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Commentary: Special Issue on Social Care Evidence in Practice (SCEiP) Project

Practitioner? Researcher? Educator? A discussion of identity and the implications on getting evidence into practice

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Over the last two decades the focus of activity related to getting research outputs used in practice, has evolved from simplistic two-way models of knowledge transfer to more holistic understandings of a knowledge ecosystem. Traditionally, two-way models saw a focus that relied on researchers 'pushing out' their knowledge through dissemination, or research users and practitioners 'pulling it' into their practice from sources they considered reliable. A decade or so ago a move was made towards the consideration of more complex relationship models as a focus on linkage and knowledge transfer as exchange emerged (Lomas, 2000; Lavis *et al.*, 2002).

While exchange models are still the focus of scrutiny to understand the key characteristics at play (Pentland *et al.*, 2011), they have tended to be replaced more recently by a focus on knowledge brokerage (Lomas, 2007), systems and processes decision-making (Mitton *et al.*, 2007; Wilson *et al.*, 2010) and knowledge mobilisation (Bennet & Bennet, 2007).

Despite their differences in focus, the commonality underpinning all of these approaches is the common emphasis on ensuring research is *actually used* in practice.

Challenges and mechanisms

If we were to conduct a straw poll of those reading this article, I have every confidence that the vast majority of you would agree that research *should* serve a purpose beyond creating or capturing new knowledge. To do so, to have a practical impact, this knowledge and research evidence needs to reach those who can use it. While this may feel a little obvious in principle, we are still far from reaching this reality in practice.

Lavis *et al.* (2006) identified four challenges to research being used in action:

1. Research is competing with other factors in the decision-making process.
2. Decision-makers do not always value research evidence.
3. The available research evidence may not be relevant for all audiences or decision-makers.
4. Research evidence is not always easy to access or use.

They then developed a much referenced framework to support the development of a knowledge exchange strategy that would address these factors. The framework consists of four methods that interplay to support the use of research in practice: developing a culture that supports research use; producing relevant research evidence; proactively acting to link research evidence to action; and evaluating these efforts. Of course we could argue that anyone who receives research funding should be routinely addressing each of these elements, as responsible researchers.

In the UK, Nutley *et al.* (2007) identified five prevalent strategies and mechanisms for effective research use:

1. Dissemination (circulating and presenting research findings).
2. Interaction (developing links between stakeholders and audiences).
3. Social influence (experts and peers informing and persuading on the value of research).
4. Facilitation (support to enable the use of research – this could be technical, financial, organisational or emotional).
5. Incentives and reinforcement (using rewards to reinforce desired behaviour).

Yet despite all of this awareness, we still appear to be no closer to the meaningful and routine use of evidence in practice. As Watson *et al*. (2012) reflect 'in the complex world of social care, with its competing priorities and demands on resources, the process of getting research into practice remains fraught with difficulty' (p.97).

SCEiP project

Back in 2012 a small team at LSE were awarded funding from LSE's Higher Education Innovation Fund to explore practical approaches and ideas for getting social care research evidence into practice. The SCEiP (Social Care Evidence in Practice) project intended to explore ideas and give all interested parties the opportunity to 'taste' different approaches, regardless of their relationship to research and knowledge. The project started with an unconference (an event where the agenda is set in real time by participants attending on the day)open to anyone who was interested. The discussions held on this day set the agenda for the project moving forward. One of the more traditional approaches explored during the project were conferences and workshops. One of these conferences was JSWEC 2014 (Joint Social Work Education and Research Conference).

This commentary piece emerged out of the conversations and discussions had throughout the course of the SCEiP project and particularly one such discussion between workshop participants at the 2014 JSWEC Conference. This piece highlights some of the issues related to identity that have been raised to enable you (the reader) to consider them when planning or engaging in research about, or for, practice. In this instance practice refers to the daily undertakings of those working in adult social care or social work.

JSWEC workshop

Our workshop: *What's the point of your research anyway? Exploring connections between research and practice* was intentionally designed to be interactive and provoke reflection on the challenges of getting research used in practice.

It was attended by a mixed group of 14 participants. The first exercise was a speed-networking task where participants introduced themselves to each other. This revealed a mixture of people who were social work practitioners, educators, and researchers (some a combination of more than one role). Participants then paired up and discussed what motivated them to conduct research, or work in practice or education, before sharing as a large group.

We then used small group activities to explore the barriers and facilitators to research being used in practice, and for researchers to engage practitioners in their work. The groups then mapped what they considered to be an idealised research process, considering different methods and ideas for breaking down barriers at each stage.

The workshop concluded with a discussion about how participants felt they could increase the use of research in practice, and what knowledge exchange methods produced the most impact for them.

Themes emerging from the workshop

One of the unexpected additions to the workshop was a cartoonist who was attending the conference, and joined us to capture any key points visually. He perfectly captured the initial discussion by sketching a person wearing three stacked hats; one labelled researcher, one academic, and one social worker. Sharing this image on social media with the question 'does how you identify impact on practice?' elicited similar responses to those in the room, about the complexity of balancing different roles.

Three key themes emerged through the workshop discussion: primary identity; confidence; and whether people felt they had sufficient knowledge.

Primary identity

The vast majority of participants strongly identified as social workers/social work students, or educators, first and foremost. Given the focus of the conference, and the delegates in attendance, this is not entirely surprising. We did not anticipate many researchers being in attendance, although several participants did identify as academics or researchers, but usually as an addition to some other primary identity. There was also a useful discussion about those who use services, and the interplay between many of us as professionals, while also service users, at some time of our lives.

Confidence

The strength with which most people identified as being in one field over another surprised one of the attendees who raised the issue of confidence in moving between roles. He felt that his strong identity meant he could cross boundaries and he expressed his surprise at what he considered to be others' construction of false dichotomies.

We also discussed how those receiving services have to quickly develop confidence and competence at navigating silos and 'service land'.

Knowing enough

Confidence was also a discussion point raised by other participants, in relation to their relative experience and knowledge in their non-primary role. Participants talked about '*not being experienced enough*' or '*not knowing enough yet*' to consider themselves researchers or academics. There also appeared to be some distinction made between researchers (used interchangeably with the term academics) and those who viewed themselves as 'educators' who seemed to have non-research roles.

Identity within the research-practice literature

A quick scan of the literature in relation to researcher/practitioner identity raised a number of related factors to those that were explored in the workshop.

The role and status of practitioner research

A School for Social Care Research (SSCR) methods review by Shaw *et al*. (2014) explored the role of practitioner research in social care, considering its role as a source of knowledge for applying to practice, and as a method for how practitioners could conduct inquiry.

While they suggest that the practitioner/academic distinction makes less sense in some health or social care academic roles designed to cross traditional practice and academic boundaries, they acknowledge that 'the person or people having a primarily practice identity did not hold the lead' in many of the studies they reviewed (p.33).

They recommend that practitioner research is not seen as being a separate form of research, imploring readers to avoid ‘invidious distinctions of naïve versus mature, small versus large, and practitioner versus practitioner/academic models of practitioner research’. They go on to say that ‘these distinctions are premised on an unquestioning academisation of practitioner inquiry’ (p.37).

It may be that in focusing on developing practitioner-led research the distinction between researcher and practitioner has become amplified. It is also possible that the issues of confidence and ‘knowing enough’ raised by workshop participants actually emerge as a result of the low status, and incidence, of practitioner research in social care.

Promoting social or political change

Collinson (2004) in her research on the occupational identity of social science contract researchers in higher education, found those with professional experience in health, social work or law frequently entered contract research because they believed it was a good opportunity to promote social and political change, despite then ‘tolerating such a marginal status with all its attendant insecurities’ (p.317).

Contract researchers’ conceptions of identity were dependent on a number of factors including their biographical history, their academic capital, where they worked and prior research experience. Those with a social justice background had self-images still, at least partly, located in their earlier occupational experience and they viewed contract research as a practical tool to influence their fields and improve people’s life experiences.

This view of research as a lever for change is often proffered in relation to action research, where discussion of power dynamics at play are not unusual:

> *‘Empowering’ the women who take part is a primary aim of this kind of research, with fully participatory research involving participants in all stages of the research process, including the identification of the initial question or problem to be studied* (Gillies & Alldred, 2012, p.51).

Whether it’s possible to hold two, or more, separate identities

It was clear in the workshop that most people had a primary identity that they related to. There was also discussion about whether it is possible, necessary, or indeed beneficial to differentiate between professional identities. Bell & Nutt (2012) discuss this issue in relation to Nutt’s dual roles of social worker and researcher:

> *Before commencing this research she decided that she would not be a ‘social worker’ in the research interviews as she wanted to conduct them in a very different manner. For her this was new, less sure ground and she wanted to keep separate the two experiences of ‘doctoral researcher’ and ‘social work practitioner’* (p.82).

Despite Nutt’s best attempts to conceptualise the roles as separate identities, the overlaps were too great and she reflects that it was impossible to avoid wearing two ‘hats’ at the same time.

Anecdotally we know of career track researchers from the SCEiP project that started their careers in social care or social work practice, or have been involved in social care during their research careers (for example as carers to their own family members). Interestingly in those examples, it is only when looking at CVs or social conversations does this become evident. It is not an identity that these researchers put forward (even as secondary to their researcher role), yet it influences how they approach their research and their understanding of the practitioners they are engaging with or participants in their studies.

Implications of identity for getting evidence into practice

The workshop's discussions, and wider literature on professional identity, raise several considerations for the practice of getting evidence used in practice.

Three of the challenges that Lavis *et al.* (2006) identified were the competing priorities at play during the decision-making process, the lack of value placed on research, and the lack of relevance of research evidence.

Quite simply, if research is to be considered valuable and relevant by those who identify as practitioners first and foremost, it needs to be situated within the practice arena.

One potential avenue for the embedding of research evidence into social care practice, is to build relationships with existing groups, networks or professional bodies. It is clear from Collinson's work, and our workshop, albeit with a small group of participants, that most people had a primary identity that related to their professional training and practice. Therefore, connecting with the professional support systems for that identity is likely to lead to new audiences for that research, which in turn are likely to increase the chances of it being adopted into practice.

Action research, or practitioner-led research, are two approaches that are perhaps more likely to produce relevant and useful research. Clearly articulating how your research could be used to bring about practical changes, or increased social justice, is also likely to engage those from a social care or social work background.

Genuinely joint research, that involves practitioners (and/or other stakeholders and interested parties) at the start of the process, and on an equal footing throughout, is also likely to produce research that is successfully embedded in practice.

A truly co-produced, co-researched approach to knowledge generation would meet almost all of Nutley *et al.*'s mechanisms for research use. Interaction between all key stakeholders would guarantee social influence and dissemination, as participants share their experiences with colleagues. Actively engaging a range of stakeholders in the research process would also have the beneficial outcome of increasing their capacity for conducting, and understanding research. This in turn would increase people's confidence in research activity, and reduce any need for incentives or rewards.

Many of the implications above bring their own perceived barriers. Funding is, of course, at the top of the list. Ideally engagement takes place prior to the start of any research study, and preferably in designing research proposals. Yet we know from conversations throughout the SCEiP project that developing relationships and discussing priorities prior to research funding applications is seen to require resourcing not currently available, and requires a leap of faith that time spent on developing these relationships and identifying priorities will not be 'wasted'. There is a role here for funders to make funding more accessible, and potentially introduce seed funding channels; however, arguably there is also a need to manage the expectations of all those involved, to understand the perspectives that people identify with, and for relationships developed in previous studies or through networking events to be built upon. In order to lead to a change in approach, we need to commit to building those relationships to utilise current evidence and expertise, which in due course may lead to action research or more representative research teams. This is particularly required when research funding calls have short timeframes for proposal submissions.

Another perceived barrier is the lack of information held by researchers about non-academic settings, practitioners and educators and their research interests. Discussions with academic researchers within the SCEiP project have repeatedly raised concerns about not knowing who to approach, how to engage with the various professional networks and (for some newer researchers) generally where to start.

Implications of identity for research

Shaw and colleagues (2014) identified 72 relevant studies from their research on practitioner research. They noted that:

> *One of the more significant differences is associated with the professional and occupational roles of the authors and the relationships between joint authors. …[For those undertaken within a health context] those involved were not either practitioners or university-based researchers but occupied roles that included both service provision and scholarly activity… Single practitioner research was relatively unusual and was typically related to a study requirement for a university. Partnerships were more common, usually a practitioner and academic or specialist research role. There were also practitioner activities undertaken within larger group endeavours* (p.5).

We know that those identifying predominantly as practitioners generally work within settings where research is not seen to be a priority, the time available is limited, as is support for research activities. There are also perceived to be limited research budgets available for practitioners to seek funding without some form of academic expertise within the proposal team. Where research is undertaken, it can be limited to internal knowledge sharing and only a 'very small proportion of practitioner research studies… enter the public domain' (Shaw *et al*., 2014, p.7). Producing journal papers, for example, is a priority for researchers based within academia but unlikely to happen for others. This in turn suggests there could be a wealth of evidence available within practice settings that we are just not aware of (Campbell *et al*., 2015).

A further activity the SCEiP project implemented was to seek professionals to support them to develop a journal article from research they had undertaken. The aim of this was two-fold: to support professionals to develop outputs – and open access peer-reviewed journal papers were chosen to do this – and secondly to encourage knowledge sharing from within practice organisations.

Applicants were offered academic mentoring support to develop their papers to a high quality standard. Once prepared they were submitted to the journal and subject to the journal's external peer-review processes. No article was guaranteed acceptance but we did offer to support all the authors through peer-review and revisions until their article could be accepted. The mentoring support was made available not because there was a perceived lack of quality in the research itself that required addressing (although this has been raised as an issue in some SCEiP discussions), but to support practitioners to develop journal papers where this is not their immediate channel of communication.

Five were selected for mentoring support to develop their papers, as presented in this journal issue. Three were relatively new to research with the articles included in this issue being one of their first: one presents research as part of a Masters dissertation, a second covers findings from the first research study the author has undertaken (during her days off from her part-time position) and the third arose from a knowledge exchange initiative between a university and two local councils to support practitioner research. The remaining two authors are more experienced researchers working in non-profit organisations. As one noted in her application for support, this meant 'an emphasis on quick and practical outputs' where 'opportunities for writing peer-reviewed papers have been limited'.

All five authors took up the opportunity of support from the academic mentor, as well as having access to additional support from the journal editors after submission, and developed their articles from reports previously written (and not all publicly available). These five identified as social care professionals and responded to the call for applications addressed to professionals; two noted their titles as 'Senior Researcher' and 'Research Officer'.

Alongside implications for evidence use in practice, there are implications for evidence generated within practice, and identity plays a significant role in both. There are improvements that are needed as to how knowledge is shared across social care research and practice; further breaking down barriers between identities is perhaps a first step.

Conclusion

Some of the issues emerging through the SCEiP project suggest that, perhaps not surprisingly, many people have more than one professional identity, although they seem to situate their self-concept within their primary role. The research-practice literature could benefit from a more holistic understanding and consideration of professional identity and its implication for engaging with, conducting or adopting research into practice. There are practical steps researchers, practitioners, educators, and those who support research and/or practice could take to enhance the type of evidence that is produced and the value it has for social care practice.

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