## Reviews

**Innovations in Social Work Research: Using Methods Creatively**  Hardwick, L., Smith, R. & Worsley, A. (eds.)
*London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2015*
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Systematic research can support improvements in social work, and, more widely, social care practice, by adding specific forms of knowledge to that which comes from other sources, such as individual experience and management information systems. Combining knowledge from such sources to inform practice working with people, or to guide the development of local systems of care, is the nature of evidence-informed practice. Without the generalisable evidence obtained from robust research we may be led by our cognitive biases into practice that is inappropriate for the context. Without the knowledge of a context, research may also lead us to adopt practices unsuited to a person's needs. This is what Croisdale-Appleby (2014)[i] seems to have meant by proposing a 'social scientist' model for adult social workers, encouraging colleagues to be routinely engaged in critical thinking about their practice, using a range of sources of knowledge, especially appraisal of high quality research evidence.

To continue to produce good research evidence to support this kind of practice requires attention to the research methods used, and how well they are fitted to the questions facing social work and social care practice and policy. As the world and our understanding of it continually change, so should our understanding of the most robust research methods and how to employ them.

Given this, it is good to see a book aimed at stimulating critical thinking about the research methods used in social work research, and particularly seeking to encourage thought about innovative approaches to research, to ensure a dynamic and relevant body of knowledge. Hardwick, Smith and Worsley's examination of innovations in methods in this sector is a timely prompt to avoid falling into the habit of simply addressing research questions with tried and trusted methods and methodological frameworks simply because they are what we feel comfortable with. That way lies sterility, and probably irrelevance.

Following an introductory chapter setting out the context of social work research and practice and the rationale behind the book, the chapters on innovative methods are structured into four sections: *Innovations in Design and Planning*; *Innovations in Research Methods*; *Innovations in Data Analysis*; and *Innovations in Dissemination and Impact*. Within each section are highly stimulating chapters combining interesting and concrete questions on practice with pertinent and approachable discussions of research methods. A concluding chapter provides a summary discussion of some issues arising from the methods chapters and of more general concerns facing social work research.

The first section of the book (*Design and Planning of Research*) includes chapters on action research, a description of a randomised controlled trial (RCT), guidance on using archival resources, a longitudinal study of outcomes for children with harmful sexual behaviours, and how a systematic review was undertaken by directly involving people with dementia. Each chapter of this section, and indeed of the whole book, very clearly discusses the research method in relation to a specific aspect of the real world of social work practice, ensuring that readers are not faced with overly abstract methodological concerns.

The discussion of an RCT, for evaluating a therapeutic intervention for children affected by sexual abuse, begins by acknowledging that RCTs are not particularly innovative as a method (being widespread in medicine, for instance), but that they are rare in social work. It is noted that there are many opponents of the use of RCTs in social work, but this illustration of their use seems to me to illustrate why an ethically and robustly conducted trial can be highly desirable. Without a robust method to compare the new intervention with some other practice, how are we to know

what is the best way to support these vulnerable young people? The authors discuss the organisation of the trial and many practical issues, especially making it fit with the world of practice, arguing in a highly readable way for the power of RCTs in social work research.

To illustrate the range of methods discussed in the book, the second chapter about method argues for the need for researchers to use methods to 'get close to' practice by undertaking observations of face-to-face encounters. More specifically, this includes direct observations of interactions between social workers and parents. The author discusses the rationale for this and the key ethical and practical challenges faced when using this approach. He also demonstrates how methods can be complementary so as to provide a more rounded (triangulated) view on an issue, as some of the observations discussed were part of a project based on an RCT.

Both the chapters considered so far raise a point that potential readers need to bear in mind, as neither reports findings from the research it discusses. This book is about methods and their application to social work, and readers should not come seeking specific evidence to inform their practice.

The chapters of the second section, *Innovations in Methods*, cover examples of ethnographic approaches to research, using visual methods, and mobile observation. The opening chapter of this section again argues for methods that get as close as possible to the daily world of practice. Led by an ethnographic methodology, the author describes research in which he observed practice in its real interactive environment, and he was highly mobile in following social workers in their frontline encounters. He argues that these have not been especially widely researched in social work, and that hence 'mobilised ethnography' constitutes an innovative method. By discussing a case example from the research, the author illustrates the power of such close observation in allowing the researcher to see the detail of practices used by social workers to better engage parents and children with whom they are working. The practice included moments of uncertainty and hesitation on the part of the social workers. These detailed observations were discussed in more detail with the social workers after the practice encounters. The author argues cogently that the research interview on its own does not offer the rich insights that observation of practice does.

Making mobile approaches an explicit part of a study is also discussed in the next chapter, concerned with researching the lives of marginalised young men. The authors built into the project walking tours in which young men in the study led a researcher on a tour of local sites associated with their own survival. During the tour they would discuss (and audio record) the meaning of specific sites to the lives of the men. Alongside other methods in the study, this allowed the researchers to get close to how the young men lived their lives and the meaning of place within those lives. A relationship developed between the young men and the researchers through walking and talking that might not have easily been achieved through other research methods.

The final two chapters in Section 2 discuss the use of visual methods (e.g. the use of photographs and drawings) in research. Both these highly stimulating and clearly argued chapters present food for thought on how different methods can engage people, often in challenging circumstances such as recovery from substance abuse, in ways that a questionnaire or interview would not. They are reminders of the value of thinking carefully about how to fit methods to the topic and the participants in research if we are to achieve robust and relevant findings.

Innovations in data analysis are discussed in Section 3. They include phenomenological (broadly, how the world is experienced) approaches to validating meaning, the impact of language differences in research and analysing data, and a quantitative analysis of longitudinal data drawn from other research datasets. As in other sections, chapters present methods that are not necessarily innovative in social research, but which they argue are at least underrepresented in social work research. The discussion of each method encourages us to be highly sensitive to details of the real world of practice, such as how older men understand and make meaning of

their experiences, and of the importance of differences in language (English/Polish in Chapter 13) in shaping experience and identity.

Bringing participants in to all aspects of the research process, to help better understand the subtleties of lived experience and data, is discussed in Chapter 14 in the context of participatory research with adults with Asperger's Syndrome. The author discusses practical and ethical issues experienced during the research, such as disputes over analysis of some data, but argues that the partnership approach underpinning the project led to a better understanding of the topic of the research.

Secondary analysis of datasets from other studies, the British Cohort Study 1970 in the case of Chapter 15, potentially offers an effective and efficient means of exploring research questions (especially longitudinal ones) as much of the cost of many research projects is incurred in the data collection phase(s). Challenges in this method include the fact that the data items might not be exactly what the researcher needs, and/or may require some interpretation, and these issues are discussed by the author; but the potential of this method in social work research ought to be explored more.

It is encouraging to see the range of methods being described in the chapters in the first three sections of the book. Experimental designs such as RCTs are powerful tools to evaluate the effectiveness (and even cost-effectiveness if economists are involved) of different interventions and models of care. Methodologists have evolved trials to include a number of variations of design to address specific challenges, such as where randomisation of individuals to non-intervention or control elements is difficult or inappropriate. Research methods that get ever closer to real world practice help answer other questions that trials may not in themselves answer. Indeed, such methods are increasingly used complementarily in, for example, health research, such that they answer different parts of a searching question about how effective an intervention is, and the processes behind its implementation and operation. I would like to see wider consideration of innovations not only in individual methods, but also in programmes of research that help us to answer more complex questions about practice by integrating different methods.

The fourth section of the book reflects a recent turn in academia, namely a specific focus on trying to maximize impact from a research project. Whilst academics in the past might well have said they were concerned with impact, it has become an explicit focus for researchers following the most recent *Research Excellence Framework* review of academic research activity. Impact assessment has moved thinking beyond passive dissemination (where a report, for example, is published and pushed out to potential audiences in the hope they will read it) to more active forms of engagement with groups having a stake in the knowledge being generated through the research. Considering how best to achieve impact has led to better evidence-informed understanding of how this can be done (e.g. implementation studies), and has raised many methodological issues about the nature of knowledge and power. These latter include questions about whose concerns and interests are being addressed in research, and what is the place of stakeholders, such as service users and practitioners, in planning and undertaking research, as well as in using the evidence. The chapters in this fourth section reflect these concerns. They address empowering women through participatory research, and using knowledge exchange processes throughout a project to ensure it is relevant and robust, with a view to increasing the amount of impact it achieves after completion. The final chapter of this section is another concerned with increasing the voices and influence of non-researchers in the research process, but is distinctive for several reasons especially in being one in which the service users collaborating on the research are given their own space in the chapter to voice their experiences.

The chapters in Section 4 provide a timely reminder that impact is a critical and highly pertinent issue for researchers, and that research and impact are complex processes unfolding over time and involving many actors. They encourage thinking more clearly and differently about these issues and how to actively work and widen influence in research.

Following this discussion of the chapters in the book, I make two general points. First, one touched on already, that it is not made clear by the editors what is meant by innovation. As noted above, and acknowledged by some of the contributors, some of the methods discussed are not generally innovative. Many are not common in social work research, but they are not necessarily innovations in the sense of 'being new'. Readers prompted by an interpretation of 'innovations' leading them to look here for radically new methods will probably be disappointed. The implicit view of the editors seems to be more one of encouraging researchers in social work to extend their methodological thinking and repertoire of methods, rather than to argue for completely new approaches to research.

The second point is about the structure of the book, and is that the four sections constructed by the editors (namely design, methods, analysis, and impact) risk being seen as overly rigid. One implication of this is that as the authors rightly discussed their research projects in the round it was not always clear why some chapters were placed in the sections they appear in. Another is that there is a risk of some readers thinking they can consider only one aspect of the research process in isolation from the others.

Indeed, the book seems underdeveloped in failing to fully discuss a more complete sense of understanding high quality social work research and the place of different approaches and innovations in it. The book makes a case for innovation as necessary to help social work research address the goal of emancipation of the people whom social workers support. However, there are other considerations for research that help make it robust, and therefore able to provide a valuable contribution to the knowledge base for evidence-informed, reflexive practice. These issues concerning the rigour of the research, i.e. its validity and reliability.

Methods and analysis, and innovations in them, have to be matched carefully to questions to produce valid and reliable evidence; and this decision-making is entwined with other aspects of the research process. However, the editors do not discuss these issues. Bringing together a discussion about innovations in methods, an emancipatory or empowering stance, and consideration of what makes research robust could have led to a very interesting discussion, including of issues of power in defining what research is done and the approaches used. Such issues are discussed across some chapters, for example in those indicated above that are concerned with widening voice and influence in research; but if the editors had addressed them head-on they could have more clearly set out the arguments, and why they are important parts of thinking about innovations in social work research. Neglecting validity and reliability in research in relation to the other points discussed in the text has left quite a gap.

The book nevertheless covers a very broad range of interesting research methods and issues, and practice concerns, across many varied groups engaged with social work. It is highly stimulating in all these respects, and contributors convey a passion for their topics. They left this reader enthused about the intellectual challenges of choosing and operationalising research methods and wanting to follow up references to learn more about some of the specific methods discussed. Hence the book achieves what I am sure was the main goal of the editors and contributors. It is very pleasing to see a publication that specifically tries to encourage the social work research community to think more widely about methods rather than unreflectively remain tied to trusted research methodologies and methods. The book is thus a welcome addition to the processes of helping to extend the methodological and methods repertoires in social work, and social care, research.

**Michael Clark**

Associate Professorial Research Fellow, Personal Social Services Research Unit, London School of Economics

**Learning from Baby P – The Politics of Blame, Fear and Denial**  Shoesmith, S.
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Sharon Shoesmith's is arguably one of the most recognisable names in British social work in the early twenty-first century. This is ironic, given that Sharon Shoesmith is not a social worker, but rather has a background in education – as a former head teacher, special needs specialist and inspector – who was Haringey's first Director of Children's Services at the time of baby Peter Connelly's death in 2007.

A quick internet search reveals that almost a decade later, with the publication of Shoesmith's book *Learning from Baby P – The Politics of Blame, Fear and Denial*, the press has not released Shoesmith from the attributed burden of responsibility for Baby P's death, and still overtly doubts her motivation in writing a book. In August 2016, anticipating the publication, one of the tabloids claimed that she planned to 'cash in on the scandal that got her sacked from her role with Haringey Council, launching a book called *Learning from Baby P*' (Mail Online, 19 August 2016)[ii].

Shoesmith makes clear in the preface that her motivation is very different: 'The book is not about me or my colleagues who were sacked from our jobs following Peter's death. It is not about seeking retribution or pursuing restoration'. She adds: 'In particular, the book seeks to understand the processes of blame, fear and denial that were so prominent in the responses to Peter's death, which might now with some degree of understanding provide opportunities to learn' (p.12). In my view this is what Shoesmith goes on to achieve.

This book makes no apology for its origin as a PhD thesis, and the layout and contents attest to its academic roots. Shoesmith explains the rationale for the book's structure, drawing on available national data, theoretical perspectives, and an avowedly psychosocial analysis of national responses (political, media, general public) immediately after the conviction of Peter Connelly's mother, her boyfriend and his brother for 'causing or allowing' the death of Peter (Baby P). The reader is guided through an analysis of the nature and prevalence of familial child homicide, and the author thoughtfully questions what we (as a society, as social work professionals, as politicians and as academics) actually know about the phenomenon.

Given the personal nature and impact of her own involvement in the media storm that followed the conviction of those found guilty of Peter's death, Sharon Shoesmith is remarkably dispassionate in her account of the 'narrative' which emerged about Baby P. She calmly analyses the influence of social media, and the speed and ferocity with which members of the public leapt onto the press and political interpretations of what was thought to have happened, and vilified the work of the social workers, paediatrician and Shoesmith herself. The author argues that 'blaming social workers was an easy response that had become habitual. Social workers were expected by the public to carry the anguish that no one else could face' (p.191). This anguish focuses on the unpalatable truth that parents, and, most unacceptably, mothers are sometimes responsible for the death of their children. Shoesmith spotlights the transference of moral blame away from Peter's killers and onto the social workers – particularly the assumption that they should have been better able to identify and manage risk. She disassembles the construct in theory and practice of local multi-agency working, and notes how partner agencies (who were heavily involved at the time) stepped away from the uncomfortable limelight, leaving a few individuals thoroughly exposed.

Shoesmith's book describes the 'perfect storm' which was created when political, societal and media attitudes came together and reacted to the death of this particular child. She explores in a sensitive and considerate way why the stories of the deaths of certain children through familial homicide hit the headlines and become instrumental in changing policies and lives, where others slip past media attention almost unnoticed. For those children who are killed by family members and who were previously 'not known' to statutory services, their manner of death is likely to have been equally despicable, and yet this is somehow less shocking, as they were not evidently

'failed' by those who were supposed to be looking out for them. Shoesmith highlights the converse argument, that in fact the latter group were 'failed' in a different way as they had escaped notice altogether, so had no one looking out for them at all.

Sharon Shoesmith carefully studies what we know about familial child homicide and contextualises this within the boundaries of Haringey local authority and its history. She peels back the layers of expectations placed on Haringey, including through the interpretation of certain past events there such as the murder in 2000 of Victoria Climbié (another child killed by family members), the political context regarding promoting gay and lesbian relationships in schools, and the murder of PC Keith Blakelock in the Tottenham riots in 1985. By exploring perceptions of Haringey as a failing and radical authority (which flew in the face of improvements inspectors reported as being made) Shoesmith helps the reader to understand how the media temperature was rising at the point at which the news broke of the convictions of Peter's mother and kin as his killers.

Shoesmith also draws attention to the profound effect on the wider social work world of Victoria Climbié's death. The reports by Lord Laming, and subsequent legal and policy changes, influenced the whole of children's social care. I recall listening to Lord Laming as he described the findings of his report when I sat in the rapt audience at a conference in Cornwall, which pulled together social work professionals from across the West Country. On reflection now, it is poignant that as Shoesmith points out, eighty-two other familial child homicides occurred across England and Wales in the same year that Victoria died; and yet their names are lost to history and their stories did not attract media attention. Another reflection from that Cornwall conference is my recollection of the audience predominantly comprising social work colleagues, with a much smaller representation from partner agencies – a ratio to be later echoed, as Shoesmith describes, in the partner agency responses to Baby Peter's death.

In her well-argued examination of societal denial of crimes against children Shoesmith questions the fabric of our understanding – she asks her readers to consider why as a society we have become habitual in blaming social workers for failure to protect (a 'cultural trope') rather than focus on the societal mechanisms we could employ to improve protection within communities. Her construct of childhood is well referenced, and challenges us to recognise the imbalanced value that society places on children, where sentiment has grown regarding the notion of childhood being a protected time, and yet children still live in poverty and neglect. For communities, policy makers and media professionals alike, the question from Shoesmith's perspective is that if the energy, time and resources that went into blaming social workers and others for failing children were directed towards more constructive, protective activities, how many child deaths could be prevented?

Similarly, Shoesmith's evaluation of the entwined nature of social work, regulators and politics is strong, and poses the question of how the more radical voice of social work has become 'virtually silenced' in the latter part of the twentieth century. Shoesmith cites the work of Professor Eileen Munro on child abuse case enquiries (1996) and comments that 'almost half the inquiries she researched did not fault social workers, but that several high profile cases publicly vilified social workers for both identifying and failing to identify child abuse and familial homicide' (p.45). Even greater depth to Shoesmith's analysis of 'prediction and prevention' as a problematic professional construct would have been beneficial; this approach, and the aspirations that go with it, have been both adopted by social work practice as 'what we do', and conversely have become the stick by which the media persecute social workers who apparently fail to do so.

Shoesmith takes an analytical approach to the direct impact of the media, including social media orchestrated in Haringey, and the political responses (including her own public dismissal on television by the then Education Secretary, Ed Balls). Shoesmith asserts that 'The case of Baby P became another watershed in the history of children's social care'. The impact was far-reaching: for example, in the 'Baby P effect', which described the rise in the number of children brought into care; in the recruitment and retention of social workers, which became problematic;

and in Haringey Council, where social workers left in such numbers that the new Director had to make an appeal to other London DCSs to 'lend' him staff (p.193). In my view, we are still battling those effects today.

The final chapters of Shoesmith's book aim to draw together the powerful arguments that she has discussed through the text about the idealisation of motherhood and childhood, the lack of knowledge (let alone evidence) about familial child abuse and homicide, and what she calls 'emotional policy making'. This extends to discussion in 2015 of the idea of a proposed crime of 'wilful neglect' by members of the social work and teaching professions and elected council members. Shoesmith notes that health and police colleagues were not proposed to be subject to the same level of criminal responsibility and yet clearly had a multi-agency part to play in protecting Peter Connelly and other children at risk.

When I mentioned to a colleague that I was writing a review of Sharon Shoesmith's book, she commented that it would be really good to find out about her individual perspective, including how Shoesmith survived having been made such a scapegoat. My colleague might not be alone in appearing somewhat disappointed to learn that whilst I believe that the academic thesis and subsequent book written by Sharon Shoesmith has something of a cathartic element to it, she deliberately does not bare her soul, and is thoughtful and analytical throughout. The emotional, financial and reputational impact on Sharon Shoesmith and on the other workers who lost their jobs as a result of Baby Peter's death is graphically described, but so too is the careful examination of society's wish in effect to sanitise familial child homicide. It is easier to publicly blame and humiliate workers (who were working to protect children) than it is to accept that a mother has either caused or allowed her child to die.

As a text, this work took me some time to process, and the author's adherence to academic terminology is sometimes awkward as, for example, when she repeatedly and unnecessarily uses the phrase 'I argue...' to introduce a proposition or line of discussion. The chapter on *Blame, Fear and Denial*, doubtless necessary for the PhD, felt somewhat detached, and rather than the lengthy explanations of the cited theoretical perspectives, I would have preferred to see those theories used more directly to illuminate Baby Peter's story. This book will justifiably be included in the reading lists of social work students, but I do wonder how many will find it readily penetrable. Having reviewed Professor Ray Jones' publication *The Story of Baby P: Setting the Record Straight* (RPP, 31(1), 2014-5), it is my view that his message is more easily accessible; but that in the main body of her text, Sharon Shoesmith makes the greater challenge directly to researchers and social policy makers, as to how much practice and policy change has been based on reactive responses to individual tragedies rather than on a foundation of well analysed data and tested knowledge.

Frustratingly, the final chapter, where suggestions are made for future action, is rather superficial. Whilst Shoesmith has spoken with social workers (which should itself generate a strong approach), her contact was apparently in a one-off workshop setting. The workshop outputs are heartfelt, but many of the suggestions listed are already regularly put in place in councils all over the country, making for a disappointingly weak ending to the book, and risking undermining her earlier strong analysis. The final conclusion also puts the responsibility for change squarely with the social work profession alone: does this then give others an 'opt out' clause with regard to learning from Baby P about protecting children?

**Andrea Morris**
Locality Director, Children's Services, Devon County Council

[i] Croisdale-Appleby, D. (2014) *Re-visioning Social Work Education. An Independent Review*, London: Department of Health.
[ii] By James Dunn For Mail Online Published: 00:18, 19 August 2016 | Updated: 11:54, 19 August 2016 Article: 'Shamed Baby P boss Sharon Shoesmith's ex-husband is caught with a haul of child porn – as she prepares to cash in on the tragic toddler's death with a tell-all book'.