Making Research Count

Practitioner Research: Realising its potential for improving social care services and practice.

Summary of seminar held at King’s College London on 30 April 2013

For full presentations please see Social Care Workforce Research Unit’s website: http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/kpi/scwru/events/past/30apr13.aspx

Introduction

In his introductions and welcome, James Blewett commented that all of the speakers had combined research and practice experience. He admitted that the current context for research activity was extremely challenging. However, regardless of the budget environment, the use of best national and local knowledge is key to good decision-making. JB said it was encouraging to note that over 50 attendees had signed up for the seminar indicating much interest in the subject.

Dr Joan Rapaport, Visiting Research Fellow, King’s College London. Why should social workers do research? Reflections on a PhD study.

JR described how her research into the much maligned but neglected role of the nearest relative under the Mental Health Act 1983 had illustrated its overlooked potential not only for service users and carers but also for social workers. A key finding of the research was the empowerment of alliances and with particular relevance to the reciprocal functions of the Approved Social Worker and nearest relative, the potential to counterbalance medical power.

JR highlighted how closely her methods of data collection resembled social work. Interviewing techniques are central to social work and given the nature of the social work task, social workers are generally well equipped to conduct all types of interviews ranging from structured, to hardly structured at all. Thus research is within the reach of social workers. JR considered that if she had been young enough, she would have returned to practice and believed that, had she done so, her research experience would have made her a better social worker.


By way of introduction, JB commented on the ongoing and long running debate about the nature of evidence in both research and practice and professional evaluation. Social work capabilities were constantly being questioned. Simple solutions were being sought for complex situations. There was considerable overlap between the language of ‘Practitioner Research’ (PR), the idea of practitioners engaging in research alongside their work and ‘Action Research’. The best way of promoting PR programmes raised many questions, such as who or which agency should be in charge, how should they be nurtured and how should findings be disseminated?
JB described the CWDC national programme of practitioner research 2006 – 2010 and commented that it could easily be replicated in adult services. The scheme, advertised nationally, was only open to practitioners. Projects were selected jointly by CWDC and Making Research Count. Mentoring and meetings were arranged within working hours – and sometimes outside! Research proposals, mostly initially over ambitious, were refined and methodologies agreed. Assistance was given with literature reviews, obtaining ethical approvals and report writing. Findings were disseminated by way of regional and local events. There were many benefits, such as:

- Insights into local practice with wider implications for service improvements
- Excellent means of maintaining CPD points
- Promotion of reflective practice and working culture
- Support of staff retention and staff resilience
- Improvements for service users
- Enjoyable experience for most.

JB said that a number of the agencies involved have commissioned further small projects in recent years and plans are in hand to undertake a three year follow-up. Whilst practitioner research plays a valuable role as above, it sits alongside and is no replacement for, other types of national and local research and evaluations.

**Dr Mark Baldwin: Senior Lecturer in Social Work, University of Bath.**

**Participatory Action Research ‘PAR’**

MB stressed that the participatory approach meant research *with* and not *on* people. Validity is improved because learning is derived from the researchers’ experiences and is owned by them. Action Research examines behaviour over time and seeks to inform and bring about change. Its application is appropriate where people have no voice and/or learning to take control of their lives (emancipatory research). There are four phases of co-operative inquiry:

- Co-researchers form a group, agree the research focus and who does what; engage in action over three to four weeks and open up new experiences and understanding
- Reformation of group and sharing of experiences with collaborative critical reflection, make sense of learning, feedback into original proposition to inform next phase of inquiry
- Repeat cycles of action and reflection to embed learning into practice
- Endings – commitment to critical reflection.

The cyclical process of discussion and debate is crucial to the success of any Action Research programme. Drawing from two pieces of research, MB said that an organisational ‘listening’ culture and professional outlook were also key drivers. In respect of both examples, the social care agency had been supportive. However, whereas in one authority the social workers had embraced and owned the project and learnt to use the reflective sessions constructively, in the other, there had
been considerable professional reticence to such engagement. The more motivated group gained confidence in exercising their professional discretion in decision-making and using opportunities for mutual critical reflection. They also realised they could test out and influence organisational attitudes to management, teamwork and supervision. The more ‘traditional’ social workers demonstrated a mixed commitment to explore their own practice and resisted new policy development.

MB concluded by highlighting similarities between PAR and social work such as aims and objectives, service user involvement, a focus on strengths, process and outcomes and critical reflection. However, he recognised that critical reflectors are increasingly likely to collide with managerialist policy. This being so, PAR, like its ‘nearest relative’ Practitioner Research, affords many opportunities for practice development, service user and professional empowerment and professional registration accreditation. It also meets the objectives of the Social Work Reform Board national framework for CPD ideas and CPD standards.

**Discussion**

Points raised included concerns about time available to social workers to undertake research, limited energy levels to take on yet another commitment, the prevailing ‘tick box’ culture and difficulties identifying the appropriate management level to enlist support for practitioner research. MB commented that it was important to forge links with University networks to facilitate small scale projects. For example, at his University he could organise meetings, facilitate critical reflective discussion, keep a record of events and ensure dissemination of findings by leading on publications. All the speakers commented on the potential energising effect of conducting research. Academics could help ease some of the academic and administrative load and thus free up social workers to take the plunge.

Joan Rapaport

1 May 2013