

Editorial: Social Work Practitioner Research in a Globalised Context

Introduction

The idea of running this special issue germinated from the success of the 2nd International Symposium on Social Work Practitioner Research, co-organised by Durham University and the UK Social Work Practitioner Research Network (The British Association of Social Workers, Special Interest Group). The theme of the symposium was *Social Work Practitioner Research for Diversity: Knowledge for Transformation*, reflecting an emphasis on the need for diversifying knowledge production and applying diverse knowledge for social transformation. The symposium involved presentations and workshops co-organised by social work practitioner-researchers and social work academics, from the UK, Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, Australia, the USA, Iraq, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and was joined by more than seventy attendees. The experiences and learnings shared in the symposium brought to the foreground the roles played by social workers in a broad range of research activities, which include but are not exclusive to, ‘evaluating practice’, ‘co-producing social work research’ and ‘theorising social work’, involving people who are disadvantaged by racial/ethnic status, disabilities, socio-economic background and neurodiversity.

The editors of this special issue were co-organisers and/or contributors to the symposium and are keen to build on the momentum it generated. This includes widening debate, for example, on how to bridge the social work practice–research gap, or, if the gaps are, to some extent, necessary for the thriving of each enterprise and their joint pursuits. These conversations have already led to some international consensus on the need for research mindedness in social work practitioners and practice mindedness in academic research (see the Salisbury Statement, 2011 and the Helsinki Statement, 2014), and the need for practitioner–academic–users collaboration (the New York Statement, 2015 and the Melbourne Statement, 2023). With the increasing amount of literature trying to define or capture these collaborative research practices and transdisciplinary learning, we felt it important to provide a forum through which to explore the specific historical,

cultural, political, social and legal contexts, where social work practice and social work research are conducted (the Hong Kong Statement, 2017).

The special issue

This special issue invited submissions based on a broad understanding of social work practitioner research—social work research that involves social workers significantly in the research design and process, with an intention to investigate the practice–research gap and strengthen social work professionalism. To capture the latest methodological, ethical and practical challenges and innovative responses arising from undertaking social work practitioner research, we welcomed the submission of both full-length articles and shorter case studies, as well as book reviews.

This collection of works covers mainly UK studies but includes also those carried out in Israel, Zambia, Australia, and the USA, as well as one reporting on a multi-country study conducted in Northern Ireland. From these articles, it is clear that the benefit of carrying out practitioner research is beyond the ‘immediate or instrumental’ (Mitchell *et al.*, 2008, p. 32). Many highlight the distinctive challenges presented by neoliberalism, managerialism and political conflicts to social workers, and their practice and involvement in research (McDonald and Rogowski; Power and Dean; James *et al.*; Ashworth and Burke), whilst some demonstrate the limitations of Western social work theories and interventions and emphasise social workers’ roles in challenging and modifying them for the benefit of the local communities (Alhuzail and Mahajne; Michalopoulos *et al.*).

Rather than trying to arrive at a definition of practitioner research, this special issue seeks to open up conversations on the complexities involved in making sense of practitioners’ engagement in diverse research activities across varied socio-political contexts. Hopefully, these conversations can offer insights into possibilities for generating ‘pragmatic, variable, context-dependent and praxis-oriented’ knowledge (Uggerhøj, 2011, p. 46), which foregrounds the role of social workers in addressing global issues, such as human mobility, decolonisation and the neo-liberalisation/politicisation of social work and social care.

The politics and challenges: the state of social work

The articles, case studies and book reviews of this special issue serve an important function in illuminating the challenges that social workers are likely to encounter when seeking to engage in practitioner research. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the impact of the political context of social work and how it is framed as a profession is seen explicitly or implicitly in each of the contributions. McDonald and Rogowski provide the most overt analysis in the form

of an incisive historical summary of how social work in the UK has been remoulded by prevailing political ideology since the 1950s, particularly the shift towards neo-liberalism. Accompanied by the introduction of New Public Management, the impact of this change is manifested in the prioritisation of bureaucracy and narrowing the focus of practice to individual casework provided only to those in urgent need. The global economic crash of 2007, Brexit and COVID-19 have served to exacerbate this process by offering additional economic ‘imperatives’ for the further retrenchment of public services. The knock-on effect on social work is felt throughout the profession at a visceral level. This is reflected, as Turner and Linton indicate, in high levels of stress, emotional exhaustion, job dissatisfaction and significant numbers of social workers leaving the profession. Moreover, the reductive neoliberal view of social work as primarily a functional and ‘common-sense’ activity directed towards gatekeeping resources eliminates the need for practitioners to be involved in activities seen as superfluous to this role, including participating in and learning through research.

As such, the special issue contributions also speak to the cultural challenges that pertain to undertaking practitioner research, specifically, in framing it as something that is valid. Power and Dean attest to the impact of such a professional culture on their role as social work practitioners, recognising how they had ‘internalised the idea that our research was an “optional extra” competing with our statutory duties and significant service demand heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. . . . As a result, we de-prioritised the research and did not consider it to be an integral part of our role’. Extending this concern, James *et al.* convey the extent to which they experienced practitioner research as an outlier. Here the barriers relate not just to practicalities, but in the sense that research activity feels contrary to the prescribed social worker role, particularly when aligned, as in their study, with ‘activism’ and a commitment to upholding human rights. For them, being a practitioner-researcher becomes a form of activism that signifies, ‘breaking the chain from the neoliberal managerialism and the proceduralism of being State employees’.

These experiences raise wider questions of how the profession has been ‘conditioned’, at least apparently, to accept a lack of involvement in research as a given? Clearly, the time pressures and resource problems that characterise day-to-day social work practice, as illustrated by Blakely, Roulston *et al.*, and Webber and Joubert, are significant barriers to engaging in practitioner research and are unlikely to be addressed meaningfully any time soon. In challenging this direction of travel, however, McGlade *et al.* reflect on their experiences of building a research community over a period of eleven years in Northern Ireland and acknowledge the centrality of developing a ‘strategic vision and leadership’ and a ‘supportive organisational culture that is receptive to learning and change’. They also signal support in the form of finance as a key challenge, one that is necessary to enable a strategic approach to engender a culture of practitioner research.

Specific challenges of practitioner research related to nationality, race, conflict and illness are highlighted in two contributions by Allasad Alhuzail and Mahajne, and Michalopoulos *et al.* The former convey the difficulty of accessing social workers in sensitive political situations, in this case in a Palestinian/Israeli context, and consider some of the steps researchers may need to take to assuage participants' fears regarding any implications of taking part. The latter study is also sensitive, addressing the subjects of HIV and mental health among female fish traders in Zambia. The authors explore in depth the issues encountered and identify the need for a community development approach to ensure ethical practice, which involves developing cultural awareness and mitigating the impact of stigma and shame.

Different ways to approach practitioner research

The above-mentioned challenges indicate that approaching practitioner research requires capacity building at personal, organisational and system levels. One of the responses in recent times is national doctoral fellowship programmes for social workers, such as Forte's national research programme on applied welfare in Sweden and the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Doctoral Local Authority Fellowship in the UK. These programmes enable practicing social workers to remain in their practice whilst having some of their time paid for by the fellowship schemes to conduct research. With the support from both the service agencies and academic institutions, these fellowships are set to incubate professional social workers who can bring the strengths of practice and research ever closer to each other. On a smaller scale is the University of Edinburgh's Knowledge Exchange fellowship Scheme which encourages practitioners to undertake research projects with academic and employer support. Other innovative attempts might look more like a community of practice and a learning network, set up for knowledge exchange and resource sharing, which are often co-led by professional organisations and academics. Some examples are the NIHR-funded Kent Research Partnership building research capacity in adult social care; the UK Network for Social Work Practitioner Research co-founded by Durham University and the British Association of Social Workers; and the Mental Health Officer Community of Practice and Research Network in Scotland, supported by the Scottish Association of Social Work, and social work practitioners and academics.

These programmes and learning communities celebrate the collaboration between social services and academic institutes and speak to Webber and Joubert's idea that practice is a 'meeting place'—where academic and practitioner-researchers encounter each other, seeing practitioner-researchers play key roles in shaping research agendas and keeping research projects relevant to practice and cultivating 'practice mindedness' among academics. Webber and Joubert also suggest the bilateral flow of knowledge that

characterises practitioner-researchers can improve practice outcomes by enhancing research knowledge (research mindedness and use of evidence). Michalopoulos *et al.* similarly argue for the need for collaboration, but beyond academics and practitioners, to include community organisers and government officials in their study with female fish traders in Zambia. Widening the ‘meeting place’ to involve communities whose lives are affected by the research is said to be key to ‘the identification, adaptation, and development of a manualized intervention that is acceptable, feasible, contextually congruent, and will be potentially scalable in a wide array of settings’. Both Webber and Joubert and Michalopoulos *et al.* highlight processes and tensions in negotiating an acceptable compromise among research standards, integrity of the intervention, practicality, and cultural sensitivity.

The special issue also enquires into some of the knowledge-based, methodological and ethical challenges encountered when engaging in practitioner research. Ashworth and Burke explore some of the ethical hurdles involved, including gaining informed consent, navigating blurred boundaries as researchers/employees and avoiding research bias, in particular, ‘where practitioners are critical of practice within their service areas or are exposed to criticism themselves’. Power and Dean reflect on their lack of methodological preparedness at the dissemination stage of the research process and how to achieve impact, illustrating the need for the ongoing academic support and mentoring across the research journey. James *et al.* identify particular ethical considerations where practitioner research is framed as activism in support of service user rights, including the degree to which such claims can be made and how willing social workers are to disrupt ‘the status quo’ in support of effecting meaningful change.

How does research make its way to practitioners?

That considerable care, attention and time have gone into creating each of the publications for this Special Issue is evident. Set against the resource, ethical and methodological impediments indicated above, this is a testament to the authors’ commitment to the research process and belief in the transformative role of practitioner research in influencing and effecting change in social work practice. However, this does not mean that such change is a given. The process of collating the Special Issue has raised questions about: ‘who will read it?’, ‘will it be mostly academics?’, and ‘how will social workers access *BJSW* and, even if they do, where will they get the time to read a full-length journal article?’ Sitting astride these concerns is the broader question of, ‘how does research make its way to practitioners?’ In the UK, it has long been acknowledged that the post-qualifying practice/research gap for social workers, and social care professionals, requires a systemic approach, which in part includes developing research repositories and dissemination sites aimed directly at practitioners. These include the UK-wide

Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), described as ‘The UK’s largest database of information and research on all aspects of social care and social work’, and the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS) which is based in Scotland but is an open access site. Both organisations have a remit to support the development of, collate and share knowledge on research and practice innovations that inform change. Initiatives illustrate the efforts made to overcome access barriers; for example, IRISS commissions research ‘Insights’ and ‘Evidence Summaries’ designed to be readily understood and with clear advice on how they may be used to shape practice. A key additional driver, however, is engaging with practitioners and social work/care services in determining the focus of and co-producing research based on what is needed in practice.

This special issue has sought to adopt similar levers to reach as wide as social work readership as possible. Obviously, there are no guarantees in this regard, and the work to develop research-to-practitioner conduits and networks is, arguably, still in the very early stages and much more is required to build on the foundations of SCIE and IRISS, among others. That said, the fact that the special issue is available through BJSW’s Open Access arrangement, meaning that it is ‘free to view’ for six months after publication, will hopefully support this aim. In addition, the mix of full-length articles, shorter case studies and book reviews aims to meet a range of prospective readers’ needs in relation to time and preference for in-depth analyses or more accessible overviews and summaries.

Further key aspects to encourage readership and engagement are the Special Issue’s demonstration that research by practitioners is first possible, and also personally and professionally fulfilling in developing the self and contributing valuable knowledge to the profession. Much of the appeal here lies in what Horner refers to, in his review of Shekhattari *et al.*’s book on practitioner research, as ‘demystifying and democratising the practice of research’. Relatedly, the centrality of the practitioner-researcher’s voice and the agency and passion that infuse the analyses and reflections on their research activity showcase research as something that is both exciting and important (see Blakely). This includes bringing to life theoretical and methodological concerns that can often feel dry and exclusive; for example, McDonald’s and Rogowski’s overview of what critical social work is and how it can support relationship-based practice. Similarly, James *et al.*’s exploration of how ‘allyship’ through research with people with learning disabilities enabled them to ‘translate the abstract concept of participation in political and democratic life into rights-related personal outcomes’.

The fundamental aim of achieving change through practitioner research is further articulated and celebrated throughout the Special Issue, including in Ashworth and Burke’s study with social workers, which demonstrates practitioners’ agency and ability to ‘disrupt’ practice conditions through research, challenging notions of a browbeaten, procedurally driven workforce. The authors highlight the importance of this outcome for countering ‘current deficit

discourses', for example, that social workers are under-skilled and lack 'the knowledge and skills needed to support families'. In a similar vein, reflecting on being a practitioner in current times, Power and Dean attest to the impact of engaging in practitioner research for improving job satisfaction and the ability to stay in the social worker role, as well as increasing their sense of efficacy and confidence in facilitating change 'on a level more akin to 'macro-social work'. Moreover, Hemmington and Vicary's edited collection captures the value of hearing from practitioners, in this case, approved mental health professionals, and affording them space to make sense of the role, which in this collection includes decision making on the use of compulsion in mental health.

An invitation to explore practitioner research

As guest editors, we hope this collection of articles, case studies and book reviews, with most of them authored by or co-authored with practitioner-researchers, helps to demystify practitioners' participation in all stages of research, including data (co)analysis and writing. The deep engagement with practice in this body of work shapes the ways these articles make connections between practice, evidence and theories. The use of reflective practice records and other practice-near data collection tools, the prevalence of visual representations and the accessible language are strong features of the work included within this special issue, demonstrating a range of possibilities for undertaking and disseminating practitioner research.

Considering practitioner research as a continuum is crucial for making sense of social workers' participation in research activities, from research consultation to involvement, collaboration and practitioner-led research. Where genuine collaboration among social workers, service users and carers and academics takes place, to democratise their leadership, decision-making processes, knowledge production processes and the conception of 'science', there will be more commonalities than differences across practice research, practitioner research and service user-led research. This special issue, we hope, can be an invitation to this common place where theories and research skills, practice wisdoms and knowledge, and lived experiences work together for improving well-being, promoting social justice and developing the social work profession.

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