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## The Melbourne Statement on Practice Research in Social Work

### *Practice Meets Research*

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## **The Melbourne Statement on Practice Research in Social Work:**

### **Practice meets Research**

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## The Melbourne Statement on Practice Research in Social Work:

### Practice meets Research

Practice research in social work is an evolving phenomenon. It is both influenced by changes in social work practice and is shaped by developments in social work research. An agreed definition of practice research in social work has proved somewhat elusive (and some suggest the search for one is futile or undesirable), though Fisher et al's entry in the *Oxford Bibliographies in Social Work* (2016) is helpful in this regard. However, the evolution of practice research in social work has been documented by a series of Statements initiated by an international conference held in Salisbury, United Kingdom (UK), in 2008 (Uggerhøj, 2020). This paper presents the fifth Statement and reflects the state of the art as experienced in the international conference hosted by the University of Melbourne in 2021 and developments thereafter. It is likely to be superseded, though, by future Statements as practice research continues to develop in the future.

The phrase *Practice meets Research*, chosen to name the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Practice Research in Melbourne in 2021, reflects three significant concepts relating to practice research. They are encapsulated in the three words — *practice, research and meet*.

By *practice* we are referring to the diverse and complex field of social work practice. This not only refers to the multiplicity of contexts where social work takes place but also the diverse structures and people engaged in, or contributing to, social work practice. The term indicates social work practitioners, agency committees and organisations, government bodies and statutory requirements as well as service users who have benefit and expertise of lived experience. In addition, recognition must be afforded to the informal social networks that promote and support agencies, departments and services and the people they engage with in the community. According to the New York Statement for Practice Research (Epstein et al.,

2015), practice research means *generating evidence from research to inform practice*. The statement emphasizes, in relation to practice, making more equal the relationship between social work practitioners and researchers, in a collaborative model. The emphasis is on the inclusivity of all people who are part of this system.

*Research* refers to the rigour brought into the thoughtful and reflective evaluation of practice and the development of new knowledge. Practice research is in many ways an inclusive and flexible model where evidence or new knowledge informing practice, is the result of a bridging approach between *evidence-based practice*, which relies mostly on results of randomised controlled trials, and *evidence-informed practice*, which uses a range of research methods to respond to the complex and diverse focus of social work practice and research. The challenge for practice research is to embrace, within the rigour of research methods, the complexity and diversity of practice while not compromising on the rigour of the development and implementation of research practices leading to new knowledge for practice. Practice research embraces different modalities of research methodology, in response to diverse research questions emerging from social work practice and not in creating a hierarchy of research methods, linked to academic selection of research foci.

The word *meet*, implies the *meeting place*, and reflects the importance of *community* in practice research. It has a direct implication of dynamic collaboration between researchers, services users and service structures and systems. It is the space where, according to the New York Statement there is “co-creative knowledge production” (Epstein et al., 2015, p. 713). The term builds on the New York statement which acknowledges the global diversity of social work practice as well as the important role of service users. In ‘meet’ we are concerned with the development of models and methods of research that are sensitive to the environmental, cultural and economic realities that impinge on the attempts of researchers

and practitioners to collaborate in the generation of knowledge which has direct relevance to social work practice.

### **Reaching this point**

Looking back to the Salisbury conference, practice research has evolved from a focus on engaging in self-reflective practice to research methodologies devoted to capturing the engagement of research-minded practitioners, practice-minded researchers, and the survival research approaches of service users. The Salisbury Statement (Fook & Evans, 2011) sought to focus on the need to define, develop and experience practice research, its structures, processes, interpretations of knowledge and epistemology without the need for specific and complete definitions, terms, or standards. 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 second conference in Helsinki in 2012 focused on establishing a theoretical background and robustness in the practice research processes. Practice research was not viewed as a unique or different research method but rather a meeting point between practice and research that necessitates a process of negotiation every time and everywhere that it takes place. The evolving theoretical and methodological framework for practice research calls for flexible and collaborative structures and organizations (Julkunen et al., 2014).

Two years later in New York, the practice research community broadened its reach by engaging a wider group of interested practitioners, educators and researchers, and those in other disciplines. A more inclusive vision emerged, embracing a focus on interdisciplinary activities and a more global outlook. The New York Statement also aimed to address the involvement of service users in research and to educate researchers, practitioners and service users in practice research (Epstein et al., 2015). In drawing upon diverse methodologies used

in practice research, it sought linkages with the mixed methods approach to evidence-informed practice.

The practice research conference in Hong Kong in 2017 represented efforts to extend the evolution of practice research in relationship to different contexts and challenges. It included a number of scholars, practitioners and others from countries not previously represented at practice research conferences, especially practitioners, universities and service delivery associations. The Hong Kong statement called for the increased use of practice language to complement the preoccupation with research language, especially when involving practitioners in future conference deliberations (Sim et al., 2019). At the same time, there was a call to expand the evolving definition of practice research as well as practice research methods. As a result, the conference pointed out the paradox within the field; namely, the requirement for academic work on definitions, theories and methods while at the same time making practice research less academic and more practice-based. It was noted that this paradox becomes even more challenging when concerted efforts are made to involve service users in the design, implementation, and utilization of practice research.

This Melbourne Statement builds upon this rich history of international dialogue devoted to developing the art and science of practice research. It acknowledges the recent publication of two significant text books in this field (Austin & Carnochan, 2020; Joubert & Webber, 2020) which enrich and diversify scholarship in social work practice research. This Statement highlights that practice research is about promoting a sense of curiosity about practice that also challenges current wisdom through a partnership between practitioners, researchers and service users, often in the context of social justice issues. Practice research involves the generation of knowledge of direct relevance to professional practice and therefore will usually involve knowledge that is generated directly from practice itself, thereby in a very grounded way. It requires diverse research methods in order to respond to

the challenges faced by practitioners and to answer practice-based questions. Practice research is inclusive and rigorous, so that studies make contributions to both the social work academic and practice disciplines. This Statement continues to capture the evolving nature of practice research as a way of codifying an international body of knowledge to inform practitioners, researchers, service users, and especially students.

### **Thematic analysis of conference abstracts**

This Statement is informed by a thematic analysis of 115 abstracts of papers presented at the Melbourne conference. Using a thematic network approach (Attride-Stirling, 2001), this analysis yielded 187 points of reference and four major research themes related to disadvantaged groups; service users across the lifespan; hospital and clinic-based service users; and research, education, and policy frameworks (Figure 1).

*(Figure 1 about here)*

The largest theme (research, education and policy frameworks) had 96 points of reference which were divided into five basic themes. Of these, social work practice made up 45% of all research in this area and included research into collaborations, interventions, areas of practice as well as the social work role. This was closely followed by the context and design of practice research where co-creation, collaboration and research frameworks were the main areas of focus.

The second largest theme (research with service users across the lifespan) included 48 points of reference, with the majority being in the children, adolescent and family spaces. The areas of research within this were widespread but concentrated in adolescents, youth at risk and out of home care. Within the area of families, the focus was on domestic and family violence as well as lower-income families.



Within the 22 points of reference of the theme of disadvantaged populations, over half referred to minority populations, which included immigrant, refugees, and indigenous communities. Finally, for the 21 points of reference for research carried out within a hospital setting, the basic themes were accessing services, models of care, and working practices.

When reviewing methods used in the research presented at the conference, the most common group was qualitative methods (57%), followed by mixed methods (37%). Some of the mixed methods included experimental designs and randomised controlled trials, as well as combinations of quantitative and qualitative methods. Purely quantitative methods accounted for just six per cent of the research presented.

These abstracts do not reflect the full diversity of practice research as, for example, Australian hospital social work was over-represented at the conference, but they provide a useful indicator of current activity. They represent a breadth of activity across many domains of social work practice, with the dominance of social work with children and families reflecting the profession at large. The range of methodologies and approaches used in practice research aligns with the need to design research in response to practice-based questions. While practice research includes intervention studies, for example, it is not limited to randomised controlled trials.

### **State of the art**

Practice research is increasing in prominence in social work. The growth in the number of abstracts submitted to the International Conference on Practice Research; the recent publication of two significant texts in the field (Austin & Carnochan, 2020; Joubert & Webber, 2020); and the recognition of practice research in social work across the globe exemplify its current strength and breadth. However, its inherent strength and uniqueness lies

in the collaboration between researchers, practitioners and service users that is required to answer practice-based questions.

Practice research is inspired by the insights, ideas and innovations of practitioners. A partnership between practitioners and researchers is essential and, when working at its full potential, this partnership is characterised as a transactional process of mutual reciprocity. The output and learning from such partnerships and activities can then be translated back into evolving practice in the work setting, providing a dynamism to practice. In addition, the outputs and learning from practice research not only help to build the evidence base for the profession, but can also help position social work in a role of influence and leadership within the profession, the practice setting, the broader organisational context and beyond.

Practice research in many contexts is characterized by its diversity and contradictions. Although this could be seen as confusing and unreliable, it is viewed by proponents as a strength (Joubert & Webber, 2020). The openness and the curiosity embedded in practice research is looked upon as very important, especially as it evolves over time. Practice research is simultaneously being defined, approaches are being developed, theoretical connections are being analysed and practical tools and methods are being described; whilst research is being undertaken in practice without clearly being defined, often called something different and maybe just being a part of a larger study (Andersen et al., 2020). Different approaches are not based on different ‘schools’, but rather both on coincidence and on different interests. This remarkable and practice-driven approach is regarded as important especially because practice research includes many stakeholders with different interests and positions, but is no less rigorous than other forms of research. The challenge is to respond to practice questions with an appropriate methodology rather than defaulting to your preferred paradigm. The contradictions between the different approaches to practice research and the different experiences coming out of these approaches are perceived as both inspiring and

provoking, and a possibility to keep the development of practice research alive (Uggerhøj, 2017).

The goal of practice research is to generate knowledge derived from agency-based practice. The theoretical frameworks and methodological research tools for engaging in practice research often require flexible and collaborative structures. In addition, practice research is a negotiated process between practice (providers and users) and research (researchers and educators) within the context of cross-cultural dialogical communications needed to address the gap between research and practice. In essence, for practice and research to be shared, the elements of co-learning, respect, and curiosity are needed to support an inclusive inquiry and knowledge development process. This process seeks to capture the differences and tensions reflected in fundamentally different perspectives (e.g., service user and provider, service provider and researcher, and researcher and policymaker) (Austin et al., 1999). In addition, practice research is often funder influenced, outcome focused, and change oriented (Fisher et al., 2016).

Practice research is particularly prominent in health and mental health settings. For example, the Academic Practitioner Research Collaboration initiative in teaching hospitals in Melbourne, Australia, supports and encourages research to improve services for patients and their families, and has as a core value patient and family centred care. Practitioners generate questions from practice, with results translating back into clinical practice innovation (e.g. Hickey et al., 2018; Manguy et al., 2021; Steiner et al., 2021). These projects include formal and informal partnerships with research experts and academia (Joubert & Hocking, 2015), collaboration with other health professionals and health care services (Berger et al., 2019; Joubert et al., 2022), and an increased emphasis on service user contribution across all phases of research (Poon et al., 2018; Schiena et al., 2019).

In a similar way, questions generated by social workers in mental health services in the UK have been explored in partnership with researchers and new insights generated for practice. For example, concern about how self-disclosure by mental health practitioners about their own mental health problems should be managed led to a mixed methods study which found that disclosures were often valued by service users and practitioners alike (Lovell et al., 2020). The results of this led to the development of a framework for mental health practitioners when making disclosure decisions. Following training in this new framework, practitioners reported feeling more confident in managing such disclosures (Dunlop et al., 2022).

As practice research studies produce models, interventions or recommendations for practice, researchers have begun to draw upon implementation science to find the most effective way to scale up innovations. For example, in the UK a practice model – Connecting People – was developed through a partnership of researchers, practitioners and service users to support people to enhance their social connections (Webber et al., 2015, 2016). When piloted, this was found to improve access to social capital and perceived social inclusion for people with mental health problems (Webber et al., 2019). A subsequent implementation study identified particular difficulties in implementing the model in community mental health teams (Webber et al., 2021). However, it has also been integrated into a new model of community-enhanced social prescribing which is currently being implemented in a primary care setting (Morris et al., 2022). More work is required to integrate insights from implementation science into practice research, but this work highlights how it can support social work interventions and help to improve outcomes for mental health service users.

Social workers are often first exposed to practice research during their qualifying programme, either as a learner or as a researcher. A gradual shift from bachelors to masters level qualifying social work degrees in many countries has provided more opportunities for

practice research, which has led to a growth in the number of masters dissertations published in respected peer-reviewed journals (e.g. Bonnet & Moran, 2020; Lonsdale & Webber, 2021; Thornton-Rice & Moran, 2022). Engagement with evaluation and research activities as part of social work education programmes is considered to be an important part of ethical social work practice (Joubert et al., 2017; Thyer, 2015) and practice research curriculum guides are now available to support this (e.g. Webber, 2020b).

Improving research literacy among social work graduates supports the growth of practice research, and there are increasing opportunities for practitioners to engage in research (particularly in the UK, for example). However, in other countries, such as Australia, individual social workers can pursue simultaneous careers in both clinical practice and academic research work. Examples of these opportunities include implementation and development of specific research development positions within social work departments at most major health services, alongside clinician-scientist and allied health fellowships. Although somewhat less-well developed than clinical academic roles in medicine, these opportunities hint at the future potential for practice research to create a lasting impact for practitioners and service users alike.

Practice research is well-established in the United States of America. For example, practice research in the San Francisco Bay area of Northern California is carried out under the auspice of a university-agency consortium of 12 dues-paying county social service agency directors along with the deans and directors of five university social work programmes. The consortium was founded in 1987 and the practice research program is 25 years old. Some examples of its work includes the use of qualitative data-mining to identify good practice in child welfare (Carnochan et al., 2019); a survey of human service organisations to test a conceptual framework of relational contracting (Chuang et al., 2019) and an evaluation of the implementation of family stabilisation programmes (Stanczyk et al., 2018).

In Finland, the government has recently expanded funding for research directly related to social work practice and integrating research and development activities in daily work. In addition, the establishment of the Helsinki Practice Research Centre has been a significant step towards showcasing social work practice research in Finland. This Centre is actively involved in supporting two institutes (Heikki Waris and Mathilda Wrede) which provide ongoing academic-practice collaborations that aim to advance social work practice research both in Finland and internationally. However, practice research related to child welfare in Finland has taken place since 2018. This has been under the auspices of the national co-ordination of the systemic practice model (SPM) in social work (a Finnish version (Isokuorti & Aaltio, 2020) of the reclaiming social work model (Goodman & Trowler, 2012)) by Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos (THL). The aim was to introduce the model by doing small-scale practice research projects in different contexts and creating a network of collaborators and ‘writers’ (Petrelius et al., 2021). Currently there are around 220 SPM teams in Finland (Yliruka & Tasala, 2022). As a part of coordination of SPM, THL is piloting feedback-informed treatment (FIT) (Bertolini & Miller, 2018) to determine how it fits into the child welfare context, using *Howspace* as the learning platform. It can be conceptualised as a form of trialogical learning (Paavola et al., 2004), where there is a common learning target, with adjustment of the FIT to the new context.

In many countries, though, practice research is still an emerging enterprise. In Asia, for example, there is a strong need to highlight the purpose, methodologies and value of practice research to social work stakeholders such as managers, academics, training bodies, practitioners and service users. As the government is a key funding source in many parts of the Asia, such as China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and many of the developing economies, there is a need to promote practice research to the government in these countries. The concept of practice research is still emerging and can be confused with a myriad of concepts and

methods such as intervention research, evaluation studies, action research and the like.

Although practice research may encompass these, there is a need to understand the value of the concept of practice research in social work. In developing practice research in Asia, the need for social work academics and practitioners to collaborate is paramount. In addition, it is essential that social work academics advocate practice research, where they can, to their government and incorporate it into the social work curriculum. The potential for practice to meet research has increased over the past years in Asia, as it is becoming more familiar, supported by hosting the 4th International Conference on Practice Research in Hong Kong in 2017. But there is much more to be done in Asia, and in other regions who may benefit from it, to promote and integrate it into the social work profession and discipline.

In Singapore, social work practice research had always been of importance to academics and practitioners. While there had been isolated research studies conducted in the past, the process of practice research became more systematic with the establishment of the Mrs Lee Choon Guan Endowed Research Fund at the National University of Singapore. The Fund is one of the first, if not the only one known, to specifically support social work practice research by the collaborative efforts of philanthropy, academia and practitioners. The Fund has supported research focused on practice issues such as improvement of existing services and emerging needs that practitioners and service users identify as significant.

### **Practice meets research**

The Covid-19 pandemic interrupted the plans for the 5<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Practice Research, which was eventually hosted online by the University of Melbourne in 2021. However, the widespread use of online meetings during the pandemic opened up the conference to new audiences, including many practitioners. The pandemic also required social workers to use new technologies in their work, such as telehealth with audio and/or visual components. For example, during the pandemic, hospital social workers in Australia

needed to draw on their professional skills and resilience to respond to the increased pressures, demands, changing roles and scenarios whilst being on the frontline in a changed social, economic, health and political context. The flexibility and ability of social workers to adapt rapidly to pandemic-driven policy changes, work protocols and practice, demonstrated remarkable resilience. Social workers, during the pandemic, whether working under the constraints of lockdown or not, demonstrated high levels of resilience. These levels were unaffected by the degree of infection in the community, indicating that as a group, social workers have high innate levels of resilience (Joubert et al., 2022). Research questions generated from practitioners were investigated in a partnership between practitioners and researchers named the *5+1 Health Social Work Collaboration*. The outcomes of this work are now being fed back into practice and the development of practice guidelines.

The widespread and routine use of online meetings during the pandemic has made it easier to collaborate internationally. However, international collaboration in practice research is not new. For example, a pre-pandemic health social work audit study conducted in Melbourne was replicated in Finland. In this study, a dataset of over 10,000 items of practice collected over a 24-hour period in 14 health services found that 88 different issues were presented to social workers, 1,900 evidence-based interventions and 1,200 evidence informed social work interventions were implemented with over 29 linkages made to social care in the community. This study highlighted that social workers practice in diverse contexts and respond to local need with a variety of approaches attuned to their particular socio-cultural context. Practice research reflects this and is often concerned with local concerns, often within single agencies. The aim is not always to produce generalisable knowledge – and it is occasionally criticised because of this – but its intrinsic value to practitioners and service users lies in its potential to improve the quality and outcomes of social work practice. Going forward, there is every possibility that digital connectivity can foster more international



collaborations so that practice innovations could be replicated in other contexts and new practice research collaborations develop.

Practice research in social work is driven by questions arising from practice rather than ideology or adherence to a particular model. The method chosen to answer the question needs to be selected carefully to ensure it is appropriate, and often more than one method is required. Practice researchers are therefore required to be methodological pluralists, able to draw upon a range of different methods as the need arises (Webber, 2020a). Irrespective of the method used, though, practice research is no less rigorous than other forms of social work research. The same high standards of ethical conduct and rigour are applied so that research findings can be trusted and used by practitioners with confidence. This is no different from the use of practice research in other professions. Practice research is used in health and allied health professions, for example, to develop practice knowledge and evaluate interventions. Similar methodologies are used and the same standards of rigour are applied.

There is a growing focus on the importance of what is termed co-creation or co-design among consumers, practitioners and researchers, across a number of human services areas (Slattery et al., 2020). In the context of health and mental health, this move has been driven by a growing understanding of the limited relevance and potential waste of much of the health research that is produced, due to a lack of integration among clients, practitioners and researchers in undertaking such work (Ioannidis, 2016). For example, an early study found that only nine of 334 studies examined found a conjunction between researchers' priorities and that of clients and practitioners (Oliver & Gray, 2006). Practice research has pioneered the imperative of placing the practitioner at the forefront of the research enterprise, and these broader developments could create a more conducive environment for valuing modes that place the consumer or the practitioner at the centre of the research enterprise in the future. Furthermore, current understanding of co-design or co-creation processes within the larger

literature are quite limited in their scope (Slattery et al., 2020), compared to the conceptualisation and implementation of practice research, as outlined earlier in this Statement. This broader movement also gives rise to some challenges as well, as practitioner research could be confused with the less developed and more poorly integrated examples of co-creation that have been documented in the literature to date. It highlights the importance for continuing to formulate models and demonstrate the effectiveness in vivo of practice research in addressing issues that have direct relevance to enhancing clinical practice, as laid out across the five international statements.

Practice research is an approach to developing knowledge shared with other practice-based professions. However, social work has perhaps led the way in its inclusive approach to collaborating with service users. Social work has made an important contribution to the field of practice research through the co-production of research with service users and supporting their involvement as equal partners (Moran et al., 2020). More work is required, though, to ensure that service user expertise is fully engaged in the research design and process. Drawing upon the experience of consumer-workers employed in some mental health services who still experience varying levels of inclusion or marginalisation by human resource systems, processes and practices (Edan et al., 2021), it remains important to find ways to ensure the full and meaningful involvement of service users. This will form the focus of the 6<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Practice Research in Social Work in Aalborg, Denmark, in 2023.

Finally, practice research is beginning to engage more with implementation science to better understand how to feed practice innovations, which have been developed and evaluated using practice research, back into practice. Although research which originates from a practice question is more likely to be subsequently utilised in practice, it is more challenging to do so when practitioners work in highly structured roles shaped by law or policy. Also,

practice improvements are difficult to implement in contexts where social work practitioners have limited latitude to innovate (such as in mental health services in England, for example (Webber et al., 2021)). However, there are grounds for optimism in the shift in the practice research discourse away from the gaps between research and practice, to the shared space that both researchers and practitioners inhabit. This shared space promotes conversations, collaboration and innovation. It is in this shared space that practice meets research and the promising future for practice research in social work lies.

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Figure 1. Thematic network of Melbourne conference abstracts (n=reference points)

