The New York Statement of 2014 on the Evolving Definition of Practice Research: Designed for Continuing Dialogue

by

Michael J. Austin, University of California, Berkeley (USA)
Irwin Epstein, Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College (USA)
Mike Fisher, University of Bedfordshire (UK)
Ilse Julkunen, University of Helsinki (Finland)
Timothy Sim, Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Hong Kong)
Lars Uggerhøj, Aalborg University (Denmark)

representatives of the International Network on Social Work Practice Research

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Our Brief History

The search for a venue for dialogue in which to develop a working definition of social work practice research began in 2008 with an international group of 23 social work researchers and practitioners in Salisbury (UK). The goal of the conference was to explore the complexities of social work practice research and the tools for improving practice by engaging service providers, service users and researchers. The result of this initial effort to define practice research is captured in the Salisbury Statement. Each succeeding conference has attempted to refine and expand the original definition.

The Salisbury Statement of 2008

The Salisbury definition includes the following definition of Practice Research: Practice research involves curiosity about practice. It is about identifying effective and promising ways in which to help people; and it is about challenging troubling practice through the critical examination of practice and the development of new ideas in the light of experience. It recognizes that this is best done by practitioners in partnership with researchers, where (researchers) have as much, if not more, to learn from practitioners as practitioners have to learn from researchers. It is an inclusive approach to professional knowledge that is concerned with understanding the complexity of practice alongside the commitment to empower and address social justice issues, through practice. Practice research involves the generation of knowledge of direct relevance to professional practice and therefore will normally involve knowledge generated directly from practice itself in a grounded way.

The Helsinki Statement of 2012
This Salisbury definition was re-visited in 2012 in Helsinki, Finland by a group of 110 service providers, users, and researchers with a call for raising the standards of practice research by exploring the nature of rigorous research using aspects of the Nordic models of practice research (the practitioner-oriented, the method oriented, the democratic and the generative model as well as the process of negotiating relationships between research and practice) and North American models of clinical data-mining and the need for organizational supports for research-minded practitioners (curiosity, critical reflection, critical thinking).

Increasingly practice research is viewed more as a meeting point between practice and research that needs to be negotiated every time and everywhere it is established rather than a specific research method. In essence, practice research needs to evolve its own philosophies and methodologies for defining practice-based knowledge within the context of supportive and flexible organizations. In this context, the definition of practice research was expanded to include the following specific goals and methodological considerations:

I. Goals that include:
   - a critical research that describes, analyses and develops practice;
   - a process where curiosity, critical reflection and critical thinking from both researchers, practitioners and service users are in focus;
   - a close, binding, committed and locally based collaboration between researchers/research settings and practitioner/practice settings in the planning, generating and disseminating of research;
   - a participatory and dialogue-based research process relevant for developing practice and validating different expertise within the partnership;

II. Using a methodology that represents:
   - Research based on academic standards;
   - Research built on experience, knowledge and needs within social work practice;
   - Research where findings are interpreted and disseminated through dialogue with service users and practice
   - Reflecting learning processes in practice;
   - Social work research that addresses concrete and pragmatic issues;
   - Studies that challenge practice in new ways (empirical, exploratory, emancipatory and theoretical).

III. Expanding the meaning of robust research to include
   - negotiations throughout the research process,
   - incorporating the dissemination elements into the research strategy,
   - taking into account the embedded values and emotional and political dimensions,
   - being strategic about choosing collaborative partners, and
   - validating the outcomes in large and external networks.

Practice research is relational by its very nature and its human services context. By definition, it deals with the relationship between research and practice methods, between theory and practice and between the values and challenges of social work practice. Practice research, thus, reflects and emphasizes the relationship and interactions between researchers, practitioners and service users.
The themes of “robust” practice research, theory-informed practice research (e.g. Cultural Historical Activity Theory), and models of practice research served to expand the evolving definition of practice research. These themes also generated new issues to guide discussions in the 2014 New York conference of 220 participants. The objectives of the 2014 conference included the need to:

I. Engage a wider audience of interested practitioners and researchers around the relevance of social work practice research related to:
   - Deliberating public policy; how do findings from practice research get translated into new, more service user relevant policies and practices?
   - Deliberating the changing context of practice; how could practice research inform the impact of merging health and social services in numerous governmental locales around the world?
   - Integrating senior management in order to develop the necessary organizational supports for social work practice research;
   - Inviting other research colleagues to adopt a trans-disciplinary approach to the dissemination and utilization of social work practice research; what are some of the best ways of dissemination social work practice research through a multi-actor approach?

II. Engage a wider international audience of social work educators and researchers regarding the role of social work practice research methodology in the education of future practitioners related to:
   - expanding the domain of social work practice research to actively include services users and engage in inter-disciplinary dialogue about the connections to survivor research carried out primarily by service users
   - engaging in the process of transforming practice questions into practice research questions through the active use of critical reflection and critical thinking (education the future research-minded practitioner)
   - engaging researchers in the exploration of applied research methodologies in order to locate them within the domain of social work practice research (educating the future practice-minded researcher).

The New York Statement of 2014

The themes of the Salisbury and Helsinki conferences served as the framework for the New York conference designed to explore the two-way bridge between practice and research in order to address some of the barriers between the following historically distinct activities: 1) managerial interest in the role of practice research in generating evidence to inform practice improvement, 2) equalizing the relationship between practitioners and researchers in the relational process of addressing practice improvement, 3) bridging the perceived gap between evidence-based practice (often based on random control trials) and evidence-informed practice (often relying upon a range of non-experimental methodologies, including clinical data-mining), and 4) promoting multiple stakeholder dialogue (service providers, service users, researchers, educators, policy makers, etc.) where theories of democratic participation underlie the engaged scholarship dimensions of practice research.
The New York conference engaged a wide international audience including both educators, practitioners and researchers and involving trans-disciplinary approaches. The vivid discussions bridged the perceived gaps between different methodologies and raised questions on how dialogues and negotiations between multiple stakeholders throughout the research process may enhance knowledge building and changes at the individual as well as on the organizational level.

The themes emerging from the New York conference set out the following challenges facing the evolving definition of practice research:

- **Recognizing the importance of infrastructure supports for practice research**
  There is a need of national policy or competency accreditation standards to support the training of social workers in practice research and national funding for practice research, as well as support of social service agencies for practice research.

- **Recognizing the important role of service users in the conduct and/or leadership of practice research**
  How do the views of service users impact the nature of service provision? How might service users become allies with service providers in addressing the multiple barriers to service engagement/provision?

- **Recognizing the global diversity of practice**
  Given the pre-occupation with research processes on micro practice, how does practice differ when viewed from a global perspective that includes both developing and developed countries? How does practice differ when viewed in different contexts (natural disasters, environmental sustainability, pollution, social development, etc.)?

- **Developing organizational structure to support varied forms of learning networks**
  These may involve new approaches to networking both information and dialogue, such as a) international conferences, b) the dissemination (beyond regional journals) and c) utilization of technology and social media in addition to open publications, experience-based knowledge of service users and including new ways to address the need for multiple languages beyond English.

**Moving from an expanded definition of practice research to shared value creation and shared understandings on the conditions of human wellbeing and local needs**

In reflecting upon the progress made in exploring and defining practice research over the past six years since the 2008 Salisbury Statement it is now possible to propose a preliminary set of practice research challenges to guide future discussions at our next conference in Hong Kong in 2017 and beyond:

- **Expand stakeholder involvement and dialogical methods** from an earlier focus on practitioners and researchers to multiple stakeholders that include service users, educators, agency managers, and policy makers.

- **Explicate, refine and utilize existing research methods for their relevance to practice research** as tools to amplify the voices of various stakeholders using multiple forms of dialogue and partnership development

- **Take advantage of reflexive research methods like experimentation and innovation**
research for a co-creative knowledge production

- **Address the complex issues of practice research dissemination to and utilization by** various stakeholders by addressing aspects related to language, technology, organizational supports, and policy relevance.
- **Address the changing needs of service users and lay people** and the changing diversity of social work practices through an ongoing dialogue and shared value creation
- **Support the learning process** where social workers become both users of practice research and producers of practice research and thereby contribute to new forms of social work practice
- **Identify the organizational and financial supports** for practice research among managers and policy makers as a way to institutionalize this form of knowledge development within the service delivery environment.
- **Expand the practice research dialogue to include a global dialogue including participants** from a wider range of countries and continents including Africa, Asia, Central and South America
- **Involve practice researchers in trans-disciplinary developments** in emerging fields of practice (e.g. disaster relief)
- **Educate future generations** of practitioners, practice-researchers AND service users about partnership-building
- **Promote debate and differentiation about different methodological approaches** unique to social work (e.g. relationship to Action Research, Case studies, Experimentation, Critical reflection, and Evidence-informed Practice)

While these challenges provide a current sense of direction, it is well known that the social work practice environment is constantly changing. As a result, the best laid plans for conducting research are frequently upended by changes in the economy, governmental policies, ongoing research, organizational structures, and new generations of practitioners, service users and researchers. It is increasingly clear that the production of practice knowledge calls for boundary-crossing or spanning behaviors between the world of practice and the world of research for practitioners to produce and disseminate new knowledge. A similar process is needed to make sure that service user perspectives are incorporated into this process.

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1. This statement is compiled by the 3\textsuperscript{rd} International Conference Scientific Committee composed of Irwin Epstein, Chair (USA), Mike Fisher (UK), Ilse Julkunen (Finland), Lars Uggerhøj (Denmark), Michael J. Austin (USA), and Tim Sim (Hong Kong, China) and is based on presentations and workshops made at the Hunter College Silberman School of Social Work in New York City, USA, June 2014.
