BOOK REVIEW

Practice Research in the Human Services: A University–Agency Partnership Model

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This very recent book has 12 informative chapters all describing, illuminating and promoting practice research in the field of human services.

In Chapter 1, the authors set the backdrop for future chapters. They describe practice research as a process of knowledge development where service providers, service users, and university researchers and educators can all participate in practice-focused research partnerships. They identify that, in practice research, multiple collaborators are involved in designing, planning, and conducting the data collection, and interpreting and disseminating the findings. Chapter 1 provides a valuable overview of the authors' university–agency partnerships that provided the platform for carrying out the studies described in this volume. They offer a range of perspectives on the related phenomena associated with learning organisations and evidence-informed practice. The authors identify how practice research plays an important role in the continuing search for ways to improve social welfare service delivery through university–agency research collaborations. Equally, it is through these research relationships that insight is gained for research-informed practice and practice-informed research. They describe how, in turn, research findings can be introduced into the classroom. The authors further identify how such research activities are based on negotiated relationships that honour practice skills, knowledge and lived experiences, and are informed by a philosophy of engagement, inclusion and power-sharing. It is a joining together of *research-minded practitioners and practice-minded researchers* (pp.1–2). The authors identify in the text that they share two decades of valuable experience in practice research.

In Chapter 2, the authors identify how interviewing practitioners, managers and leaders is one approach they have taken to capture and share practitioners' rich practice stories and service innovation. Such stories can then inform future efforts for organisational program redesign, and for using case studies in a student learning lab. Chapter 3 highlights the importance of setting the groundwork for practice research by learning from the research of others through literature reviews. As noted by these authors, practitioners often have limited time and access to highly relevant literature that can inform their practice and proposed research. How information can be disseminated in ways that is useful and accessible for

practitioners is also considered here. The authors use examples from past projects to explain processes and outcomes. In Chapter 4, the authors widen the lens through a process of cross-case analyses, so practitioners, managers and organisations can learn from the experiences of other organisations.

The next three chapters provide practice research examples: Chapter 5 focuses on examples from child welfare collaborations, and describes different methods of data collection, including data mining. Chapter 6 focuses on the specific practice area of welfare-to-work service delivery, while Chapter 7 discusses managerial experiences and perspectives on cross-sectoral relationships, contracting challenges, accountability, knowledge-sharing and measurement of outcomes.

After these very clear practice research examples, Chapter 8 usefully returns to outlining core principles and underlying phases of the research process needed to sustain research relationships, so together the research partners can complete meaningful, rigorous and relevant practice research, and importantly, they can translate the new knowledge into policy, program and practice redesign.

Chapter 9 describes common research methodologies and frameworks, including those that are particularly useful in practice research, and methodological challenges and strategies for success. Chapter 10 provides elaboration of data-mining methods using case records from child welfare agency databases. Chapters 11 and 12 address the roles played by service providers in supporting these relationships between research-minded practitioners and practice-minded researchers. Here the value of integrating practice research into curriculum is reiterated, to role model and promote evidence-informed practice to future graduate practitioners. Additionally, a useful table in Chapter 12 (Table 12.1.) considers parallels between integrating service user involvement in practice and in research. The impact of practice research is considered in this chapter. Finally, the authors pose compelling questions for readers, including: "How will practice innovations, supported by practice research, be disseminated and utilized by current and future practitioners?" and "How do we keep social work practitioners up-to-date with practice research when they find so much disconnection between practice and research courses in their formal education programs"?

All chapters provide an introduction and conclusion, keywords, further readings, and chapter references which are all very useful for readers. Appendices include a teaching case study and information about research discussed in this book and the institutions that have supported the authors' research endeavours.

One topic I thought could have been expanded upon relates to one of the questions posed by the authors as noted above: the dissemination of research findings in ways that enable practitioners, policy makers and service users to gain ready access to, and make meaningfully use of, emerging innovation. In Chapter 3, dissemination is discussed in relation to producing literature reviews, and research reports—although the authors note that research reports

can often go unread. Chapter 4 talks of sharing findings through cross-case analyses, and translation and implementation of research findings is discussed in Chapter 7 (the need for concrete recommendations), Chapter 8 and Chapter 9, for example, developing peer-reviewed publications. Yet, it seems evident from the literature elsewhere that the dissemination phase in partnership research can be underdeveloped, leading to diminished impact on practice. University-based researchers can encourage co-authored academic journal publications that will inform future literature reviews and classroom teaching and learning. However, increased strategies seem needed to translate and distribute research findings more effectively, given that academic journal publications often can be inaccessible to practitioners, policy makers, service users and the general public. A vision for effective dissemination and implementation might have been further elaborated here.

That said, this is a very comprehensive, readable and informative book. The authors share their wealth of knowledge to foster practice research in human services informed by, inclusive of, and in collaboration with, practitioners and service users who are partners and experts in developing new knowledge for evidenced-based practice.

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