



WHAT'S DISTINCTIVE ABOUT SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH?

OVERVIEW

This chapter will explore social work's knowledge base and the constellation of core values it draws on that predispose it towards enquiry that is both relationship-based and informed by a broader emancipatory mission. The questions 'What is research?' and whether there is a justification for practitioner research being seen as a valued perspective in its own right will be investigated. It is argued that, given the nature of social work practice, it is only to be expected that practitioners should seek research knowledge that both arises from, and reflects, the complexities of practice. It is also argued that practitioners themselves might contribute to this knowledge by engaging in research that can inform and influence practice and policy. To begin to understand the challenges facing practitioner research, we will look at the recent history of social work research's contribution to policy and the drive towards evidence-based knowledge and New Managerialism. We will suggest that practitioners who undertake research could provide both a situated understanding of the unique in each individual and circumstance and offer a challenge/critique of the practices, institutions and policies that militate against social justice. Doing research provides one route for practitioners to realise social work's emancipatory potential.

WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE?

The National Occupational Standards for Social Work draw on the international statement which identifies the social work profession as:

A profession which promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers, 2001)

This is a statement on the commitment of social work to humanitarian values and the promotion of social change. It provides the nucleus from which issue and permeate the six key roles of social work, and any social work endeavour.

National Occupational Standards for Social Work

- Key Role 1: Prepare for, and work with individuals, families, carers, groups and communities to assess needs and circumstances.
- Key Role 2: Plan, carry out, review and evaluate practice, with individuals, families, carers, groups, communities and other professionals.
- Key Role 3: Support individuals to represent their needs, views and circumstances.
- Key Role 4: Manage risk to individuals, families, groups, communities, self and colleagues.
- Key Role 5: Manage and be accountable, with supervision and support, for your own social work practice within your organisation.
- Key Role 6: Demonstrate competence in social work practice.

These key purposes combined with the humanitarian values in the International Federation's statement mean that for the social worker the service user is not just an individual in a social situation who is the subject of engagement, assessment and practice. The service user is also a unique individual in complex and uncertain circumstances that are influenced to a lesser or greater extent by collective socioeconomic forces. These forces demand acknowledgement and understanding if social justice and inequality are also to be addressed. Nonetheless, this collective emancipatory mission has been an area where the social work profession has struggled to move significantly beyond the rhetoric (Jordan, 2004) despite this fusion of regard for both unique and collective inequalities providing social work with its distinctive nature (Bisman, 2004; Webb, 2001). This is made even more challenging because social work is a highly complex and sometimes apparently contradictory pursuit. It is an adherence to this value base that helps navigate the practitioner through the quagmire that characterises practice. As Jordan argues:

... social work occupies an ambiguous role in society, negotiating with individuals in ways that try to validate their claims to autonomy, but from a position inside such institutions as public agencies, civil society organizations, churches or local groups, and one which involves a duty to criticize and challenge those very institutions, from the perspective of freedom, equality and justice. (2004: 12)

At an individual level of engagement the practitioner must always seek to facilitate a relationship which can enhance well-being and be characterised as 'relationship-based practice', an awareness of 'the uniqueness of each individual's circumstances and the diverse knowledge sources required to make sense of complex, unpredictable problems' (Ruch, 2005: 111). Social work also needs to move beyond the individual circumstance to understand and find ways to express concern for the societal inequalities and injustice that feed these individual circumstances. Practitioner research has the potential to express both these sets of values.

SOCIAL WORK KNOWLEDGE

Social work has always been multidisciplinary in its knowledge base and practice, drawing on, for instance, sociological thinking and research, psychology and social

policy, and experiential knowledge (reflection). Through sociological thinking social work is offered an understanding of social differences and inequality such as class, disability, race, gender and age in the context of the laws and rules laid down by society. The sociologist gaze is bifocal – distinguishing between social presentation and social reality. Through psychology, social work is offered a knowledge of the processes that will influence and impact on individual behaviour and develop an understanding of personal attachments and relationships and how the nature of these can influence an individual's behaviour. Through social policy, social work is offered an understanding of the processes involved in the state distribution of resources amongst individuals and groups to meet welfare needs and how this is organised through a range of institutions from 'the family and the community networks in which the family exists, the market, the charitable and voluntary sectors, the social services and benefits provided by the state, and, increasingly, international organisations and agreements' (Baldock et al., 2003: xxi). Experiential learning is also important to social work knowledge because social work practice not only relies on technical expertise (theories and methods that can inform interventions and the legal and procedural requirements of the profession), but also on a tacit understanding that is a complicated combination of personal judgment, past experience and theoretical knowledge.

REFLECTION IN SOCIAL WORK

Experiential learning is explored in the work of Donald Schön who has analysed how professionals learn by focusing on what he calls 'the swampy lowlands' of professional practice (Schön, 1983). These relate to the inner resources professionals draw on when they find themselves having to make decisions in complex and/or controversial settings. For a social worker the obvious area for these kinds of decisions is regulatory practice, as for example the decision to take care proceedings under Section 38 of the Children Act (1989). However, less obvious situations – like the decision to follow up an intuition that may prove rooted or groundless – also requires complex decision making. Schön is fascinated by the inner resources and processes that influence how professionals can make these difficult complex and contingent decisions.

Schön has suggested that the professional develops a kind of 'artistry' which is different from their technical expertise. He has argued that this type of problem/situation cannot be dealt with by simply applying a technical competence. Instead, the professional has to build a 'repertoire' of past scenarios, precedents and case studies that can be drawn on to inform an understanding of the 'here-and-now' situation. These are accessed by applying knowledge from literature and research but additionally, and more significantly, by applying knowledge from the interpretation of experience. This process only becomes 'artistry' when the professional engages in a meaningful reflection on their past experience and practice. Reflection on practice involves:

- recapturing the situation;
- thinking about it;
- mulling it over (alone or with others);
- evaluating;
- acting on that evaluation. (Boud et al., 1985)

For Schön simple reflection is not sufficient as it ignores the social and situational nature of experience. Together with his colleague Argyris he argued that simple reflection will only produce 'single loop learning' (Argyris and Schön, 1974). With this kind of learning an individual will simply reinforce and defend old habits and behaviours because it fails to challenge their underlying assumptions, preconceptions and belief systems. You will doubtless be familiar with the attitude 'This is how I've always done it and no one has come to any harm'. For example, when reflecting on something like an altercation with a difficult colleague a practitioner may reflect that this colleague is always difficult and aggressive when asked for information when passing on the corridor. Single loop learning would be content to explore the problem as simply lying with the colleague. This approach lacks the critical reflection that challenges taken-for-granted understanding and problematises the process and motivation.

Alternatively, a competent professional will engage in 'double loop learning' which will challenge all previous understanding in a 'progressively more effective testing of assumptions and progressively greater learning about one's effectiveness' (Argyris and Schön, 1974: 86). This double loop learning may, for instance, question the appropriateness of asking for information on the corridor, why appropriate systems for information sharing are not being utilised, what the consequences of affixing the label 'difficult' on that colleague are likely to be. The process of critical reflection required for 'double loop' learning is inevitably difficult to achieve alone. The would-be learner can be the last person to recognise when their understanding is limited by long-held preconceptions that might go back to childhood because they are so enmeshed in the situation as to be incapable of objectivity. To avoid this Schön suggests what he calls a 'reflective practicum', where people come together to analyse an issue or problem and explore it from many different dimensions, including the individual's emotional response. Argyris and Schön developed their ideas on reflection from an educational discourse where they fundamentally questioned the value of professionals only using theoretical and technical knowledge for their practice. These ideas complement and cross-fertilise with reflexive knowledge, which is also important to the social work practitioner.

REFLEXIVITY IN SOCIAL WORK

Although reflexivity is a similar concept to reflection, it developed out of a social science discourse and has been used as an approach in social science research. It relates to researchers reflecting on the research process and locating themselves in this process (Fook, 2002). Reflexivity involves a more sophisticated exploration of the processes at play facilitating an emergent understanding of social situations that takes into account the social context, experience and values of the researcher (Powell, 2002). Sue White advocates using reflexivity in social work practice as well as research as a means 'of destabilisation, or problematization of taken-for-granted knowledge and day to day reasoning. Treated in this way, reflexivity becomes a process of looking inward and outward, to the social and cultural artefacts and forms of thought which saturate our practices' (2001: 102). This process of taking time to problematise all aspects of a situation avoids the rigidity which rides roughshod over the nuances of the particular. It also allows an opportunity for destabilisation and self-awareness rather than blindly acting on the basis of policies and procedures, research findings or strategies.

Since a reflexive approach takes account of values and questions taken-for-granted assumptions it is an approach which sits very comfortably with the situated and value-based requirements of the social worker practitioner. As Ruckdeschel and Shaw argue, '... all forms of social work practice can benefit from a reflective stance ... [but] reflective practice is of limited use unless the products of reflections are shared' (2008: 299). An effective method of ensuring that these reflections are rigorous and shared is available through the practitioner engaging in research.

WHAT IS RESEARCH?

Before we can focus in on practitioner research we need a brief examination of what we mean by research itself. All research involves the use of rigorous and systematic methods to explore questions, problems and topics with the aim of gathering data that will inform greater understanding. The discovered data and understanding may be very specific, or general, depending on the type of research being undertaken and the type of data sought. Research can range from basic/scientific to an applied social investigation. Generally speaking, with basic research the investigation will be driven by the researcher's interests and will be unrelated to immediate practical questions, problems or topics. In contrast, applied social research is more likely to be driven by social interests and be closely related to immediate practical questions, problems or topics (Stoecker, 2003).

Underpinning any research endeavour are key values associated with different research approaches and paradigms and these in turn will impact on the types of investigation undertaken. Positivism is an epistemological approach (theory of knowledge) which advocates the application of scientific methods to the discovery of social reality. This approach aims to reduce any possibility of contamination coming from the researcher themselves (researcher bias), the research equipment, the methods used, and the setting/laboratory or field setting, and is associated with the scientific methods found in the natural sciences. In contrast, the interpretivist approach requires researchers to investigate the subjective meaning of social reality. This approach is predicated on the belief that the social world is fundamentally different from the physical world and cannot be understood in all its complexity though the use of scientific methods.

There are two general approaches to gathering data – quantitative and qualitative – and these are not mutually exclusive. With the quantitative approach a researcher is more likely to remain objective and distant from the process and gather data which is often in the form of numbers. The data are analysed and interpreted using measurement and can be presented in the form of tables and charts. The types of methods associated with this approach are surveys, questionnaires and structured interviews. The qualitative approach is designed to allow for more complexity to emerge in the findings, thus allowing the intricacies of a situation to be acknowledged. Findings and data are often presented as prose. The interpretation of findings is more likely to be offered by the researcher and is therefore open to alternative interpretations, whereas with quantitative data the measurements and calculations will often speak for themselves. This approach lends itself to small-scale research that adopts methods of observation, unstructured interviews, focus groups and the use of narrative (Denscombe, 1998).

To summarise the differences between quantitative and qualitative:

The difference might be summarised by saying quantitative research is structured, logical, measured and wide. Qualitative research is more intuitive, subjective, and deep. This implies that some subjects are best investigated using quantitative whilst others, qualitative approaches will give better results. In some cases both methods can be used. (Bouma & Atkinson, 1995: 208)

In some research texts the two approaches will often be polarised. You will need to be cautious not to be too rigid in your understanding of these data gathering approaches.

TRIGGERS FOR SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

There are numerous demands made upon social work research in what is a rapidly changing world. For example, in the UK people are generally living longer and healthier lives, but with increasing numbers of older people there is also an increase in the enduring health problems associated with ageing (see ONS/Social Trends 2009).¹ One example of this is the predicted impact on the cost of caring for an increasing number of older people with dementia (McCrove et al., 2008). This type of trend inevitably impacts on health and social care resources and makes demands on our understanding as social workers. Community Care Managers are likely to face numerous pressures, some of which will be in tension, when working with an elderly person with dementia. They must, for instance, consider self-reliance and autonomy whilst at the same time ensuring there are sufficient resources in the community to support the elderly person to remain in their home environment. They must also balance the risks faced as a result of care in the community against the greater restriction that is part of a residential nursing home. They must consider whether the budget can meet the various costs and also, given the unique circumstances of the individual service user, which route would best respect their integrity and well-being. Answering these complex and potentially contradictory questions requires a recourse to the literature and research to discover what is already known about similar situations and discrete investigations to establish what is specific to a particular situation. It also requires an understanding of the sometimes unintended consequences of social policies that impact on people's lives. Through engaging in an exploration of research the practitioner is contributing to a comprehensive assessment of the situation. Through engaging in producing the research themselves there is the potential to develop an understanding that can be shared with others and influence both practice and policy.

Social work practice requires research on practice and policy initiatives that can impact on the social environment at a local and national level (Shaw, 2007). Historically, although social work might have wished to inform policy, the reality has been that social work has been at the receiving end of policy and subject to the prevailing political necessities of the day. This can be seen by tracking the recent history of social services research. With Seebom (1968) and the setting up of social services departments, it was argued that it would prove 'wasteful and irresponsible' not to

¹Social Trends is produced by the Office for National Statistics and can be accessed online at <http://www.statistics.gov.uk>. The ONS is an invaluable resource for the researcher.

monitor the effectiveness of social work. Research was to be concerned with two areas: 'First, the collection and analysis of basic data and, second, the clarification, evaluation and costing of the main options available in tackling the problem' (quoted in Payne, 1981). Building on this, in 1994 the Department of Health published a report called 'A Wider Strategy for Research & Development relating to Personal Social Services'. This looked at the links between research, policy and practice. It argued that research was being used to inform policy but that research findings were not being used more directly to inform practice. The report made a number of recommendations about the national, regional and local organisation, and dissemination, of social services-related research. Social services departments were to:

- have a known dissemination plan to keep their own staff and other service providers up to date with research findings;
- use in-house training to develop research findings;
- develop opportunities through secondments and fellowships to provide practitioners, researchers and trainers with experience of each other's work.

However, in reality most social services departments did little beyond employing small numbers of research and development staff whose remit was usually too wide to be able to implement these recommendations effectively. Eventually these recommendations and posts became re-shaped to meet quite different agendas. This point can be illustrated with reference to a Merseyside social services department.

Case study

Between 1995 and 1998 a Merseyside social services department became involved in a wide range of research which included:

- *projects undertaken internally*, such as evaluations of specific services – for example an evaluation of community care support to people with dementia (Hardwick, 2000);
- *projects commissioned from an external source*, for example a piece of work on local rehabilitation needs (McNally & Hardwick, 2000);
- *as participants in external projects*, for example in a study of community care assessment commissioned by the NHS from Lancaster University (Cornes & Clough, 2001).

Staff and service users were active participants in these projects, positively welcoming the opportunity to express a view on particular services or processes, receiving feedback on findings, and also being involved in discussions about the implications of those findings.

However, with the relentless raft of social care (and related health care) policy initiatives emanating from the Department of Health after New Labour came to office in 1997, interpreting policy for local implementation and following through that implementation with operational staff and managers became more of a priority. This resulted in the priority shifting again to performance management in the early 2000s with the introduction of performance indicators (Department of Health, 1998a). Work in social services departments became driven by the need to meet national performance targets. In this particular Merseyside social services department the shift was symbolised by the setting up in 2001 of a Policy and Performance unit, within which 'Research and Development Officers' became 'Policy and Performance Officers' with the inevitable move away from research and even policy towards performance management.

This change away from involvement (albeit very limited) in research is exemplified in this case study by the change of job title from ‘Research and Development Officers’ to ‘Policy and Performance Officers’. However, at the same time the rhetoric coming out of government initiatives related to the ‘modernising’ agenda for social services recognised that practitioners should have greater recourse to research (Department of Health, 1998b). The White Paper states ‘as in other professions, it is important that professionally qualified social workers base their practice on the best evidence of what works for clients and are responsive to new ideas from research’ (Department of Health, 1998b, cited in Woodcock & Dixon, 2005: 955). This is not always as straightforward as this quote implies as has been acknowledged and strategically addressed in the Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee’s (JUCSWEC) fourteen-year strategy, which states its aims are to:

- maximise the HEI contribution to social work and social care service improvement;
- develop a strong evidence base for social work and social care services;
- build a workforce capable of using evidence critically and effectively. (JUC/SWEC, 2008: 6)

WHAT IS AN EVIDENCE BASE FOR SOCIAL WORK?

In the arena of social work research there has been an increasing emphasis on evidence-based knowledge/research because of the pressure exerted by the modernising agenda with its ‘ideological affiliations in favour of a pragmatic embracing of ‘what matters is what works’ (Davies & Nutley, 2002). As well as it being a vehicle to disseminate the ‘what works’ agenda to the social work workforce, a number of other reasons for this increasing emphasis on using evidence in policy and practice have been suggested. These include: the growth of a well-informed and educated public; an information explosion and corresponding improvements in information technology; a need for cost containment and increased productivity in service delivery; growth in the size and capabilities of the research community and an increasing emphasis on governmental scrutiny and accountability. Evidence-based knowledge also allows social work research to have credibility with more established scientifically-based academic disciplines and professions such as medicine. Take, for example, the drive towards interprofessional working – especially as this is backed by major research funding bodies like the National Institute for Health Research which includes social care/social work when considering issues related to the NHS (Cooksey, 2006). Social work research needs to be able to make a distinct contribution to this type of interprofessional research and not be swallowed up by the more resourced and larger health perspective.

When we talk of an evidence base for social work practice we are referring to a particular kind of knowledge that has been defined as ‘the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions regarding the welfare of service-users and carers’ (Sackett et al., 1996: 71). This is the idea that practitioners can intervene most effectively when they are drawing on a rigorous evidence base, the sources of which can be found in peer-reviewed journal articles, practice guidelines and systematic reviews (Corcoran & Vandiver, 2004). However, critics of an emphasis on evidence-based knowledge have argued that this approach to understanding indicates causal, linear thinking that is intrinsically flawed when dealing with human

agency (King, 1997) and that using an evidence-based approach is built on the assumption that what has proved useful in one context is necessarily transferable to another, ignoring the significance of local information and interaction, and raising the question, 'Is a professional opinion inferior to a piece of research?'

Critics of the emphasis on evidence-based knowledge have also argued that research for it is often produced from a positivist perspective that believes standardised scientific methods will produce an objective truth about the social world and question how appropriate this view is for understanding the complexities of social work (Webb, 2001). In other words, that evidence-based researchers are too often academics who inhabit Schön's 'high hard ground' and who understand little of the 'swampy lowlands' of emergent, contingent and situated understanding.

These criticisms of evidence-based research may be legitimate if it is incorrectly applied and research becomes isolated from social work values. Use of evidence-based research requires the use of appropriate knowledge rooted in the values of social work practice. As Corcoran and Vandiver argue, '... evidence-based practice requires that the practitioner structure the intervention into a workable treatment plan, which means that the session-by-session planning is unique and appropriate for the particular condition' (2004: 18). Munson further argues that 'relationship-based practice' and a recourse to evidence-based research is both compatible and necessary in practice as '... evidence-based practice must be balanced with a relationship model. Practice cannot be grounded in only evidence, just as it cannot be formulated solely on relationship' (2004: 259)

In 2001 social work's evidence-based research bias was further strengthened with the establishment of the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) which set out to correlate a wide range of sources, and particularly research evidence, although they also acknowledged the need to listen to service user/carer views, to have a local evaluation of service deliveries and to hear about practitioners' experience of practice. SCIE was founded at a point when it was becoming increasingly recognised that the social work enterprise needed to be able to draw together the wide range of knowledge that informs practice and understanding.

Activity

- Log onto the SCIE website <http://www.scie.org.uk/>
- How many differing sources of knowledge can you discover from your search around the website?
- Write a term of interest such as 'dementia care' into the search box and identify from the results the range of issues that this throws up.
- Also identify the differing types of documents i.e. policy, article, etc. that come up.

DEVELOPING RESEARCH MINDEDNESS

A helpful way of thinking about social work research is to see it partly as a state of mind that can be acquired with rigour and professional discipline which opens up the

possibility of exploring the interface between individuals and communities and the worlds they inhabit. This has been described as ‘research mindedness’ – a way of thinking and a habit of questioning that challenge our taken-for-granted assumptions so that we can *better understand* and reflect on the world that we, service users and communities encounter.

For example, as social workers this research mindedness could involve looking at an aspect of intervention or the context of a welfare provision including, perhaps, the agencies that provide services: for whom do they exist, and who is excluded? How are they funded? What are the culture, values and histories that impact on individuals and communities, and the particular policy initiatives that influence them? In fact, it could involve us opening our minds to any aspect of enquiry that can be related to the values, purposes and context of social work. (Developing ideas for research questions, problems and topics will be explored in detail in Chapter 2.)

Although all research is broadly about the advancement of scholarship and knowledge, if social work is to be beneficial to service users and carers this needs to be fine-tuned to the requirements of the profession and/or service users, in order to lead to a better understanding for practice and policy. If not, it will be indistinguishable from any other social science research and will also further marginalise the voices of service users, carers and professionals who live and work on the frontline of social injustices and need. Orme and Powell argue that ultimately social work research should be ‘to improve professional practice for the benefit of service users and carers (2008: 2)

THE DRIVE TOWARDS PRACTITIONER RESEARCH

Social work practice takes place in the context of a global socio-political flux that is leading to accelerating changes in contemporary society. As Taylor-Gooby (2008) argues, governments throughout the world have been driven by these global pressures to develop new strategies for welfare reform. In the UK such welfare reform can be encapsulated by the New Managerialism that has taken hold of provision, which is predicated on the belief that to survive global pressures we need to increase cost-effectiveness and quantify outcomes to measure the effectiveness of welfare. Taylor Gooby also claims that running in parallel to these policy changes has been a subtle and implicit shift in the values legitimating welfare. The ‘old’ values coalesce around mutual trust, inclusion and a reciprocity between the state and the individual, endorsing the provision of a ‘safety net’ for the most vulnerable and ill informed in our society. However, Taylor-Gooby suggests that these ‘old’ values are being eroded by policy makers who are placing an increased emphasis on individual self-regard and the ability of individuals to make educated choices in the arena of welfare provision. The motivation behind this shift is the assumption that this will nourish competition, cost effectiveness and efficiency.

To encourage this individual appetite for informed choice amongst citizens the government has recognised the need to ‘nurture and develop certain psychological characteristics – motivation, self-esteem, confidence, entrepreneurship and self-development’ (Jordan, 2004: 10). These changes not only have implications for traditional welfare values but also the individual’s ability to access services. Those individuals who are ‘disabled and chronically sick people, those with heavy caring

responsibilities, and those with fewest material resources and intellectual endowments' (ibid: 10) struggle in this welfare market environment. Who then does it fall to, to persuade and assist such individuals struggling to survive the requirements of this new welfare, but the social work profession? Social workers are expected to encourage service users to achieve this aspiration of self autonomy, while also to monitor, control and enforce a compliance with welfare reforms (Jordan, 2004). This produces an uncomfortable pressure on the practitioner to cajole service users into meeting the demands of the neoliberal state. This also places a heavy burden on the practitioner who is attempting to find forums to express core social work values and avoid buckling under the internal contradictions inherent in the contemporary social work role. By engaging in doing research that is emancipatory and grapples creatively with these tensions and contradictions the practitioner can make an emancipatory contribution beyond the individual therapeutic relationship.

EMANCIPATORY VALUES IN SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH

Social work research is usually driven by some issue or practical problem that someone wants to solve or understand i.e. it is purposeful in some way – seeking a particular end – and will make a difference to individuals, groups or organisations. Therefore social work research can be a vehicle for change, review, refocus and *empowerment* and can also make a real contribution to resolving the problem(s) we encounter. For social work research to be emancipatory practitioners will have to 'work together' with other parties associated with the social work enterprise to achieve change. These other parties might include employers, service users and carers, colleagues, other professionals and also academic researchers. Together they can ensure the research is properly disseminated to interested parties.

The general features expected if practitioner research is to be emancipatory are:

- an awareness of the situated nature of social work research, acknowledging the uniqueness of the individual;
- an awareness of the 'caring relationship' which has features of attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness;
- an awareness of seeking change in order to empower and search for social justice;
- an awareness of the need to work together with disempowered groups, individuals and communities – in other words, in a collaboration/partnership with the recipients of research.

CONCLUSION

When identifying what is distinctive about social work practice we have emphasised its humanitarian values, being relationship based and committed to the emancipatory principles of promoting social change and enhancing well-being to achieve social justice. These are intrinsically combined with the key roles/purposes of social work as identified by the National Occupational Standards, which involve drawing on a wide range of knowledge from other disciplines and practice expertise to work effectively with individuals, families, carers, groups and communities.

We have explained the concept of basic and applied social research and how the latter captures the applied nature of social work, where social work research emerges from, and reflects, the complexities of the context in which it is used. We have also drawn attention to how the social work community has become increasingly aware of the need to give legitimacy to the wide range of research enquiry that contributes to improving the lives of service users and carers. This includes evidence-based knowledge from a wide range of research sources as well as service user/carer views and practitioner expertise and research. A prerequisite to practitioner research is research mindedness, opening up the channels of enquiry that begin to further explore the interface between individuals and communities. Practitioner research is inevitably more likely to be concerned with a specific situation and context where practice takes place in an attempt to solve problem(s) encountered on a day-to-day basis. It has been argued that with this type of situational research the same professional values that apply to practice also apply to research.

Key points

- The situated nature of social work.
 - The centrality of the 'caring relationship'.
 - An engagement to seek change in order to empower.
 - Working with others in partnership.
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Further Reading

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