

Research for practice in small human service organisations: doing and disseminating small-scale research

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Research is something that everyone can do, and everyone ought to do. It is simply collecting information and thinking systematically about it. The word 'research' carries overtones of abstruse statistics and complex methods, white coats and computers. Some social research is highly specialised but most is not; much of the best research is logically very straightforward. Useful research on many problems can be done with small resources, and should be a regular part of the life of any thoughtful person involved in social action (Connell, 1975, p. 1).

Introduction

Over the last decade there has been an increasing focus on practice-based research in the social welfare sector and this period has seen the emergence of, and growth in, specialised research positions, particularly in the non-government sector. The focus of this paper is the practice-based research undertaken by one such service, Rosemount Good Shepherd Youth and Family Services, a small non-government service located in Marrickville, an inner western suburb of Sydney.

The paper begins with an exploration of the concept of practice-based research and situates the debates surrounding this concept in the context of significant changes that have occurred in human services delivery. It then moves specifically to an analysis of Rosemount's work, including an overview of research undertaken, discusses the nature of their impact and

analysis of both the strengths and challenges that arise from conducting research within a small human service organisation. Finally, suggestions are made for further research on issues arising from this analysis.

Exploring the Concept of Practice-Based Research

Traditionally social welfare research has been seen as part of the mandate of academics and tertiary institutions (O'Neil, Cleak, Brown, & Goodman, 1999, p. 27; Poulter, 2006, p. 329). However, since the 1990s there has been an increasing focus on practice-based research (Barber, 2003; Crisp, 2000). This period has also seen the emergence of specialised field based research positions. For example, many of the large non-government organisations in NSW now include substantial research units, while a number of smaller organisations support at least one research position.

The term 'practice research' or 'practice-based research' is used in a variety of ways within the literature. Some commentators use the term to refer specifically to research conducted by practitioners (Fook & Gardner, 2007; O'Neil et al., 1999). Others differentiate between program evaluation and the concept of practice research (Gardner & Nunan, 2007, p. 337; O'Neil et al., 1999, p. 28; Wade & Neuman, 2001). There is a growing body of literature which confines practice research to the examination of the efficacy of specific social work interventions (Barber, 2003; Crisp, 2000; Epstein, 2001; Wade & Neuman, 2007). Epstein (2001, p. 17), exemplifying this view, defines practice research as '... the use of research – based concepts, theories, designs and data gathering instruments to structure practice so that hypotheses concerning cause-effect relationships between social work interventions and outcomes can be rigorously tested'.

Theorists such as Fook and Gardner (2007, p. 171) adopt a broader approach which conceptualises practice research as research activities which build on data available in the workplace, including the experiences of practitioners, and which uses methods that can be readily applied to immediate practice concerns. For the purposes of this paper practice-based research will be defined simply as research which arises from practice issues and which is conducted within social welfare agencies. The focus of the paper is research conducted by one such agency, an agency that supports a designated research position.

The rise of evidence based policy and practice

The institutional and policy context of service delivery and professional practice have undergone significant changes (McDonald, 2003, p. 131). A series of aggressive micro economic reforms beginning in the 1980s and continuing to this day has resulted in a shift towards outcomes based funding within human services (Barber, 2003, p. 226). The Industry Commission in its 1995 report to the Commonwealth Government, *Charitable Organisations in Australia*, signalled the need for welfare agencies to be more accountable with public funds than had historically been required (Crisp, 2000, p. 189). Increasingly, funding is dependant on services being able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their programs and interventions (Crisp, 2000; Fook & Gardner, 2007; O'Neil et al., 1999). This has resulted in a focus within organisations on '... ensuring that organisational inputs such as social work interventions lead to demonstrable, desirable effects' (McDonald, 2003, p. 131). These changes in the context of service delivery have provided 'fertile ground' for the uptake of evidence-based discourses in the social welfare sector (Marston & Watts, 2003, p. 149).

Evidence-based policy and practice evolved from the concept of evidence-based medicine, the process of systematically finding, appraising and using research findings as the basis for clinical decisions. Central to evidence gathering in medicine is the use of randomised control trials to determine the most effective treatment (Marsten & Watts, 2003, pp. 146–147). In its current form in social work, proponents of evidence-based practice argue social work knowledge should be developed using positivist research methods and that social work decisions and interventions should be based on this research (McDonald, 2003, p. 124; Parton, 2000, p. 451). Policy makers in both the community and government sectors increasingly using the language of evidence-based policy, and there is evidence of its promotion across a range of social policy fields (Marston & Watts 2003, pp. 148–149). For example, in child protection, juvenile justice, and mental health, evidence-based practice is promoted as the best response to manage the risks associated with those populations (Powell 2001, cited in McDonald, 2003, p. 131).

Evidence-based discourses and the role of practice-based research

As was discussed previously, there are a number of commentators who position practice research firmly within evidence-based discourses (Bar-

ber, 2003; Crisp, 2000; Epstein, 2001; Wade & Neuman, 2007). Barber (2003, p. 228), exemplifying this view, maintains the proper focus as ‘... finding out what specific interventions work for what specific problems’, a task for which he argues qualitative research is ‘most unsuited’.

As Fook and Gardner (2007, p. 163) note, it is not unreasonable to expect practitioners to ensure their interventions are informed by reference to relevant research. Moreover, there may be times when research conducted within an evidence-based framework can be effective in assisting social workers in making decisions (McDonald, 2003, p. 135). For example, research on the effectiveness of group versus individual anger management interventions would be important for an agency developing their own program. However, this framework limits the capacity of practitioners to draw on other equally important forms of knowledge such as knowledge developed by and with service users. For example, in the area of disabilities, social workers need to ‘know’ about the effects of specific impairment but they also need to know about the social and political experience of living in a disabling world (McDonald, 2003, p. 136).

Moreover, the framing of practice research in terms of establishing which interventions work to address what problems means that important questions about how social issues are constructed in both the welfare and broader political arena are neither acknowledged or addressed. Bacchi’s (1999) ‘what’s the problem’ approach to social policy, for instance, highlights the role interventions play in actively shaping, rather than merely addressing, particular problem formations.

Alternative concepts of the role of practice-based research

Shaw (2007, p. 662) proposes practice research be framed as a *critique* of both research and practice, rather than an *application* of research to practice. This critique, he suggests, needs to include the development of strategies which allow practice to challenge research. Drawing on Fahl and Markand’s (1999, cited in Shaw, 2007, p. 662) work in psychology, he points out that difficulty bringing research and practice together in any professional discipline indicates that the discipline, as a whole, needs to be critiqued and developed. Such an approach bridges the traditional division between research and practice and in doing so allows practice an active role in knowledge formation. Similarly Fook’s (1996, p. xiii) reflective re-

search approach takes as its starting point the ideas and theories ground in people's practice experiences and then uses this to develop alternative theoretical paradigms. The strength of both these approaches is their ability to recognise, rather than dichotomise, the praxis that is the relationship between research and practice.

Agency Background

Rosemount Good Shepherd Youth and Family Services was established in 1982 and is auspiced by the Good Shepherd Sisters. The service is located in Marrickville, an inner western suburb of Sydney, which is characterised by a culturally diverse population with varied socio-economic status. There are two main streams of service provision within Rosemount: education programs for young people whose needs have not been met through the mainstream system and two counselling services – a specialised sexual assault program and a more generalist adolescent and family counselling program.

Rosemount's target group is young people aged 12 to 24, although the majority of clients in recent years have been aged between 14 and 16 years. The young people who use Rosemount's services have generally experienced a range of intersecting disadvantages. A disproportionate number have been victims of child abuse and many are living in refuges or in foster care. A marked increase in numbers of young people affected by intergenerational mental health and/or drug and alcohol problems has been noted by the service in recent years (Rosemount Annual Report, 2005/2006).

The service employs staff from a variety of professional backgrounds including social work, psychology, education, administration, and youth work. Funding is received from the Department of Community Services, Department of Education, and the Good Shepherd Sisters. A three-day a week research position, funded by the Good Shepherd Sisters, was created in 2000 and the author has been in the role since mid-2006. Previously the research position included a fundraising component. This is now the responsibility of a designated fundraiser, also appointed to a part-time position in 2006.

Overview of Rosemount's research

The research undertaken at Rosemount is practice-based; that is, it is undertaken in response to issues arising in the context of direct service provision. Although there is a focus on discrete research projects, the role also more generally involves linking people and information – whether this is legislative changes affecting young people or literature about specific issues such as self-harm. Listed below are the main research projects undertaken by Rosemount during the past seven years:

- Sexual assault prevalence studies. Analysing frameworks and findings (2007)
- Are we on the right track? Mapping the terrain of anger management (2007)
- Working out what works. Meeting the needs of young marginalised men (2007, undertaken with Youthblock Health and Resource Service)
- Adolescent violence towards parents (2004)
- Internet and adolescent socialisation (2004)
- Young people and infringement notices (2003)
- Drug and alcohol use among young people in Sydney's inner west (2002)
- Early school leaving in Sydney's inner west (2002).

Common themes underpinning the research

A point of commonality within the research is the focus on issues which are only just emerging as problems needing to be addressed. This will often initially be recognised by changes in referral patterns within Rosemount programs. This was certainly the case with the issues of the adolescent violence toward parents and the anger management projects, where both the education and generalist counselling service had marked increases in referrals for these issues. Generally, however, the issues will also have been raised as concerns within the local interagency meetings, which Rosemount staff attend. For example, the research on infringement notices was undertaken as part of Rosemount's involvement with the Youth Justice Coalition (YJC), a network of practitioners, lawyers,

policy makers, and academics who work to promote the rights of young people. A number of services connected with the YJC were dealing with increasing numbers of young people issued with prohibitively high train fines. Consequently, a project was undertaken to establish the effects these fines were having on young people and their experiences more generally with transit officers and transit police. For example, because of fines, a significant percentage of young people said they did not have enough money for day-to-day living expenses (Bobic, 2003).

Another initial impetus for research is often an identified gap in service provision. For example, the research on anger management was initiated not only in response to increased referrals for the issue but also in response to requests by referrers for a targeted group work program and the lack of such a program in the local area. Similarly, *Working Out What Works* (2007) was undertaken in response to the concern that existing forms of service provision in the youth services sector were not adequately meeting the needs of young marginalised men; that is, young men not engaged in school or employment, and often isolated from family and other support structures. For some time local services had been concerned about low referral rates and the fact that even when referred these young men often did not return for follow up appointments. In response to these concerns, Rosemount and Youthblock Health and Resource Service secured funding for a research project. Both local service providers and young men were interviewed about their needs, barriers in current service provision and the types of interventions that would more successfully meet their needs.

Finally, the small-scale nature of the research has meant a focus, though by no means exclusive, on qualitative research methodologies. Most often, it has involved both primary and secondary research, although again there are exceptions. For example, the most recent research, *Sexual Assault Prevalence Studies* (2007), was undertaken to examine the discrepancies in the findings from existing studies and to highlight the unarticulated assumptions underpinning this body of research. With the exception of one project (*Working Out What Works*), the research has all been conducted by the research officer and without external funding. It is perhaps this last factor, as much as the small scale nature that distinguishes Rosemount's research from some larger organisations where it seems not uncommon

for consultants to be employed or academic researchers involved in projects (i.e. via linkage grants and other partnerships with universities).

Disseminating the research

The research is disseminated through a number of channels both formal and informal. Given the focus on local issues, it is especially important that the findings are easily accessible to local workers. The anger management research, for example, was presented at a number of local youth inter agency meetings as well as to services where workers had participated in focus groups conducted as part of the research. Perhaps because of their informality, these forums have resulted in some of the liveliest, critical, and interesting discussions on the issue in general and the research findings in particular.

However, there is an obvious importance in making the research easily available to a broader audience. To that end, the research reports are made available on the Rosemount website. In addition, most research has been presented at conferences that target a wider and more diverse audience. For example, the work on young people and train fines was presented at the Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology (ANZOC) conference Sydney 2002; the anger management research at both the Youth Advocacy Policy Association (YAPA) conference, Sydney 2007, and the National Youth Affairs conference, Melbourne 2007. In addition, two of the eight research reports have been written up as peer-reviewed publications. Though Rosemount is keen to increase publications in the future, there are a number of challenges involved in achieving this, which will be discussed in the latter part of the paper.

Impacts of the research

To some extent, the impact of the research is particular to each project and the specific focus taken. However, some general effects can be discussed. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, it is used to inform the work of Rosemount staff. In some instances, this has been about providing literature on newly emerging practice issues. This was certainly the case with the issue of adolescent violence towards parents, where little information had previously been available to guide practitioner interventions. In other cases, it has resulted in the introduction of a new and specific program. For example, the

agency is currently examining the logistics, training, and resources required to implement a targeted anger management group work program.

Program development and implementation is undeniably an important research outcome. However, as established by theorists such as Fook (1996) and Shaw (2007), the role of the research in promoting critical reflection on both practice and research frameworks is of equal if not more importance. An interesting finding of the anger management research was the degree of criticism levelled by the practitioners interviewed at the assumptions underpinning standard anger management interventions, interventions which are supported by an impressive body of evaluative research. Of particular concern was the fact that anger management deals only with a very specific form of anger (externalised anger), generally targets marginalised or 'problem' populations such as young people and fails to recognise or address the social context in which anger difficulties are experienced. These points have prompted considerable discussion within the agency about how the 'problem' of anger management has been constructed and in particular, the types of interventions that would address the concerns raised in practitioner interviews.

As was implied earlier, the research also has an impact outside the direct confines of the agency. For example, *Young people and infringement notices* (Bobic, 2003) provided grounded knowledge about the adverse impacts of a specific policy on a particular group of people, in this case young people in the inner west of Sydney. The issues generated by the research then became part of the advocacy work undertaken by the Youth Justice Coalition ((Youth Justice Coalition, 2007). The research projects have often acted as a focal point for workers in the local area, bringing people together around issues of concern. For example, an outcome of the research on adolescent to parent violence was the organisation of a conference which both provided an avenue to present the research findings and created a much needed public space to discuss an issue which had been causing increasing concern (Cunningham, 2007).

Finally, it needs to be acknowledged that the research does not always have the effect that one would like. For example, *Drug and alcohol use among young people in Inner Western Sydney* (2003) was undertaken in response to the lack of a youth specific drug and alcohol service in the area. Despite the findings clearly confirming the need and despite considerable effort made to procure funding, there remains no youth specific drug and alcohol service in the inner west. As Connell (2007) points out, research, despite

what some may believe, is not a policy decision-making machine. Research illuminates possibilities, it does not and cannot make choices about patterns of action; such choices are the result of complex and deliberate social and political processes.

Strengths of Research for Practice in a Small Organisation

One of the acknowledged strengths of small community-based organisations is the capacity to respond quickly to local issues as they arise, often using minimal resources. The fact that the service made the decision to support a research position has significantly enhanced this capacity, as has been illustrated in the previous discussion. Moreover, the extent of the research undertaken, given the part-time nature of the position, is further evidence of the ability of a small service to produce a substantial body of research using relatively few resources.

Secondly, the fact that the research position is co-located, rather than physically and organisationally remote as in some larger organisations, has proved an invaluable tool in keeping the research/practice (praxis) relationship both visible and tight. It means the researcher is able to observe the work of the agency on a daily basis and that there are many informal opportunities to feedback research progress. In addition, the more formal mechanisms in place ensure a high degree of collaboration and a sound feedback loop. For example, an issue of concern recently has been the ways in which some of the young people are using social networking sites such as Bebo and Myspace. In response to this, meetings have been organised between the researcher and each of the programs. In part, this has been to gather more specific information on the concerns, but also to ascertain the form in which practitioners would find it useful to have research/knowledge on the issue and in what ways they would anticipate using this knowledge in their practice. Consequently, the practice implications are being built in from the outset, before a specific research question has been formulated.

Challenges in Undertaking Research in a Small Human Service

Despite the considerable strengths of undertaking research in a small human service, there are also a number of challenges. First are the constraints posed by the position being part-time as well as a lack of quite basic resources. For example, the service has been dependant on the research officer having a university library card. This gives the service access to a comprehensive range of databases and journal articles, which would otherwise incur a cost. A recent discussion revealed that there are other researchers also employed in other small organisations in similar positions.

In terms of time constraints, it is not so much completing the research projects within the designated periods that presents the challenge as it is having time to write them up for publication. Healy and Mulholland (2007, p. 31), based on their own experience, estimate that simply preparing a paper for an initial submission takes between 20 to 60 hours in addition to the time taken to conduct the research. Given the Rosemount position is part-time and entails a number of duties in addition to discreet projects, this means adding an additional four to five weeks onto any given piece of research.

Numerous social work academics (Healy & Mulholland, 2007; Rabbitts & Fook, 1996), noting the lack of practitioner representation in the professional literature, have highlighted the important role of publication in allowing field based social workers to contribute to the formal knowledge base of the profession. Whilst writing for publication is undoubtedly important, it is also an area that would benefit from critical discussion. In particular about what counts as 'formal knowledge' in the social work arena; in the same way that the what counts as 'evidence' in evidence-based practice has been subject to critique (Marston & Watts, 2003; McDonald, 2003). As Connell (1990) pointed out a number of years ago, dissemination of research in refereed journals tends to reach a limited and specialised audience. It is therefore not always the most effective method of communicating findings to those who will most often use it.

The second major challenge is being the sole researcher within the organisation. While colleagues are keen to discuss research content, they have less of an interest in methodology and design. Moreover, unlike the direct

service practitioners, the research sector has not fostered the professional development opportunities and support networks that mediate the difficulties faced by sole workers. However, it does need to be acknowledged that this situation has begun to change. For example, the NGO Research Network and the Social Policy Research Network (SPRN), Faculty of Education and Social Work University of Sydney are two meetings now available to NGO researchers in NSW. These networks have been proved very useful in facilitating connections with other field-based researchers, including others in sole worker positions.

Professional development, however, is an issue that to date has not been adequately addressed by either the field or the academy. The workshops available through the various training bodies with a social welfare orientation tend to focus on practice orientated issues such as conducting assessments, group work, or interventions with particular client groups. However, the National Association of Australian Social Workers (AASW) has recently established a Research Committee, though from available information it is unclear whether it will have a training and development focus (AASW National Bulletin, 2007). Similarly, while the author has accessed university-based research workshops, this has been by virtue of being a postgraduate student. Access to workshops such as these on a regular basis would be extremely beneficial to field based researchers. A fruitful discussion could be had on the most useful way to provide these workshops. Options could include opening up the existing university-based workshops or using professional/academic partnerships with the goal of developing workshops specifically for field based researchers.

There are a number of other initiatives that could be considered to support field-based researchers, especially sole workers or those in employed in small research units. For example a mentoring scheme, such as exists in universities, to link early career with experienced researchers or sole workers with researchers from large research units. Another strategy would be to adapt the group supervision model commonly used in clinical work for the purposes of researchers. While this model is generally used *within* organisations, it could be adapted to bring together researchers *across* organisations for discussing methodological and other issues arising from their respective projects.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the role of practice-based research in one small non-government organisation. To date there has been little analysis of the role of field-based research and researchers across the NSW social welfare services sector. A useful starting point would be a mapping exercise to establish research type and focus, the organisational location of positions and developmental history of these positions both within services and across the sector. Of further interest would be an exploration of the extent to which the changed context of human services delivery has shaped the emergence of and form taken by practice-based research in the social welfare sector.

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