

SOCIAL WORK

THEMES, ISSUES AND
CRITICAL DEBATES

EDITED BY

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Research and development in social work

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Introduction

Social work has long had a somewhat ambivalent relationship with research. Concerns have been expressed that practitioners do not read research, do not inform their practice with findings from research, do not influence decisions on what is researched, do not commission research and do not undertake research themselves. There is not space in this one chapter to consider all of these issues. Instead, taking account of recent policy initiatives, the chapter suggests some approaches to research and development that might be particularly relevant for social work. In this, social work is understood as a professional activity wherein practitioners engage in their craft to contribute to policy and practice with a view to reducing inequalities in society and to ameliorating the local and personal effects of these.

Enhancing research in practice

A range of initiatives have been introduced in recent years to enhance the relevance of research to policy and practice development. Some, such as the practitioner-research programmes at York University (Whitaker and Archer, 1989) and at the Social Work Research Centre at Stirling University (Fuller and Petch, 1995), focus upon providing opportunities for social workers to undertake small-scale research relevant to their practice. Others, such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, in its publication of *Findings and Research Matters*, published twice a year by the magazine *Community Care*, concentrate on making the find-

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ings of research accessible to practitioners. Still others take the form of action-research projects such as the Department of Health's pilot scheme, set up in 1995 with social services departments in the south west of England designed to promote the use of research findings in practice and to involve practitioners in identifying needs for research.

The state of research in health and the personal social services has been the focus of two working groups established by the Department of Health: the Smith review of personal social services' research reported in June 1994 (Smith, 1994) and the Culyer review of NHS research the following October (Culyer, 1994). Both were partly prompted by concerns about how research and development would fare in the market economy of health and social care. With purchaser-provider changes in the organisation of services, and short-termism in funding and projects, questions were being asked on where and by whom research and development would be undertaken. It was thought that research and development might well diminish, with purchasers attracted by the cheapest and providers driven to reducing costs. Furthermore, a decline in local government research was anticipated as unitary authorities disappeared and others struggled with depleted budgets. Both reviews, acknowledging the gap between research, policy and practice, emphasised the importance of the usefulness, relevance and ownership of research by those expected to be influenced by findings. Both recommended that practitioners should feel ownership of research, be involved in deciding what should be researched and take part in dissemination and implementation exercises. They should be trained to be research literate, and researchers should have a clear responsibility to make research findings accessible. Links between health and personal social services, and other services such as education, should be fostered and partnerships introduced for commissioning and conducting research across professional and organisational boundaries. The Culyer Report recommended that more attention be paid to health research in primary and community health. Both reviews recommended that research and development strategies be developed nationally, regionally and across the personal social services and the health service.

Considerable attention has been paid to developing research-based and informed practice with children in care. Indeed, there is some evidence that the Children Act, 1989 was itself informed by research (Harwin, 1990). Attention has been paid to making child-care research findings accessible to practitioners (Kahan, 1989; DoH, 1996). The development of research-informed practice is key to the Department of Health-funded research and development project *Looking After Children: Good Parenting, Good Outcomes* (Parker *et al.*, 1991; Ward, 1995). This is concerned with assessing outcomes in child-care work and with developing practical instruments, action

and assessment records. These records, for social workers to complete with children in care, are intended to ensure that child-care research findings inform practice, that work with children in care is pursued systematically, that data are generated for departmental review and monitoring purposes as well as comparatively across social services departments and that the child growing up in care is able to capture her or his own history. Similar to structured questionnaires, they comprise questions derived from research findings on good parenting which social workers are expected to build into their ongoing conversations with children and young people in their care.

At first sight, to the researcher, the *Looking after Children* project is impressive. It is systematic and meticulous, and care has been taken to include every detail important to the child in care. It has attracted a wealth of expertise from research units and university social work departments, and it is becoming adopted widely by social services departments and by social welfare organisations in other countries. It is interesting and innovatory in its approach to bridging the gap between research and practice. However, it is through this very gap that the project could fall into technical and unthinking ways of working. Whereas some practitioners may, and undoubtedly do, adopt the action and assessment records as valuable instruments for research and professional practice, others may merely engage in it, or alternatively resist it, as yet more of the procedural form-filling that has replaced so much professional practice.

New managerialism in health and welfare has been accompanied, even strengthened, by an array of what might be seen as research and development activities: monitoring, evaluation, inspection, performance review, output and outcome measurement, and evidence-based practice. While the central assumption of this chapter is that social work practice, and the policy context in which it operates, should be systematically subjected to the scrutiny of research and developed to take account of evidence of effectiveness, there is little doubt that these recent initiatives are experienced as a part of increasing managerial control. Rather than approaches designed to enquire into, and ensure the effectiveness of, policies, procedures and practices, they can be more like technical intrusions into what should be professional practice:

The extravagance of professional expertise was to be replaced by a range of review techniques including quality assurance, clinical audit, performance indicators in various forms and guises. Much of this scrutiny was external to the professions concerned and seen as a direct attack on clinical autonomy. (Rafferty and Traynor, 1997, p. 17)

This technical recording of practice has been exacerbated in social services through departmental defensiveness in the wake of child

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abuse enquiries and the evidence of abuse experienced by children and adults in their care. It can serve to prevent or obscure the interrogation of professional practice, particularly through the public pretence that services and practices are informed by research. Professional practice must be subject to rigorous scrutiny and public debate, and should itself be concerned with opening up social services and policies to such processes. What is important in professional practice and in closing the gap between research and practice is that social work practitioners are research-minded (Everitt *et al.*, 1992). This is a necessary condition not only for doing research and implementing research findings in practice, but also for ensuring that practice makes a difference for people in trouble. As Utting reminds us:

To get the best out of research you need an inquiring mind, the desire to improve performance and a critical and sceptical intelligence... Research is a means, not an end in itself – a tool with which to improve and perfect one's business, whether this be making policy, managing services or working face to face with people: it is not a machine which dispenses neat answers on cardboard squares. (Utting, 1989)

The process of researching is one of questioning, of generating and being open to evidence. It is about teasing out values and theoretical assumptions with a preparedness to engage in debate with those who may interpret the evidence differently. It contrasts with polemic, rhetoric and common sense. It disrupts routine and procedure. There is now quite a research literature available for social workers on undertaking research and reading published research critically (for example, Whitaker and Archer, 1989; Everitt *et al.*, 1992; Broad and Fletcher, 1993; Shakespeare *et al.*, 1993; Hart and Bond, 1995). Indeed, the literature on research methods for practitioners generally, teachers (for example, Altrichter *et al.*, 1993; Burgess, 1993), nurses (for example, Sapsford and Abbott, 1992) and leisure (for example, Veal, 1992) is quite considerable, indicating that the problem is with the relationship between research and practice generally rather than with social work in particular.

In nursing, a large part of the problem is attributed to the power of members of the medical profession (Rafferty and Traynor, 1997). It is not only that they decide on research priorities and claim the major slice of the research resource, but also that they set the prevailing ideas of what constitutes respectable and credible research. This has led to a predominance of randomised control trials with little acknowledgment of the value of smaller-scale studies yielding qualitative data. At the same time, claims that qualitative studies are more likely to contribute to social change must be treated with caution. We only have to compare the detailed large-scale studies of poverty and health that

have been undertaken over long periods of time (for example, Townsend *et al.*, 1988) with the one hundred and one case studies of people successfully making their journeys back from long-term unemployment (Booth and Mallon, 1994) or with the current prevalence of focus groups falsely occupying the space of research and consultation (Preston, 1996) to be rightly sceptical of seemingly genuine stories of people's lives and concerns. The underlying issue here is power. Processes that are dressed up as research, and come to be accepted as such, are powerful in that they produce knowledge that is thought to be credible, to be 'true'. It is important to be critical, not only of professional practice, but also of research and of knowledge, and to be mindful of the ways in which some explanations and understandings come to be thought of as 'true'. Such truths may serve to maintain the *status quo* and to continue and strengthen oppressive practices.

Theory and practice in research

The 'Wider Strategy for Research and Development relating to Personal Social Services' (Smith, 1994) adopts the official definition of research as used by government in its research policy and funding strategies. It separates 'basic research' (that is, 'experimental or theoretical work... to acquire new knowledge') from 'strategic research' (that is, research that is applied but where no specific applications have been identified) and 'applied research' (that is, 'to acquire new knowledge' but 'directed primarily towards practical aims and objectives').

For social work, the distinction which separates theory from practice is unhelpful. It feeds into practices that do not enhance social science's potential contribution to the amelioration of social problems and the reduction in social inequalities. One effect, for example, of the 'basic' and 'applied' split is the hierarchy that can develop between those who, in élitist and prestigious ways, regard themselves as social science theorists looking down upon those in more applied academic areas and probably not noticing practitioners at all. On the one hand, this serves to let such social scientists off the hook: in the position they adopt they have no need to ensure that their research makes a difference to 'private troubles and public issues' and accept no responsibility for this. On the other hand, it promotes in social workers anti-theoretical and anti-academic feelings voiced as 'they're out of touch', 'not engaged in the real world', 'irrelevant'. This finds expression in social services departments and social welfare projects where there is no time to research, even to read, in order to reflect upon what is happening in practice and to keep up to date with developing knowledges.

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In the 1970s, these tendencies separating theory from practice were noted by social theorists and those engaged with radical social work. Alas, Gouldner's opening lines are as relevant today as they were then:

Social theorists today work within a crumbling social matrix of paralyzed urban centres and battered campuses. Some may put cotton in their ears, but their bodies still feel the shock waves. It is no exaggeration to say that we theorise today within the sound of guns. (Gouldner, 1970, p. vii)

Cohen, reflecting on his encounters with social workers, wrote thus:

the most familiar reaction we encounter is encapsulated in the phrase (often quite explicitly used): 'it's all right for you to talk.' The implication is that, however interesting, amusing, correct and even morally uplifting our message might be, it is ultimately a self-indulgent intellectual exercise, a luxury which cannot be afforded by anyone tied down by the day-to-day demands of a social-work job. (Cohen, 1975, p. 76)

Gouldner and Cohen had in mind the radical activist, the practitioner with an urgency to change and a commitment to 'the tangible outcomes of pragmatic politics' rather than 'the intangible outputs of theory' (Gouldner, 1970, p. vii). Today, practitioners are often more likely to be concerned with the measurable outcomes of depoliticised practices as they follow departmental and governmental rules, guidance and procedural manuals. Their haste is more likely to be generated by a concern to get home, away from their alienating, underresourced, overburdened and ill-regarded places of work.

In contrast, the field of disability politics provides a positive illustration of the coming together of academics and activists. Here, disabled academics have been significant in changing understandings of disability, through theorising, research and personal experiences. Shakespeare (1996) has pointed out that, in the disability movement, academic interventions are closely related to the ongoing struggles of disabled people, social theories of disability arising from the wider political movement of disabled people in the 1990s. Re-theorising disability was necessary to social change. People like Oliver (1990) and Morris (1991) alerted us to ways in which research had shaped how we thought of disabled people within medical labels and categories. Disability was individualised, disabled people pathologised, subjected to treatment, sympathy and charity. Particular professional groups became experts in knowing better about their needs than disabled people themselves, telling them how they should behave,

what they should expect from life, how they should feel and how they might improve. Social theorists such as Oliver (1990) conceptualised disability as social, to do with restrictive environments and disabling barriers, rather than to do with individual failure and personal tragedy. This social model of disability disrupted the medical model to become adopted by disabled people's organisations such as the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation. It allowed the experiences of disabled people to be articulated and heard. There is not the space here for all the empirical data, nor the massive social change, that have arisen through disabled people bringing together theory, research and practice. It serves, however, as an exemplar for research and development throughout social work. It is not a rational, technical model wherein research findings are fed into policy and practice, where, unless the *status quo* is socially and/or economically ready for a change, they will hit stony ground (Pahl, 1992). It is a political model of praxis.

It is important that research and development in social work is understood as a process of praxis involving the theorising of practice and the development of theory through practice. The term 'praxis' is used, as in Stanley, to adopt:

a political position in which 'knowledge' is not simply defined as 'knowledge *what*' but also as 'knowledge *for*'. Succinctly the point is to change the world, not only to study it... [and to engage in] a social science endeavour which rejects the 'theory/research' divide, seeing these as united manual and intellectual activities. (Stanley, 1990, p. 15)

Praxis involves a commitment to understanding in order to take action, a recognition that understanding comes through engagement and debate with others, and a preparedness, through deliberation, to make judgements about 'the good'.

Critical social research

In taking seriously research and development for 'good' practice, practitioners must consider carefully the kinds of research likely to be useful to them and to users of their services that will accord with anti-discriminatory practice. This requires an understanding of theories of knowledge and theories of methods, of epistemology and methodology:

Epistemology is the study of theories of knowledge. What is knowledge? What can we know about the social world? Who can become knowledgeable. What do we choose to know? These are important epistemological and methodological questions. (Everitt *et al.*, 1992, p. 6)

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The prevailing view of both research and policy development assumes processes imbued with objectivity, neutrality and rationality. Bulmer presents this view wherein:

The task of social research is to provide as precise, reliable and generalisable factual information as possible... This information, when fed into the policy-making process, will enable policy-makers... to reach the best decisions on the basis of the information available. (Bulmer, 1982, p. 31)

The Seebohm Committee, which recommended the establishment of research sections in the new social services departments, talked in similar terms: suggesting that 'better decisions depend on better information' (Seebohm Committee, 1968).

This 'objective' approach is informed by a particular understanding of research (how we come to know about the social world) and of development (how we intervene to bring about change). Here, 'research' and 'development' are seen as separate functions, research informing development. It is an understanding which assumes objectivity in both the research process and the policy process. Research is understood as an activity undertaken under conditions controlled to ensure objectivity as far as possible. It demands and produces expertise and it requires considerable time and resources. The 'scientific method' of such research separates it from policy and practice processes and researchers work from the 'outside', usually located in universities and central government research institutes and centres, but increasingly in private consultancy agencies. This is a top-down model: policy is expected to be informed by research, practice to be informed by policy.

This supposed objectivity in social research is used to justify particular approaches to policy research that bear little resemblance to research as an enquiring activity involving the critical scrutiny of assumptions, values, policies and practices. As already noted in this chapter, research undertaken technically in the form of feasibility studies, monitoring and evaluative studies now accompanies policy initiatives almost as a matter of routine. These are often expedient activities in the name of research to put on a public show that something is being done, and indeed the funding mechanisms of the market place, where outputs are purchased from public, voluntary and private providers, have spawned a considerable 'research' industry in monitoring and evaluation. This may be valuable in providing work for academics, freelancers and private consultants, and in justifying the continuing existence of projects and programmes, but will have done little to bring about much-needed research-informed developments designed to tackle inequalities (Everitt, 1995).

The 'objective' approach to research and development purports that researched knowledge, together with research processes for generating and according credibility to knowledge, is value-free. However, that this very supposition as so generally accepted is itself highly political. Research and policy processes are depoliticised, making both seem rational and disguising the presence and exercise of power. The work of critical social scientists, feminists and members of other new social movements provides social work with credible alternatives that recognise research *and* development as political activities. To suppose that they are not, to fail to reveal the political nature of research, is to leave the prevailing bias of our society untouched and closed to questioning and debate, a bias that is sexist, homophobic, racist, classist, ageist and disablist. The values, assumptions and cultural beliefs of those who shape the research and development agenda, who raise the research questions and who, through observation and interaction, seek data to answer these questions are influential in research and development processes. Unless particularly addressed, the world will continue only to be known through the lenses of those with power and resources. As Harding argues, the perspectives and beliefs of researchers and those who determine the research agenda should be treated, like data, as evidence:

open to critical scrutiny... Introducing this 'subjective' element into the analysis in fact increases the objectivity of research and decreases the 'objectivism' which hides this kind of evidence from the public. (Harding, 1987, p. 9)

Thus, feminists and other critical researchers attempt to be clear, with themselves and others, about the standpoint from which they understand the world. Furthermore, attention is paid to researcher/researched relations and to the researched becoming researchers so that those usually objectified through research have the opportunity to articulate, become conscious of and develop understandings of their own experiences. Value is placed on revealing and acknowledging the experiences of researchers and the researched, while, at the same time, experience is not treated as unproblematic. It needs to be theorised to understand ways in which it is shaped through structures and processes (Maynard, 1994).

Analysing research as a powerful process, and understanding its power to produce knowledge regarded as credible, raises a number of questions. How do phenomena and people come to be known, identified and categorised in particular ways? Who falls into which categories and with what effect? What views are respected and whose are not? Who decides what should be researched, what questions should be answered, how and by whom? As we have noted from the reviews

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of research in the personal social services and the NHS (Culyer, 1994; Smith, 1994), government has in recent years turned its attention to such questions and introduced a number of policy initiatives designed to shape research and development. These are now explored a little more to bring them to the attention of practitioners who might be able to shift the research and development agenda towards addressing social problems and inequalities.

Users and beneficiaries of social work research

The White Paper *Realising our Potential* (Cabinet Office, 1993) emphasised the need for government-funded research to produce useful knowledge. Focusing upon science, engineering and technology, the White Paper probably escaped the notice of social work. Yet it has had considerable influence upon the ways in which research priorities are set in all fields, including the social sciences and health and social care. It recommended that decisions about what to research should be made through partnerships of academics, professionals, industrialists and government, and that research designs should take account of those intended to benefit or take account of research findings.

Following the White Paper, all research councils which fund research were required to change their charters, policies and procedures. The Economic and Social Research Council is now committed to funding social science research that is likely to enhance economic competitiveness and public welfare. Each year, it prioritises themes for research. It does this through consultation exercises with learned societies, universities and 'users of research in government, business, public life and the media' (Economic and Social Research Council, 1996) and in response to the government's Technology Foresight Sector Panels. These panels of partners forecast research priorities for sectors of society including, for example, health and life sciences, and leisure and education (Office of Science and Technology, 1994).

There are two key themes within these research and development policy developments: useful research and users of research. The policy changes clearly indicate that research should only be funded from public money if it is seen (by whom?) as potentially useful. Furthermore, those who are expected to make use of research should be involved in deciding on research priorities. It is these same themes that were confirmed and strengthened for social work and social care by the research and development reviews (Culyer, 1994; Smith, 1994). The final section of this chapter will briefly explore these themes for their meaning for research and development in social work.

An awareness of the relationship between knowledge and power, and a recognition of the success of the New Right in shaping our

thoughts, our language and our curricula for learning, should make us sceptical of the emphasis upon partnership in determining research agendas. It fits more with Conservative political mechanisms that have served to control the autonomy, creativity and critical thinking of academics and professionals than it does with notions of democracy in science and knowledge. Writers in the field of adult education distinguish 'useful knowledge' from 'really useful knowledge' (Hughes, 1995). They have reminded us of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge set up in the early years of industrialisation to provide workers with knowledge useful to the emerging economy (Kelly, 1962). This 'useful' knowledge was contrasted with 'really useful knowledge', which:

meant knowledge that sought to make sense of the causes of hardship and oppression in working-class people's lives... must help to make sense of intolerable circumstances with a view to their challenge. (Hughes, 1995, p. 99)

Similarly, social workers should be active in influencing research agendas to ensure that all that they learn of the intolerable conditions of poverty and racism through their daily practice is exposed and understood. Practitioners have important roles as 'social investigators' (Sinfield, 1969) to reveal the harmful effects of structures and policies such that some people live in fear in their own homes and neighbourhoods without the means to participate as full members of our society and without hope for the future.

Scrutiny of policy and practice does not, however, exclude the practice of social workers themselves. Power is exercised through all of our practices, including research, and to be research-minded is to be constantly alert to the ways in which our talk, our assessments, our inspections and our behaviours affect others. For example, research on user and carer participation in needs assessment reveals a lack of dialogue with users and carers (Ellis, 1993) and, as Utting points out in his foreword to the research report:

Occupations which trade on non-judgementalism are shown to be as moralistic in their approach as any lay person. The ways in which some workers discouraged 'dependency' should impress the most fervent advocate of Victorian values, and shows that the Poor Law is alive and kicking nearly 50 years after its official internment. (Utting, 1993, p. 3)

The research demonstrates examples of good practice but also reveals 'stereotyped responses... [and a] 'lack of creativity' (Ellis, 1993, p. 7). If social work is concerned with challenging the discriminatory

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contexts of the lives of users and of their own practice, then to be enquiring and critical is essential in the repertoire of practice skills. As Utting forcefully points out, the assumptions that social workers can and do make about policies, resources and values would often not stand up to rigorous questioning and scrutiny, and serve to discriminate against users of social services. Furthermore, while social workers engage in anti-oppressive talk, speaking the correct words, any critical analysis of their practice might well reveal a totally different reality.

In reflecting on the users of research in social work, it is perhaps helpful to distinguish between users and beneficiaries. In participating in research and development, through setting research agendas, commissioning research and undertaking research, social workers themselves should be users of research for the benefit of those who use, or are likely to use, their services. They should also, however, develop ways of providing opportunities for users of social services to become users of research in their own right. Feminists, disability researchers and action-research approaches have demonstrated the potential value, to both knowledge and action, in people becoming knowledgeable about their own lives. Hopefully, having read this chapter, you will know that this makes sense theoretically, politically and professionally.

Further reading

- Broad, B. and Fletcher, C. (eds) (1993) *Practitioner Social Work Research in Action* (London, Whiting & Birch).
A useful collection of articles giving examples of research by practitioners having a real effect on practice and policy.
- Everitt, A., Hardiker, P., Littlewood, J. and Mullender, A. (1992) *Applied Research for Better Practice* (Basingstoke, Macmillan).
A helpful introduction to research for improving practice, with an anti-oppressive focus.
- Fuller R. and Petch A. (1995) *Practitioner-Research: The Reflective Social Worker*, (Buckingham, Open University Press).
A thoughtful guide to practice research.
- Hart, E. and Bond, M. (1995) *Action Research for Health and Social Care: A Guide to Practice* (Buckingham, Open University Press).
A useful guide to implementing research techniques as part of practice.
- Sapsford, R. and Abbott, P. (1992) *Research Methods for Nurses and the Caring Professions* (Buckingham, Open University Press).
Helpfully views research from a multidisciplinary focus.



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List of figures

Notes on the c

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