

Practitioner Research

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What is practitioner research?

Although practitioner research can focus on a variety of topics, and is not limited to specific methodologies or research designs, practitioner research projects are often believed to share common characteristics (Shaw, 2005). These include: inquiry that is primarily led by practitioners; involves direct data collection or analysis of existing data and which focuses on professional practice issues with the aim of directly improving service provision or outcomes for service users and organisations. With a practical, problem-solving approach, practitioner research tends to be localised and small-scale in nature, rather than aspiring to the development of theory or creating transformative change.

What are the benefits and drawbacks?

With the focus on evidence-informed practice and accountability, generating more practitioner research is seen as an important way to increase the quality and quantity of research in social care (Shaw & Lunt, 2012). The social care field has broadly accepted practitioner research as a valid form of inquiry (Atkinson, 2005) and it is seen as a core element of good social care practice (Shaw & Lunt, 2012). However, there are some debates that still exist about whether it constitutes good research. For example, historically practitioner research has suffered from lower status (Pain, 2011); a lack of methodological rigour (Shaw, 2005) and insufficient attention paid to existing theory and evidence (IRISS, 2013).

Despite these criticisms, practitioner research is also seen as having a number of advantages. Research conducted by an 'insider' often brings additional insights and a depth of understanding about the subject (Greene, 2014), as well as practical benefits such as access to participants (Coy, 2006). At the same time, practitioner research also faces particular logistical, ethical and methodological challenges such as: lack of time and capacity (IRISS, 2013), a need to develop research skills and a lack of financial and other support (Pain, 2011). Furthermore, the blend of roles created by being both researcher and practitioner can create ethical dilemmas, such as blurred boundaries in relationships (Coy, 2006), the need to maintain a critically objective stance (Greene, 2014) and challenges in relation to participant anonymity and confidentiality (Shaw, 2005).

These criticisms mean that some practitioners may feel intimidated by the thought of undertaking research, and believe that it is not for them. However, it is important to be aware that many of the criticisms levelled at practitioner research also apply to traditional academic research. For example, conducting good qualitative research, especially with vulnerable participants or on sensitive subjects, requires the establishment of 'therapeutic' relationships in which boundaries can become blurred. Similarly, no researcher, inside or out, can be truly neutral or objective, everyone has their own knowledge, opinions and experiences that shape their professional and personal interactions. Also, very little academic research creates transformative change or produces new theories, but rather incremental steps to knowledge, practice or culture change can sometimes create wholesale change over time.

What skills are required?

Undertaking practitioner research does not necessarily mean extensive study or retraining. There is a high level of congruence between good social care practice and good research, especially qualitative research. Practitioners therefore already possess many of the qualities and skills required to undertake research. These include, but are not limited to:

- Empathy
- Active listening
- Relationship building
- Boundary setting
- Handling emotional situations
- Critical thinking
- Reflexivity
- Assessment skills
- Decision making
- Report writing
- Organisational skills

Also the professional 'safety nets' that tend to be available to practitioners, such as reflective practice, professional supervision and peer support, are hugely important when conducting research, but are not always available to academic researchers.

This does not mean that practitioners would not benefit from training, advice and support when embarking on practitioner research. Practitioners engaged in this type of activity have stated that they valued having an academic mentor (IRISS, 2013) and having access to this type of support has been associated with the successful completion of practitioner research. Navigating ethical approval processes and gaining permission to conduct research can be challenging and time-consuming. Depending on the type of research being undertaken there may also be the need for training in specific research techniques or software. Organisational support is also crucial, and practitioners need to be given the appropriate time, space, resources and commitment to the research from their organisation. This might include ring-fenced time, a flexible workload, or simply recognition and status given to the research (Mitchell, Shaw, & Lunt, 2008). Support from colleagues and peers is also important throughout the entire research process, especially in helping to embed the learning into practice.

What next?

If you have a question that relates to your own practice, and are interested in undertaking some practitioner inquiry on the subject, you can get in touch with CYCJ to informally discuss your ideas. As a small organisation we are unable to support all requests for practitioner research, but we are happy to provide information and advice in the first instance. CYCJ can be contacted on cycj@strath.ac.uk

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