 1. The continuum of different approaches in practice research.

actions, improvements and new problems from practice. Likewise, development and learning processes in practice are connected to parallel stages in research, since problems in a Practice Research perspective cannot be solved without connecting the process to research questions, and the explanation cannot be given without connecting it to data collection, and so forth. Last, but not least, the above figure points out that Practice Research is both part of traditional research processes and part of processes in practice, and that it can easily include practitioner research and elements of Practice Research on social work. That said, Practice Research has its own position in between Practice Research on social work and practitioner research.

Although different and necessary to discuss when specific research projects are launched, all three positions are defined within the concepts of Science of the Concrete and Mode 2 Knowledge Production. Both Practice Research and Practitioner Research are closely connected to the characteristics of Science of the Concrete and Mode 2 Knowledge Production; by being close to reality, emphasising little things, focusing on practical activities, studying concrete cases in their proper context, aiming at both actor and structure, and underlining dialogue of framework and findings between partners with different interests, for example. One could say that it is almost impossible *not* to involve these elements in Practice- and Practitioner Research. Being much more attached to traditional research processes, Practice Research on Social Work needs to be more aware of the elements in Science of the Concrete and Mode 2 Knowledge Production. Or, to put it another way, the elements of these two concepts can be useful tools in helping Practice Research on Social Work to avoid tipping the balance too much towards traditional research processes, and thus to stay within the frame of Practice Research approaches.

In the Danish and Norwegian research project discussed above, the researchers joined the collaboration with experience primarily built on traditional research processes, while practice joined the collaboration with experience built on traditional practice processes. One of the main challenges was to establish the connection between these two – that is, to create their own ‘model’ where the two processes could meet. This was not – at this time – seen as a model but as a way to accept the different positions and understandings. The model or description of the different processes in the continuum published in the articles (Uggerhøj 2011a, 2011b) was developed simultaneously with the research project and, in that way, learned directly from the experience within the project.

For new partners, it may be difficult to make the discussions and the negotiations real and not only theoretical. The model presented here can serve as a helping tool to get the negotiations and discussions started. Out of discussions on where to position the actual research project on the continuum, partners will have to discuss their needs, their view of research and research methods, the organisation of the projects and many more issues, thus opening up different views and collaboration possibilities.

The needed disturbance and otherness in Practice Research processes

Instead of understanding collaboration as a process where communicating partners find a common path by giving up some of their main interests – even sometimes finding the lowest common denominator – the ‘negotiation approach’ argued for here emphasises that partners are to maintain their different interest and adopt then to the collaboration/specific local project. Such different interests and possible contradictions will not prevent research and practice from connecting – quite the contrary. My experience is that Practice Research in social work needs to, and will, develop and connect both out of contradictions and out of an understanding that collaboration is needed. Adopting, instead of rejecting or fighting against, might make it possible to reach a higher common denominator. Incorporating the specific characteristics of research and the specific characteristics of practice will support a stronger collaboration in which the best from each partner has been taken in, thus making it possible for both partners to be seen, to see and respect the other, and to see the otherness of the partner (see below). To reach the point of securing its own characteristics and being able to respect and understand ‘otherness’, partners must negotiate and even struggle. Some of the elements of the described research project would never have been carried through if practice and research had not both kept to their own traditions and been open to see these tradition and knowledge in a new light. It would not have been possible, for instance, to agree on using families positive towards collaboration with social authorities as informants; nor would it have been possible to use theories of power in the analysis if partners had not been arguing from their own position, whilst at the same time trying to see the problem from the other partners point of view. According to Matthies (2013), social work research has some characteristics that cause it to be ‘the other’ compared to other scientific disciplines. The reason, according to Matthies, is the character of applied social science, of which social work research is a part, and of a constant balance between scientific and practical interests in social work research. Following this line, Practice Research is not only being ‘othered’ by traditional scientific disciplines, but has to work with otherness itself. While the researchers are being looked upon as ‘the other’ by the practitioner, the practitioners are looked upon as ‘the other’ by researchers. In that way, participants in a Practice Research process both have to work on being

‘othered’ by partners and on characterising partners as ‘others’. Whilst it seems difficult to work on ‘otherness’ in everyday social work (Matthies 2013), since the partners – social workers and service users – are in very different positions, the potential of the Practice Research process is that all partners are ‘othered’ and all partners have strong and powerful positions. Although the other partners might be seen as disturbing, dangerous and difficult, the negotiating process will make it possible to encircle central issue for each partner and, through dialogue, to widen the understanding of why this disturbing, dangerous and difficult issue is central to the other. This understanding makes it possible for both partners to work for the adoption of the issue, or parts of the issue, into the common project or collaboration. However, the ‘different’ issue or element will be disturbing. Using Laursen and Steager’s metaphor of ‘disturbing feedback’ (Laursen and Steager 2011) as a central part in learning processes, and Illeris’ understanding of human beings learning through ‘new impulses’ (Illeris 2006), the ‘disturbance’ and the ‘new’ – or the otherness – constitutes a fulcrum in learning processes. Although both Laursen & Steager and Illeris focus on individual learning processes, I will take the liberty to connect this to the more collective processes of Practice Research. It is when adopting the critical and sometimes distant-based research approach towards practical issues – analysing the data through power theories, for example – social work practice may obtain and produce new knowledge different from what is already known. It is through the ‘hands on’ approach, the more practice-based instead of theoretical-based initiatives, and the ongoing pressure for translating findings into everyday knowledge, that research will be able to develop research methods and turn findings into everyday tools and models within social work. Of course, these negotiations also become challenging for both partners: when the municipalities in the presented experience of Practice Research wanted the researchers to only involve those families positive towards the departments of social services in the research; when social workers were very critical towards the researchers’ use of specific theories in the analyses and the researchers kept on using the theories; or when researchers said that the project would take close to two years to complete, while practice wanted the findings as quick as possible. Only by seeing the issues discussed not just from their own eyes but also from the eyes of the other in the negotiation is it possible to reach an understanding and a contract where both parts are respected. Likewise, the ‘theories of ‘otherness’ and ‘othering’ might be helpful tools in discussing and negotiating the different understandings, in seeing through the eyes of the other, and in accepting the disturbing feedback.

When negotiating an actual research project, the model described above (Figure 1) is not only helpful in defining Practice Research, it can also serve as part of the negotiating process itself. It can do so, for example, by posing the following questions: ‘Where on the line is the actual local Practice Research project placed?’, ‘Is it close to or even more like a Practitioner Research?’, ‘Is the Practitioner Research part of or an independent project?’, ‘Is the project a more traditional Practice Research on Social Work or will only parts of the research project be defined as Practice Research on Social Work?’ In these discussions, the extremities of the continuum can be challenging contrasts helping to negotiate where on the line the actual research collaboration can be placed or if it is actually something different from Practice Research and, in that way, helping to obtain a common understanding.

To be able to establish the described negotiating processes, both parts must accept being liable to critique; specifically, a critique of how things have been accomplished thus far – traditions for doing research and/or traditions for doing social work, for

instance. Additionally, they must also be liable to an ongoing critique during the research project. Findings may reveal problems within practice, and the research design – or lack thereof – may be critically discussed by researchers, and may possibly lead to new negotiations. In the described comparative study in Norway and Denmark, the critique was automatically put on the agenda because the social workers were invited to discuss both the provisional and the final findings and, in the latter part, they were asked to respond critically on every chapter of the research rapport.

It is probably impossible to go through a research process – whether being informant or researcher – without learning something. However, we seldom know much about this learning because attention is specifically on the research process and not on the learning process. In turning the tables by making research a part of a learning process, and not vice-versa, it becomes possible to know much more about the learning processes and the knowledge produced from the research process and, in that way, to both qualify research and learning processes. In addition, it makes it possible or, rather, necessary for both parties to learn more about each other. Furthermore, it also makes it possible for both researchers and practitioners to learn about their own methods, the tools they use, the understandings they rely upon and that they produce, and, not least, both the consequences and the possibilities of what they are doing.

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