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Practice Research

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Introduction

Practice research focuses heavily on the roles of the service provider and service user who play a major role in defining the research questions and interpreting the findings. Compared to other knowledge production processes that are agency-based, service-focused, client-focused, theory-informed, highly interactive (multiple stakeholders), and designed to inform practice, policy, and future research, practice research makes a unique contribution to the research enterprise. Practice research in the field of social work plays an important role in a continuing search for ways to improve social services that promote the well-being of service users. It often involves collaboration among multiple stakeholders in addition to service providers, researchers, service users, educators (funders, policymakers, agency directors, etc.), while taking into account the power dynamics between service users and service providers with respect to inclusiveness, transparency, ethical reflexivity, and critical reflection. In this relationship, agency practice that fully captures the perspectives of service users as well as providers can inform the education of future practitioners as well as influence research on agency practice and policies. The goal of practice research is to generate knowledge derived from agency-based practice (Salisbury Forum Group 2011, cited under General Overviews). The theoretical frameworks and methodological research tools for engaging in practice research often requires flexible and collaborative structures and organizations (Helsinki Forum Group 2014, cited underGeneral Overviews). Practice research is often a negotiated process between practice (providers and users) and research (researchers and educators) within the context of cross-cultural dialogical communications needed to address the gap between research and practice. In essence, for practice and research to be shared, co-learning, respect, and curiosity are needed to support an inclusive inquiry and knowledge development process that captures the differences and tensions reflected in fundamentally different perspectives (e.g., service user and provider, service provider and researcher, and researcher and policymaker). In addition, practice research is often funder influenced, outcome focused, and change oriented.

General Overviews

Helsinki Forum Group 2014 and Salisbury Forum Group 2011 provide an important overview of the evolution of practice research related to social work. Dodd and Epstein 2012, Marthinsen and Julkunen 2012, Shaw 2012, and Vonk, et al. 2007 are used in teaching practice research, and all references are briefly described.

- **Dodd, S.-J., and I. Epstein. 2012. *Practice-based research in social work: A guide for reluctant researchers*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.**

  This volume provides an overview of practice-based research (PBR) for students, researchers, and practitioners who seek to bridge the gap between practice and research, and it illustrates the application of PBR to different practice methods and practice settings.

- **Helsinki Forum Group. 2014. <u>Helsinki Statement on social work practice research</u>. *Nordic Social Research* 4.1: S1–S7.**

  The Helsinki Statement is an update of the Salisbury Statement (<u>Salisbury Forum Group 2011</u>) on the current challenges and directions of social work practice research by identifying both the theoretical and methodological issues facing social work practice research.

- **Marthinsen, E., and I. Julkunen, eds. 2012. *Practice research in Nordic social work: Knowledge production in transition*. London: Whiting and Birch.**

  This volume includes a collection of practice research studies in Nordic countries and provides both theoretical and methodological discussions of practice research as well as examples of practice research studies.

- **Salisbury Forum Group. 2011. The Salisbury Statement. *Social Work and Society* 9.1: 4–9.**

  The Salisbury Statement, formulated by several social work academics and practitioners from various countries in 2008, introduces the background of social work practice research.

- **Shaw, I. 2012. *Practice and research*. Farnham, UK: Ashgate.**

  This comprehensive analysis is a resource for scholars, students, and practitioners who seek to explore the practice/research relationship in social work in depth. The book covers the following areas: perspectives on social work research, evaluation, qualitative social work research, practice and research, and service users and research.

- **Vonk, E., T. Tripodi, and I. Epstein. 2007. *Research techniques for clinical social workers*. New York: Columbia Univ. Press.**

  This volume provides an introduction to the use of research concepts and techniques for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting information relevant to clinical social work practice for those interested in integrating research into their practice.

Multiple Definitions

Practice research can be viewed from many different perspectives. These include practice-based research that calls for the practice literacy of researchers (<u>Fisher 2011</u>, <u>Uggerhøj 2011a</u>, and <u>Uggerhøj 2011b</u>); practitioner research that is undertaken primarily by social work practitioners (<u>Shaw 2005</u>, <u>Shaw and Lunt 2011</u>, and <u>Shaw and Lunt 2012</u>); service user research that is undertaken primarily by service users with support from other stakeholders (<u>Sweeney, et al. 2009</u>); a multifaceted knowledge production process (<u>Julkunen 2011</u>); a data-mining process using agency-based administrative and case records (<u>Epstein 2010</u> and <u>Epstein 2011</u>, both cited under <u>Selected Methods That Inform Practice Research</u>); and a knowledge-sharing process designed to support evidence-informed practice (<u>Austin, et al. 2012</u>). Practice research is also designed to bridge the practice-research gap as well as strengthen the scientific knowledge base supporting social work intervention (<u>Mullen, et al. 2008</u>; <u>Mullen, et al. 2011</u>; see also the *Oxford Bibliographies* articles <u>Evidence-based Social Work Practice</u>, <u>Evidence-based Social Work Practice: Finding Evidence</u>, and <u>Evidence-based Social Work Practice: Issues, Controversies, and Debates</u>). Practice-based research in other disciplines can also inform social work practice research (e.g., practice as research in the humanities [<u>Nelson 2013</u>]) and developmental work research from the psychology of learning about daily workplace activities (<u>Engeström 2000</u>, cited under <u>Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)</u>).

- **Austin, M., T. Dal Santo, and C. Lee. 2012. Building organizational supports for research-minded practitioners. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work* 9.1–2: 174–211.**

  Defines the qualities that a research-minded practitioner needs—curiosity, critical reflection, and critical thinking—to work within the context of human service organizations in order to build knowledge-sharing systems that can support evidence-informed practice and promote practice-based research.

- **Fisher, M. 2011. Practice literate research: Turning the tables. *Social Work and Society* 9.1: 20–28.**

  This article focuses on the practice research relationship by calling for a shift in focus from simply engaging practitioners in research to developing practice-literate researchers. The practice research framework includes multiple stakeholders and maintains an active interaction with social work practice.

- **Julkunen, I. 2011. Knowledge-production processes in practice research: Outcomes and critical elements. *Social Work and Society* 9.1: 60–75.**

  This article identifies the different theoretical and methodological approaches to inform practice research (PR) and describes the current practice research processes and outcomes. Four practice research models are identified: the

practitioner-oriented PR process, the method-oriented PR process, the democratic PR model, and the generative PR model.

- **Mullen, E., J. Bellamy, and S. Bledsoe. 2011. Evidence-based practice. In *Social work research and evaluation: Foundations of evidence-based practice*. 9th ed. Edited by R. M. Grinnell Jr. and Y. A. Unrau, 160–177. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.**

  This chapter provides a basic introduction to evidence-based social work practice by providing a framework and definition of evidence-based practice as well as tools to conduct evidence-based practice.

- **Mullen, E., S. Bledsoe, and J. Bellamy. 2008. Implementing evidence-based social work practice. *Research on Social Work Practice* 18.4: 325–338.**

  This article focuses on evidence-based practice (EBP) within the context of social work practice implementation by examining the implementation literature, describing alternative strategies for the implementation of EBP, and presenting a pilot implementation study.

- **Nelson, R. 2013. *Practice as research in the arts: Principles, protocols, pedagogies, resistances*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.**

  This volume provides an overview of the Practice as Research (PaR) in the arts. It offers strategies for articulating and conducting a research inquiry as well as practical guidance for practitioner-researchers.

- **Shaw, I. 2005. Practitioner research: Evidence or critique? *British Journal of Social Work* 35.8: 1231–1248.**

  By focusing on the role of practice research in social work practice, this article identifies the origins and contemporary directions of social work practitioner research while assessing its potential to inform practice and research.

- **Shaw, I., and N. Lunt. 2011. Navigating practitioner research. *British Journal of Social Work* 41.8: 1548–1565.**

  This case study evaluation of two networked cohorts of practitioner-researchers captures the experience of the practitioner researcher and identifies unpredictable research processes.

- **Shaw, I., and N. Lunt. 2012. Constructing practitioner research. *Social Work Research* 36.3: 197–208.**

  This article includes an analysis of two networked cohorts of practitioner-researchers by focusing on the meaning of practitioner research as it is undertaken by social work professionals using a symbolic interactionist approach.

- **Sweeney, A., P. Beresford, A. Faulkner, M. Nettle, and D. Rose, eds. 2009. *This is survivor research*. Ross-on-Wye, UK: PCCS.**

  Written by mental health service users/survivors, this edited volume provides a holistic overview of survivor research including the theory and practice of survivor research along with practical examples and guidance about conducting survivor research.

- **Uggerhøj, L. 2011a. What is practice research in social work: Definitions, barriers and possibilities. *Social Work and Society* 9.1: 45–59.**

  This article connects social work practice research with different theoretical frameworks, such as mode 2 knowledge production and the science of the concrete, by identifying three approaches to research on practice: practice research, practitioner research, and user-controlled research.

- **Uggerhøj, L. 2011b. Theorizing practice research in social work. *Social Work and Social Sciences Review* 15.1: 49–73.**

  By analyzing the theories, definitions, interests, possibilities, and barriers to practice research in social work, the author focuses attention on theoretical frameworks that can inform social work practice research.

Selected Methods That Inform Practice Research

Practice research is not based on a single philosophy or methodology (often mixed methods) and seeks to find ways for practice knowledge to inform practice, theory, and future research. Some of the current research and data collection methods relevant for practice research include data-mining (Epstein 2010 and Epstein 2011); participant action research (see the *Oxford Bibliographies* article "Qualitative Research"); ethnographic research (Brewer 2000), along with the traditional tools of interviewing (see the *Oxford Bibliographies* article "Interviewing"); focus groups (see the *Oxford Bibliographies* article "Group Work"); and archival historiography (Danto 2008).

- **Brewer, J. D. 2000. *Ethnography*. Buckingham, UK: Open Univ. Press.**

This textbook provides the methodological bases of ethnography and details its various uses in the form of guidelines for the research process and builds on the author's experience with ethnographic research in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

- **Danto, E. 2008. *Historical research*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.**

  This guide to conducting historical research in social work research provides practical research tools from designing a study to analyzing historical data as well as information about archives and special collections.

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

  This guide provides a description of clinical data-mining (CDM) in social work practice. The multiple audiences include professionals conducting practice-based research, researchers, social work students, as well as other professionals working closely on social work research and practice.

- **Epstein, I. 2011. Reconciling evidence-based practice, evidence-informed practice, and practice-based research: The role of clinical data-mining. *Social Work* 56.3: 284–288.**

  This commentary focuses on the relationship among evidence-based practice, evidence-informed practice, and practice-based research. It also focuses on clinical data-mining as a promising practice-based research strategy.

Selected Theories That Inform Practice Research

At least five promising theoretical approaches can inform practice research: grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008, cited under Grounded Theory, and the *Oxford Bibliographies* article "Qualitative Research"); science of the concrete (Flyvbjerg 2001, cited under Science of the Concrete); mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons, et al. 1994, cited under Mode 2 Knowledge Production); dialogical communications (Seikkula and Arnkil 2006, cited under Dialogical Communications); and Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engeström 2000 and Foot 2015, cited under Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)).

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory refers to an inductive method of theory construction that illustrates propositions derived by the data using following methods: (1) continuous comparison (comparison of different cases); (2) theoretical sensitivity (the researcher's ability to be analytic); (3) theoretical sampling (the process of data collection for generating theory in which the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes the data, then designs what data to collect next and where to collect it); and (4) theoretical saturation in which no additional data can be found for developing the properties of a category (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Bryant and Charmaz 2007).

- **Bryant, A., and K. Charmaz, eds. 2007. *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory*. London: SAGE.**

  This edited handbook provides a comprehensive overview of the theory and practice of grounded theory by an international group of contributors. It covers the different perspectives and related methods as well as the complexities associated with using ground theory, the skills requirements for the research, and its location in the array of social science research methods.

- **Corbin, J., and A. L. Strauss. 2008. *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. 3d ed. London: SAGE.**

  Grounded theory has become one of the most influential perspectives to inform methodology and theory development in the arena of qualitative research. This volume of practical applications builds on the classic study for generating theory from data, referred to as "grounded theory."

Science of the Concrete

The "science of the concrete" is a pragmatic, variable, and context-dependent science that enables dialogue with those being studied, other researchers, and decisionmakers, as well as with other central actors in the field (including laypeople) often in open public venues in order to capture different interests and perspectives. It includes the following key elements: (1) getting close to reality (the research is conducted close to the phenomenon studied); (2) emphasizing little things (research studies the major in the minor); (3) looking at practical activities and knowledge in everyday situations, as well as studying concrete cases and contexts (research methodically builds on case studies);

(4) joining agency and structure (the focus is on both the actor and the structural level); and (5) dialoguing with a polyphony of voices (the research is dialogical with no voice claiming final authority) (Flyvbjerg 2001). These elements provide an important context for the conduct of practice research, although it also could guide traditional social science research.

- **Flyvbjerg, B. 2001.** *Making social science matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. **New York: Cambridge Univ. Press.**

  The author focuses on the essence of the social sciences and presents a new approach that includes theoretical arguments, methodological guidelines, and examples of practical application. To restore its position in the contemporary society, social science researchers need to be more oriented to praxis-oriented "phronetic social science."

Mode 2 Knowledge Production

According to Gibbons, et al. 1994, mode 2 knowledge production is based on interactions between actors with different perspectives while relying on traditional disciplinary and cognitive research approaches guided primarily by academic norms. It is characterized by collaboration-oriented structures and networks and often functions best in an environment of organizational flexibility in which collaboration among those with different needs and interests is characterized by ongoing reflection on differences. This perspective provides an important transdisciplinary context for conducting practice research related to the expertise of experience displayed by service users, the professional expertise of the service provider, the methodological expertise of the researcher, and the policy expertise of decisionmakers.

- **Gibbons, M., C. Limoges, H. Novotny, et al. 1994.** *The new production of knowledge: The dynamics of science and research in contemporary societies*. **London: SAGE.**

  The authors analyze the changes in scientific, social, and culture knowledge production. They make a distinction between mode 1 (traditional knowledge) production and mode 2 (heterogeneous, temporary, socially relevant, and reflective) knowledge production, and they discuss the features and relationship of these approaches.

Dialogical Communications

Dialogical communication is defined as "open communications without domination" using discussion and democratic dialogue to enhance self-understanding in practice settings and addresses the following goals: (1) generating safety and minimizing anxiety (for both service users and providers); (2) opening discussion and demonstrating a genuine interest in what each person is saying (following each other's language where words may have different meanings); (3) generating dialogical utterances (creating sufficient time to search for words as well as shared empathy that encourages comments); (4) responding to what each other has said; and (5) speaking for one's own sake (all participants sharing their own views and emotions) (Seikkula and Arnkil 2006, pp. 126–127). It is based on the concept of "shared worries" between service providers and service users as well as "shared resources" located in the networks of both service providers and service users in which active listening and service planning are key parts of the engagement process. This theoretical approach has been expanded by recent developments related to trialogical learning (Hakkarainen 2008).

- **Hakkarainen, K. 2008. Toward a trialogical approach to learning: Personal reflections.** *Lifelong Learning in Europe* **13:22–29.**

  Trialogical learning involves participants in systematic collaborative development, transformation, or creation of shared objects of activity (e.g., practices, conceptual artifacts, or products) and features the interaction of these shared objects of activity that is beyond the dialogical approach between people.

- **Seikkula, J., and T. E. Arnkil. 2006.** *Dialogical meetings in social networks*. **London and New York: Karnac.**

  This book describes the encounters between personal and professional networks and the ways in which dialogism can inform these encounters, including "open dialogues" and "anticipation dialogues."

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is a practice-based theoretical framework for analyzing and informing collective and complex human practices at multiple organizational levels (Engeström 2000 and Foot 2015). Grounded in place, time, and materiality, CHAT helps to identify the systemic contradictions that shape the ways in which people work together by noting that (1) humans act collectively, learn by doing, and communicate in and via their actions; (2) humans make, use, and adapt tools of all kinds to learn and communicate; and (3) community is central to the process of making and interpreting meaning that contributes to all forms of learning, communicating, and acting (Vygotsky 1978). The CHAT model features an activity system that is constantly evolving through collective learning actions (often in response to systemic contradictions) and thereby enables the multirelational analyses of the complex practices of professional work over time. Through the use of a CHAT framework, the interactions between service providers and users can be analyzed in terms of the evolving interpersonal and communicative aspects of those relationships within a cultural, political, and historical context.

- **Engeström, Y. 2000. From individual action to collective activity and back: Developmental work research as an interventionist methodology. In** *Workplace studies: Recovering work practice and informing system design.* **Edited by P. Luff, J. Hindmarsh, and C. Heath, 150–166. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press.**

  This chapter describes how Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and developmental work research can inform research and intervention. Researching the historical and cultural contexts of practice helps to identify the contradictions and potentials of an activity system.

- **Foot, K. 2015. Using cultural-historical activity theory to analyze social service practices evolving from the Norwegian HUSK Projects.** *Journal of Evidence-Informed Social Work* **12.1: 112–123.**

  The article explores the Norwegian HUSK projects through the use of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) by analyzing HUSK projects in the light of their cultural and historical contexts as well as a comparative analysis of the efforts to advance multisector collaboration in some of the HUSK projects.

- **Vygotsky, L. 1978.** *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* **Edited by Michael Cole, et al. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press.**

  The volume includes a selection of Vygotsky's major essays that provide the foundations of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT).

Disseminating and Implementing Results of Practice Research

Within the process of engaging a wider audience of interested practitioners and researchers in the conduct of social work practice research, several areas look promising. Clearly, one way to increase the value and visibility of practice research is to demonstrate different ways in which it can inform the development and implementation of public policy. Practice research could have significant implications for administrative policies and procedures that relate to the management and improvement of social services. Practice research does not replace the need for more traditional forms of public policy knowledge production, but it can enrich the process with different kinds of knowledge. One of the biggest challenges facing practice research is the need for disseminating and utilizing research findings in everyday practice. As with other forms of research, most of the time, energy, and funding related to practice research leaves few resources for sharing findings with other stakeholders to promote understanding and utilization. In essence, dissemination is an integral part of practice research and not a separate phase as seen in traditional research activity (Julkunen 2015, cited under Uniqueness of Practice Research). Another challenge facing the dissemination and utilization of practice research methodology involves the educating of future practitioners, especially related to actively including service users from diverse backgrounds in the research process, as well as helping students to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to engage in the provision and evaluation of interdisciplinary practice. One of the biggest challenges facing educators is to increase the competence of social work students in transforming questions emerging from practice into practice research questions through the active use of critical reflection and critical thinking. The very nature of practice is being challenged by the call for more knowledge-based practice and the needs in the practice community for research-minded practitioners and practice-minded researchers. Building practice knowledge is a methodologically, structurally, and culturally pluralist process that promotes both practice-based research as well as research-based practice (Epstein 2010, cited under Selected Methods That Inform Practice Research). Finally, the ongoing debates about the nature of qualitative research should include exploring the role of practice research in the integrated teaching of research methods and practice methods together.

Challenges Facing Practice Research

Although the emerging definitions of practice research are recent (Salisbury Forum Group 2011, cited under General Overviews), some will argue that this form of research has a long history in social work education and practice. Since it is not the purpose of this brief article to capture the history of research in social work, it seems more important to raise issues about the relevance of practice research in different parts of the world. How does practice research look in developing countries in contrast to developed countries? How does culture and context affect practice research? How do ethical considerations emerge within the context of practice research? How do research funders and social policymakers respond to the value and outcomes of practice research? These and other questions provide a foundation for exploring the sustainability of practice research in the years ahead.

Uniqueness of Practice Research

Practice research includes at least three major goals: (1) informing practice and policy, (2) informing knowledge development, and (3) informing research methods seeking a balance between the study of key variables and holistic case studies. Practice research uses the venue of agency practice to test new ideas, try new research approaches, and experiment with new ways of delivering services within an organizational context of innovation, creativity, and the protection of human subjects. Practice research focuses on the future with regard to the active dissemination and utilization of research findings and recommendations in collaboration with service providers and service users by helping human service organizations to create knowledge-sharing systems that link evidence-informed practice to decisionmaking at all levels of the organization. Practice research builds on the tools of ethnographic and participatory methods to include the use of critical reflection in the form of theory testing (e.g., CHAT) and theory development. Practice research features all levels of practice related to micro practice (service provider and service user), mezzo practice (groups of service providers, service users, managers, and community stakeholders), and macro practice (featuring management, community, and policy practice), thereby rejecting old dualistic thinking that focuses narrowly on one or more of these domains.

- **Epstein, I. 2009. Promoting harmony where there is commonly conflict: Evidence-informed practice as an integrative strategy.** *Social Work in Health Care* **48.3: 216–231.**

  This article discusses the relationship between social work practice and research, along with the epistemological assumptions of and differences between evidence-based practice, research-based practice, practice-based research, and reflective practice. The article presents a model of practice-research integration by using the concept of evidence-informed practice.

- **Julkunen, I. 2015. Practice-based research: The role of HUSK in knowledge development.** *Journal of Evidence-Informed Social Work* **12.1: 102–111.**

  Practice research involves curiosity about practice that includes challenging relational complexities through critical analysis and focusing on how ideas are created, adopted, and shared in order to strengthen individual and organizational linkages between research and practice, in which the relevance of research transcends simply generalizing and disseminating research findings.

  back to top

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