Using Practice Research as a Strategy for Developing Academic Workforce Capacity

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ABSTRACT

There is interest in developing social work research capacity in many countries and one route to this is to encourage practitioners to undertake doctoral studies. This paper discusses a case study of undertaking mental health research at doctoral level while in practice and sets this in the context of other forms of research-related workforce development. In doing so, it touches on the potential for social workers to demonstrate leadership as "natural researchers" and "active researchers."

Keywords: *Practice research; Social work; Capacity; Case study*

BACKGROUND

In the United Kingdom (UK) there are small, but growing, opportunities for social work doctoral research (see Manthorpe & Moriarty, 2016) although many of these require full-time commitment to study. For many social workers in practice, however, this level of dedication is a challenging expectation, and even part-time study on top of a full-time clinical role or practice responsibilities, not surprisingly, possibly deters potential students. Practice research initiatives which mentor students at the interface of practice and research provide opportunities to maximize the use of practice to further research aims (Joubert, 2006; Joubert & Epstein, 2013).

There have been several initiatives to foster practitioner-led research in the UK (Shaw, Lunt & Mitchell,2014) although many of these are small in scale and do not lead to a doctorate or a postgraduate award. Indeed, research skills may not be seen as priorities for professional development. The Workforce Capacity Planning Model (Skills for Care, 2014) was designed to help employers analyse their workforce capacity and to make informed decisions about the numbers of workers with the right skills and knowledge to meet the requirements of the Care Act 2014 in England. The model places "[p]erson centred assessment, care and support" (p.8) and "engaged and innovative workers" (p.8) at centre stage. However, whilst it highlighted and listed helpful questions to achieve these ends, the document failed to identify a potential role for empirical research. Is this omission acceptable or a major oversight in terms of research leadership in social work? This question is examined with reference to a PhD study conducted by a social work practitioner between 1995 and 2002 (Rapaport, 2012).

The Study

The PhD study (hereafter referred to as the "Nearest Relative" study) explored the role of the nearest relative under the Mental Health Act 1983 that still survives under the Mental Health Act 2007. The nearest relative is a specific legal designation identified by a legal hierarchy with assigned powers governing a close relative's hospital detention and discharge. The Act also defined the duties of the Approved Social Worker (ASW) (since superseded by the Approved Mental Health Practitioner) to consult nearest relatives and patients. The research was exploratory and used the comparative case study approach. Homogeneous groups of mental health carers (family or relatives), service users and ASWs were interviewed. What stakeholders thought about the role was central to the research but the PhD was informed throughout by contemporary practice experience. Indeed it was practice experience that helped formulate the questions the research was designed to answer. ASWs had reported difficulties when apparently unsuitable nearest relatives seemed to be abusing their powers. They further identified weaknesses in the system enabling the courts to legally displace "problem relatives" (Mental Health Act Commission, 1991).

This practice-focused doctoral study revealed that, contrary to widely held views, nearest relatives (instead of the ASW) did very occasionally take on the responsibility of signing the legal order to detain a close relative in hospital. It also found, due to funding constraints and problems accessing professional interpreters, that ASWs were sometimes obliged to involve a family relative as translator when seeking a non-English-speaking nearest relative's opinion about the patient's condition to inform the mental health assessment. This was a major concern given the issues of liberty at stake and the ASW's duty to be sure that the views of the

nearest relative were being transmitted rather than those of the translator relative. If the patient was also unable to speak English, using a relative to translate his or her account would be far from ideal as the ASW would have no way of knowing whether the patient's views were being faithfully recorded. However, more generally, family members and also patients (using the legal term) were totally unaware of the nearest relative role and its legal powers but, whilst they quickly recognised problems with the identification process, they could also appreciate the role's safeguarding potential to prevent unnecessary hospital detention.

The practice focus of the research led to practical outcomes (as well as a thesis), such as informing an accessible nearest relative information leaflet (which did not exist at the time of the study). The study's literature review and findings contributed substantially to a nationally funded research project about carers and confidentiality in mental health settings (Service Delivery and Organisation, 2006). The findings also highlighted the value of carer and practitioner alliances, transferable to other situations, and how, whilst practitioners can support family carers, by so doing family carers can, in return, also help practitioners. A core theory of reciprocal role valorisation based on social role valorisation principles was developed. Theoretical development that frames practitioner performance was a major outcome of the Nearest Relative study which had a major impact on the practitioner/researcher's own development.

Social Workers as "Natural" Researchers

By its nature, social work is deeply embedded in law, politics and social values. This suggests that social workers are arguably well placed to investigate the likely factors, such as attitudes and knowledge base which influence the use of legislation, including the Mental Health Act and more generally, govern human actions or behaviour. Grounded theory has developed a highly sophisticated system for analysis of such data which may at first blush seem formidable. However, many, if not most, social workers during their work, and often also during their training, have experiences of mulling over a client's/service user's behaviour and asking themselves: What lies behind this? When does it occur? Is it constant or are there times of change? What are the consequences flowing from the pattern or patterns of these behaviours? These types of questions which concern the dynamics that influence people's thinking and associated behaviours are very much in line with the coding paradigm of the mid-stages of grounded theory analysis.

As the Nearest Relative PhD incorporated some similar techniques, albeit to compare and contrast individual and group situations, such approaches are likely to be very accessible to social worker researchers. Interviewing, putting people at their ease, making observations and recording are, of course, core social work skills, which can readily be adapted for research purposes. This potentially positions social workers therefore as "naturals" in the research space, using well-honed interviewing skills in a different research context. At the same time, research training provides the opportunity for social workers to understand and manage appropriately the "insider" research role (Costley, Elliott, & Gibbs, 2010) when undertaking research into practice.

Social Workers as "Active" Researchers

For some practitioners, research interests may be shared, or at least there is a commonly shared ambition to make more immediate application to practice. There are now several types of Action Research-type initiatives (Moxley, 2013). Taking one example, Beddoe and Harrington (2012) described a project referred to as Growing Research in Practice (GRIP). GRIP explored the challenge of enhancing the research capability and confidence of groups of social workers in Auckland, New Zealand. Practitioners, including managers and academics, worked closely together in partnership. Their prime objective was to discover participants' views about the effectiveness of an innovative scheme to instruct and mentor the participants in the research process, in an effort to reduce some of the barriers to social work involvement in practice-based research. Qualitative methods, such as individual and group interviews, regular discussions, evaluations and debriefing activities – the bread and butter of social work – were used to collect data. In terms of outcomes, whilst managing time was undeniably a significant factor, positive findings included the enjoyment derived from participating in the research process, the potential to enhance social work and opportunities for personal learning and development. This kind of research involvement also provides an important context for discussions about career development. For example, Beddoe and Harrington (2012) report that there was clear evidence that some participants had been able to use their knowledge for a variety of purposes including changing programmes or practices and as a means to seek funding for further lines of inquiry. Shifts in organisational culture, improved collaborative working and opportunities to educate and involve others were also reported. Action Research studies, such as that led by Fern (2014), also detect practitioner, agency and service delivery benefits.

The importance of developing practice-based social work theory to strengthen the profession resurfaces frequently in professional circles (Mclean, 2012) and Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) is a longstanding UK government objective. Whilst a PhD is a major undertaking and costly in terms of time and money, Action Research may be a more accessible alternative. It is problem-focused and based on a cyclical process in which research, action and interaction are interlinked. It is a strategy for enquiry, development and change, is closely linked to practice and can be undertaken by practitioners and service users alike. It comfortably accommodates approaches familiar to practitioners and readily meets the social work ideals of service user empowerment. For social workers in research-receptive employment this may be one way forward rather than the lonely path of traditional doctoral study. In the UK there is also a small but growing interest in professional doctorates (Manthorpe & Moriarty, 2016) but data on these are not collected and the wider outcomes not known.

CONCLUSIONS

Practitioners may feel hard pressed in busy practice environments, but live research can be enjoyable and has the potential to enrich practice and enhance disciplinary leadership. It can also create career opportunities that move beyond practice into areas of research that are then informed by a valuable practice knowledge base and experience.

Perhaps ironically, by the time the doctorate was finished, the PhD student in the Nearest Relative study had, of necessity, left her social services post, needing more time in which to

complete the thesis. She was subsequently invited to work on a research project about carers and confidentiality jointly managed by Rethink and the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College London (KCL). A year later she was appointed to the Social Care Workforce Research Unit also at KCL where she worked on several projects including those investigating topics such as advocacy, Mental Capacity Act implementation and adult safeguarding, bringing a valuable first-hand practice perspective but also research skills in literature reviewing, interviewing and analysis, and knowledge of dissemination realities. The PhD led to several additional publications (Rapaport, 2003, 2004, 2005; Rapaport & Manthorpe, 2009) and others arising out of the research Unit's work programme. Although these post-PhD opportunities were much valued, the student's main disappointment was being unable to return to social work as a "Dr" social worker to use her new-found confidence in multi-disciplinary discussions as local opportunities were not available. Whilst able to apply her PhD knowledge as an appointed lay or specialist member of the Mental Health Review Tribunal, she would have liked to have had the chance to implement her research findings to enhance the quality of her social work practice. This illustrates an important opportunity that can be missed for PhD-qualified social workers to bring high-level academic expertise back into practice in ways that advance social work as a discipline. In addition to benefiting practice systems, given the far-reaching potential of higher degree study to enhance the quality of practice by either direct or more strategic means, doctoral study may also be an important way of developing workforce capacity. We posed the question at this start of this brief article as to whether the omission of research is acceptable or a major oversight in terms of research leadership in social work. We have suggested, on the basis of our experiences, that in the workforce planning documents such as those from Skills for Care (2014), cited earlier, research in practice should be more clearly highlighted. This also creates leadership opportunities within and beyond social work.

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