

Practitioner Research in Social Services: A Literature Review (summary)

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Introduction

This is a summary of the Literature Review conducted around practitioner research in social services. The objective of the review was to establish the context for practitioner research and its impact on practice through identifying practitioner research undertaken in a social services context. The review formed part of an evaluation into the initiative taken by Children 1st and the Glasgow School of Social Work to develop a practitioner research programme. The evaluation was commissioned by the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS) with funding from the Scottish Government's Changing Lives Fund.

The Changing Lives Implementation Agenda has five Change Programmes. The Research and Development (R&D) Strategy sits under the Practice Governance Change Programme although it is, of course, a cross-cutting matter that has relevance for all the Change Programmes. The purpose of the R&D Strategy is to: increase the quantity and quality of research activity, and its dissemination and integration into practice, in order to improve and develop social services. Practitioner research sits at the heart of this, and as such the initiative taken by Children 1st and the Glasgow School of Social Work is of great interest. It is imperative that we learn as much as we can about the context, barriers and facilitators for practitioner research and are clear about the impact a practitioner research programme can have on the service. The findings from this two part study will inform how we can develop practitioner research as part of increasing the quantity and quality of research which is at the heart of the R&D strategy for social services.

Scope and Aims

Practitioner Research (PR) involves a practitioner or group of practitioners carrying out enquiry in order to better understand their own practice and to improve service effectiveness. PR projects are typically small and localised studies and there is great variation in topic, design and methodology. Further characteristics of PR include:

- direct collection or reflection on existing data;
- professionals setting aims;
- practical or immediate benefits;
- hands-on collection of data around own practice and/or peers.

Our review examined two distinct forms of PR literature:

- 1) A systematic search of articles that were discussions of PR initiatives, reviews, and of barriers and facilitators for the conduct of practitioner research.
- 2) A systematic identification and analysis of PR studies undertaken within a social services context.

Findings

There are examples of PR schemes drawn from across all four home countries, Australasia, United States and Denmark and a great deal of advocacy of 'models', processes and frameworks for PR. Many developments are University-driven initiatives involving collaboration and partnership. Mentoring is core to most of the initiatives, although the precise understanding of mentoring varies. Initiatives involve both the use of routine information and collection of fresh data.

Whilst there is much interest and enthusiasm amongst social workers for conducting practitioner research there are barriers that must be tackled:

Resources: including lack of time, research confidence and expertise and difficulties in arranging cover. Obtaining practical support and the reliance on external collaboration and support were also problematic.

Professional identity: Social workers may view themselves as helpers rather than intellectuals, and question how research knowledge fits with other sorts of knowledge including intuition, experience, authority, and policy.

Organisational system and culture exacerbate difficulties faced around workload, role expectation, and lack of support. Social workers in small, isolated agencies and settings are particularly disadvantaged.

The review identified possible success factors for undertaking PR including:

- working in a close team environment (i.e. small teams of practitioner researchers or forms of peer support) with group ownership and passion for the practice focus of their projects;
- project milestones to address time management, forward planning and maintaining motivation;
- support of the employing organisation.

Practitioner Research in Action

A systematic search produced a sample of 23 PR studies published as journal articles. These included social workers/support workers working in statutory and voluntary sector contexts, in both children and adult services. Practice areas included generic and specialist areas. Studies were most often undertaken by sole-researchers, but there were also those where a practitioner or a group of practitioners had worked on a study together with an academic. The Table below gives three examples of PR studies

Research question	Sample	Research method/ology
Evaluate a hospital team's care co-ordination in relation to designated outcomes defined for a particular programme	209 assessments undertaken during a specified period; compared with a control group of matched referrals made during the same period	Quantitative. Adapted assessment tool to work as an audit tool; data mining from hospital database
Exploring mental health provision for black and minority ethnic groups	6 managers; 6 workers; 7 service users.	Qualitative. Semi-structured interviews.
Explore fathers' needs, experiences and views on early years services	31 fathers and 5 grandfathers, drawn from those with contact at centre and 3 local infant schools	Qualitative. Structured schedule with open and closed questions

Research focus: The primary research focus of the 23 practitioner-research studies reviewed was upon actual or potential service users, and the primary issue or problem focus was on understanding or evaluating social work services and understanding/strengthening user involvement in social work, through partnership or empowerment. Two-thirds focused upon people as actual or potential services users.

Research methods: The overwhelming majority of studies adopted qualitative methodologies, usually unstructured or semi-structured interviews but also focus groups. There were descriptive case study approaches which drew on pre-existing data or practitioners own reflections and experience. There were studies that collected data from service users or practitioners. Only two studies were purely quantitative methodologies, and three papers drew on both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Research ethics: Thirteen of the 23 papers provided no details or insufficient details to determine what consideration had been given to ethics in the research process. In many papers, there was explicit reference to gaining access to potential participants, obtaining consent, and to working to guard anonymity and confidentiality. Some of these studies had undergone independent ethical scrutiny, either by the organisations within which they were working or by health trusts that governed the organisations that they used for sampling.

Research rigour: On the whole the studies appeared to demonstrate a level of rigour in the approaches that they adopted, the samples that they drew, and in the reporting of their findings. For some papers it was often difficult to appraise their reliability or dependability due to significant omissions on the design of the studies (including details of how the sample were selected and who they were) or in the reporting of their findings. Most studies provided context-rich descriptions that gave a sense of credibility and authenticity.

Most studies were measured and cautious in the conclusions that they drew from their research. Some papers made explicit reference to the limits on the transferability or generalisability of their findings, often, appropriately restricting it to the characteristics of the team or service that the findings referred to.

Impact on policy and practice: The papers demonstrated concern for enabling impact and this can be viewed in different ways:

- linking the reporting of research findings to clear recommendations;
- disseminate as widely as possible;
- direct programme development and advocacy (e.g. a researcher assisting research participants to form a support group, develop an information leaflet, and lobby for service development);
- some of the studies contributed towards building capacity, via the partnerships that were formed and the research processes involved;
- some authors made reference to the impact of process on their own experience or through the relationships that were formed in the course of the research.

The Way Forward for Practitioner Research

We identified a set of important questions (strategic, organisational, and programmatic) that must be addressed if PR is to continue to flourish.

Strategic

- Should practitioner research be driven and controlled by organisation, agency, service users or University?
- Is practitioner research best left as a bottom-up development or does it require strategic direction?
- How can practitioner research best include service users' views and collaboration?

Organisational

- How can networks, collaborations and learning circles be fostered?
- How can all levels of an organisation be influenced to ensure the development of practitioner research?
- Is practitioner research best nurtured at the level of profession, organisation, geographical site, or field of practice?

Programme level

- What is the best form of supervisory relations: academic, clinical, mentorship, external?
- What is the appropriate content and delivery mode for training and seminar support?
- What is the most appropriate model of mentoring?
- How can PR be better disseminated amongst other practitioners?
- What frameworks and guidance are available to practitioners to guide them in the ethical review and documentation of their studies?
- How do we balance quality (methodological rigour) alongside utility?

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