DEVELOPING GOOD PRACTITIONER RESEARCH: AN AGENDA FOR RESEARCH COMMISSIONERS, AGENCIES AND PRACTITIONERS

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The aims of this lecture

1. To draw on evidence to identify distinctions within those forms of research which are to significant degrees practitioner engaged:
   • To outline the respective characteristics of ‘practitioner-led’ and ‘academic partnership’ research.
   • In turn these may be ‘autonomous’ projects or networked.
2. To understand how practitioners experience practitioner research.
3. To identify the challenges of such research for research commissioners, agencies and practitioners.
4. To make recommendations for research commissioners, agencies, practitioners and universities.
Practitioner research

- Research planned and conducted in substantial ways by practitioners occurs in fields as varied as education, adult social care services, diverse health sector occupations, social work with children, clinical psychology, pharmacy, and probation practice.
- Practitioner research possesses elements of both practice intervention and inquiry.
- It is embraced, often without question, as an element of good practice within a profession.
Practitioner research typically involves

1. Direct data collection, or management and reflection on existing data.
2. Professionals are substantially involved in setting its aims and outcomes.
3. It has intended practical benefits for professionals, service organisations and/or service users. These hoped-for benefits are often expected to be immediate and ‘instrumental’.
4. Practitioners conduct a substantial proportion of the inquiry.
5. The research focuses on the professionals’ own practice and/or that of their immediate peers.
Preliminary questions

• *Practice closeness* - how close to practice, in its purpose, conduct and consequences is or ought such inquiry to be?

• *Social scientific nature* - how close to rigorous research, in its purpose, conduct and consequences is or ought such inquiry to be?

• *Organisation of activity* - is or should such inquiry be primarily planned and purposed as part of a larger plan or programme, or be characterized by initiatives that are more bottom-up and in some cases ‘spontaneous’?
We (Neil Lunt and I)...

- ...became increasingly aware of the difficulties of generalizing regarding the character of practitioner research

- We undertook a review of practitioner research in the social care field with adults in the UK. 74 papers published in English 1990-2012. They were analysed by affiliation and country of researchers, research problem, research participants, inquiry methods employed, attention to research quality, attention to research ethics, reported benefits, and utilization of evidence (Shaw, Lunt and Mitchell, 2014).
What did we find and conclude?

• I focus today on evidence from the study that suggests there are two significantly different kinds of practitioner research.

• A common term for both types of inquiry (e.g. ‘practitioner research’ or ‘practice research’) ought to be adopted with extreme caution.

• To make a rough distinction I will think of them as ‘practitioner-led research’ and ‘academic-practitioner partnership research.’
In what ways did they differ?

1. Occupational roles of researchers
2. Working relationship between researchers
3. Focus of the research questions and problems.
4. Research methodology
5. Extent to which benefits and utilisation of the research were addressed
6. Writing relationships and ‘voice’ in published outputs
1. Occupational roles of researchers

• Practitioner-led: largely working in social work agencies and community-based social care agencies, with few in academic posts

• Partnership: a majority of the projects were undertaken within a health service context, often informed by an established culture of audit and accountability. Researchers were predominantly drawn from clinical psychology, psychiatry, occupational therapists, with 30 of these also in associated academic posts.
2. Working relationship between researchers

• Practitioner-led studies were primarily under the control of the practitioner-researcher, often working alone. In cases where academics also were involved, it appeared to reflect arrangements where the practitioner/s took a clear lead and majority position. The role of academics was rather like that of support and resource.

• In Partnership studies a typical pattern was of a small team that included, and sometimes was led by, researchers. The person or people having a primarily practice identity did not hold the lead in many of these studies. But the practitioner/academic distinction makes less sense where many of the researchers held roles that crossed traditional practice and academic boundaries, in ways that probably reflect established career paths in the fields of medical and health services.
3 Focus of the research questions and problems

• The picture is quite diverse. We used detailed classifications of kinds of research subject and problems.

• Broadly we can say that Partnership studies were more likely to be carried out in the health sector, and to address questions within a health agenda. They leaned towards understanding or explaining issues related to risk, vulnerability, identity, coping, challenging behaviour, loss, and disability.

• Practitioner-led studies leaned towards understanding, developing, assessing or evaluating social care practices, methods or interventions, or addressing similar questions at the level of services.
4 Research methodology

• Partnership: Greater weight to quantitative methods and measurement scales.

• Practitioner-led: Predominantly qualitative in approach
5 Extent to which benefits from and utilisation of the research are addressed

- Explicit attention to questions of how practitioner research may be utilized was present to varying degrees in practitioner-led research. There were a number of examples where careful attention had been given, although these were a minority.

- Partnership: Almost no-one reported any active steps to work with practitioners or service users in relation to the practice implications of the research. Among the dementia studies none mentioned actual dissemination, feedback or utilization. No-one made direct claim to any evidenced benefits of the study, although there were some discussions of what the authors thought were the potential benefits. Likewise in the occupational therapy studies, with just three exceptions
6 Writing relationship and ‘voice’ in published outputs – partnership.

• The more prominent roles of researchers in academic-linked roles were at one with the general writing style and voice of the partnership-based articles. The articles – even the brief ‘punchy’ ones stemming from occupational therapy practice – were similar in tone and structure to mainstream academic journal articles. Literature reviews and locating the claimed significance of the research in the light of previous research figured almost universally. The minimal engagement with wider professional or citizen audiences similarly reflected conventional academic writing.

• They were predominantly authored jointly. Those with primarily practice identity did not hold lead in many of studies, and often were not first authors.
Writing relationship and ‘voice’ in published outputs – practitioner-led

• predominantly authored jointly. Practitioner/s took clear lead and majority position. Academics as support and resource.

• Less conformity with mainstream academic style. Active practitioner voice.
Networked projects

• These mainly were of practitioner-led projects, and we draw on other research in Denmark, New Zealand, Wales and Scotland.

• They were either single agency co-ordinated (e.g. Mitchell, Lunt and Shaw I. 2010) or drew on practitioners from multiple agencies through a central co-ordinating mechanism (e.g. Lunt, Fouché and Yates, 2008; Ramian, 2004)

• Networked initiatives almost always had some element of moderate funding, through direct or arms-length government grant. Used to resource academic support, network infrastructure costs, etc. They were either one-off projects (New Zealand) or through a series of cohorts. The Danish case (Ramian) has been the most sustained over time. The Scotland single-agency case ran over two annual cohorts.

We have reviewed the experience of networked initiatives (Lunt, Ramian, Shaw, Mitchell and Fouché, 2012)
The experience of doing practitioner research: the Scotland study

• Little is known of what the experience of undertaking practitioner research is like. It is very likely that it varies between partnership studies, free-standing practitioner-led studies, and networked projects.

• Here I focus on practitioner-led research in the single-agency twin cohort project (We have time only to give illustrative examples)

This aspect of the study can be read in detail in Shaw and Lunt, 2011, 2012
How to think about this question

• We think it helpful to distinguish between the experience of such research at each stage – i.e. in a linear way – and those issues which cut across horizontally at all stages.

• We used the metaphor or weaving with the warp and the weft. The weft is the horizontal weave of thread interweaved by a shuttle in the warp.
Linear

• What predisposed them to become engaged in practitioner research?
• What understanding did they bring with them to their involvement and how did this understanding shift and change during their projects?
• What were the push and pull factors that led down pathways to the diverse research topics?
• How did the interplay of agency managers, cohort colleagues, practice colleagues, university faculty and tutors serve to support, encourage (or discourage), focus, shape, sustain and (re)direct the projects?
• What elements of the research experience figure most prominently in the accounts of the practitioners?
• What were the outcomes, impacts and consequences of projects and program?
• What difference did it make that the projects and practitioners were part of a planned network of such projects?
Practitioner researchers engage with a language and culture that is strange yet potentially rewarding for practice and research. They find themselves located in a culture that lies between ‘practice’ and ‘research’ but is fundamentally shaped by and challenges both.

Practitioner researchers are typically engaged in negotiating an uncertain world, which is at its heart an effort to learn what it’s about.

The location of practitioner research as lying both within and outside of core professional work poses difficult challenges of moral accountability for their work within their practice cultures.
Involvement in practitioner research stirs reflection on the meaning and value of professional work. For some practitioners this may be overly demanding in the context of the perceived constraints of their core work.

Networked Initiatives inevitably raise questions of ownership.

The nature of practitioner research is something that emerges from the experience, rather than something that prescribes it in advance. It is only in the doing of practitioner research that its critical identity takes shape.
Getting into practitioner research: Motivation, capacity and opportunity

- Personal motivation.
- Personal and professional capacity to carry forward the research.
- Timely opportunity
Motivation

• It does require the individuals to be hugely motivated, hugely proactive really. (Jean)

• I want to make sure it’s a good piece of work so I will work really hard to do that, I won’t just produce any old thing, that’s how I feel, that’s just about me about my personality (Shona)
Capacity

1. the role of academic support; and
2. the nature of pre-existing capacity;
3. the significance of clusters of related projects

• individual capacity may not be recognized in advance, and indeed will often be latent, waiting, perhaps, to be illuminated by the conjunction of motivation and opportunity
The ambiguity of academic support

• One sad thing for me is I wanted to – I don’t know whether to say it, or if it is the place to say it but – I wanted to use the children as asking the questions to other children and I really, really wanted that. I have been counselled out of it!

• Have you? By your tutor?

• Yeah. I just had two wonderful - an eight and a nine year old, who I think could ask these questions. And really it was about confidentiality and how they would maintain confidentiality within the families. But I think it is a real pity.
Opportunity

• Opportunities are as much made as given, and what may seem an opportunity to one person in an organization may be interpreted differently by someone with different interests in the same organization.

• An element of serendipity
practice puzzles

• For practitioners their research was often a lens that facilitated a focus on fairly major, but sometimes partly unrealized, and long contained career/life issues. A focus group member described the operation of family plans, observing

• ‘I find that plans are not followed by various groupings and so … I wondered why that was and was that something we could really work on. So irritation prompted me really. But it was something that you could really use and I think I really thought that too.’

• We believe the weight of these personal commitments, puzzles and investments may be underestimated in organizational deliberations about practitioner research projects.
entailed a process of focusing and downsizing

- Alison: well I had a topic in mind that would have been very difficult to do and I don’t know how you would have done it but it is still an area that I am interested in so...

- What was that?

- Alison: Well I didn’t tell them. But it was really about working with families where there is a paedophile living within the home or there is somebody who has abused a child living within the home

- And you didn’t put that forward as an idea?

- Alison: No I didn’t, no. I just thought it would have been very complex and how would I do it and it was also about getting people’s consent and I think it would have been quite difficult...
Practitioner researchers engage with a language and culture that is strange yet potentially rewarding for practice and research. They find themselves located in a culture that lies between ‘practice’ and ‘research’ but is fundamentally shaped by and challenges both.

- ‘People speak in a different language; people use different words for different things’. Alison

- Shona. ‘It’s something that I haven’t ever done before, so to be able to talk about, undertaking a piece of research or a study in this way, I quite like that. I quite like to be learning new things and we talked before about the language, the process and that was all new to me, and then being able to see it through and I’m quite excited at this point in time about getting it written and completed and that’s about a sense of achievement for me.’
An uncertain world

2 Practitioner researchers are typically engaged in negotiating an uncertain world, which is at its heart an effort to learn what it’s about.

• When we listen to Alison’s comment that ‘I tried to put as much wording in of what people had actually said because I thought that’s what it is about’, we are hearing someone tentatively endeavouring to identify the essential nature of practitioner research.

• So also in a focus group comment:

  • ‘The bit I wonder about is have you ever had a semi-structured interview and you go off on a tangent because it is interesting – do you have to do the same with all of them? Because you could end up with 5 totally different interviews, so I am a bit confused about that.’ (FG2)
3. Difficult accountabilities

• ‘I felt my colleagues, there was that kind of sense that I feel like I’m skiving.’

• ‘They maybe thought I was swanning off for days to work from home and all the rest of it.’

• Have there been advantages taking part? It doesn’t feel like it at the moment, it just feels like a millstone to be honest (Lesley)
4. Meaning and value

A focus group exchange between 4 social workers:

• C: I think we have been lucky that Children 1st invested in doing it and gave us the opportunity to do it

• A: We have been lucky

• D: I also think, despite my moaning, the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. It’s not something I regret doing

• A: So glad I did it

• D: Yes absolutely. In the main, it’s been positive

• B: We have focused on challenges and learning and things but I would agree that, you know, looking back I would do things differently but I’m still glad that I did it.
Meaning and value – a project unfinished

- a project unfinished predominated for some, and the sense that the wider agency program had been foregrounded at the expense of the individual projects.

- I really wanted something for the kids who took part in that, you know this wasn’t really necessarily something for me but it was more about the kind of process that they took part in and that feels like that’s kind of disappeared and that it has been something more corporate. (FG1)

- It’s just I feel as if I’ve kind of gone in and done it and I go away to Edinburgh and I disappear every so often to do things like this and I come back but you know nobody’s really aware of what I’ve done. And I kind of think that’s a shame because it feels like it’s been a major piece of work for me – for me. I think, I look at and I think I can’t believe I actually did that but it feels like it’s disappeared into the air somehow

(Edinburgh was the location of the agency’s head office.)
Identities

5 The nature of practitioner research is something that emerges from the experience, rather than something that prescribes it in advance. It is only in the doing of practitioner research that its critical identity takes shape.

• Practitioner research can, in Gillian’s words, ‘open up so many possibilities I had not thought of’.
• ‘I think what I am and what I would like to be are different. I am a practitioner and that is my job, so that’s what I have to do and I’m bound by the context of that because that is my income, that is my livelihood. I would like to be more of a researcher. It’s opened up a whole range of things that I’ve never done before and so I would like to pursue maybe ways of combining the two.’
Reflecting on some issues

• The worlds of policy, practice and research: ‘Unless we understand the different natures of these ...worlds, we risk forever misunderstanding each other and failing to draw on joint strengths’ (Duncan and Harrop, 2006)

• The ambiguities of:
  1. ownership (Scotland)
  2. Academic mentoring and support
  3. Challenged identities

• Recognizing diversities of practitioner research, in respect of:
  1. Solo v team
  2. Intra-team relations
  3. The written form and output

• It is vital that the rich and difficult experience of being a practitioner researcher is understood and taken into account by commissioners, agencies and universities
What to deposit

• While journal articles remain significant, they are deeply inadequate, even for partnership projects.
• At most I estimate perhaps one in twenty projects are so published.
• Reliance only on traditional outputs contributes to an invisibility problem.

What about?

1. Practice conferences?
2. Online resources
3. Network e.g. with the ‘practice research’ movement in Europe and USA
4. Network with service user groups
How do practitioner priorities compare with service user researchers?

Research problems that service user researchers believe to be important seem to be:

- Coping
- Identity
- Information needs
- Support needs

• Self-help
• Carers
• Women’s issues
• Rights and opportunities.

(Source: Mental Health Foundation ‘Strategies for Living’ project)
Recommendations: 1. Ensure a ‘framework of opportunity’

• ‘Whilst still providing …resources during the lifetime of the project the major needs of individual projects proved to be around time management, forward planning and maintaining motivation. Although the GRIP team did indeed offer input and advice around research skills and conduct, overall our contribution is perhaps more appropriately seen as providing a framework of opportunity for projects…. Whilst at times cultural expertise is required there was – within what we call the ‘framework of opportunity’ – a broader sense of cultural ‘permission’ and affirmation being given to groups. This support allowed them to forge ahead with their work and maintain a belief that what they were doing had value (Lunt et al, 2008)

GRIP – Growing Research in Practice (New Zealand)
Recommendations

2. Commit to an understanding of practitioner research that does not set it in a deficit model as a rudimentary or ‘thin’ version of academic research. It lies in an interesting position somewhere between research and practice
   • In saying this, I do not want to adopt a sentimental or romantic picture of practitioner research

3. Practitioner research should not be seen as a homogenous form of inquiry
   • resist too straightforward distinctions of naïve versus mature; simple versus complex; and even practitioner-led versus partnership models of practitioner research
Recommendations

4. Value a range of studies and methodological diversity

5. One strand of practitioner research should take place through different kinds of networks, including funded networks and informal partnerships.

6. This will call for funding streams.

7. Funding also must include enabling appropriate forms of written product
Recommendations

8. national and regional government bodies could facilitate ways in which support functions for such work could become part of organizational roles.

9. Good practitioner research should address issues of both local application and wider interest

10. Establish appropriate dissemination and utilization plans for each project.
References 1

References 2