NIHR School for Social Care Research, London

Conference May 2012

Getting Real on Methods

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Why do we need research in social work?
We need knowledge because:

- Vulnerable people have the right not to be the ‘victims’ of untested and possibly harmful interventions, however well-intentioned
- Knowledge helps us to identify the right support for those who need it
- Knowledge helps us to use scarce public & voluntary resources most effectively for those who need help
Arrogance in ignoring evidence?

- Clients & families have a right to expect use of best knowledge
- Professionals are responsible for using the best evidence, most effectively to inform their judgements
- Bolitho judgement: professionals claiming that a practice is accepted as proper in defending a claim for negligence must now have a knowledge-based rationale for their view [development of 1957 “Bolam test”]

Bolitho v City & Hackney Health Authority [1998] House of Lords AC232
It is a professional responsibility to:

- Be informed and appropriately confident
- Build skills and knowledge – your own, and those whom you manage and develop
- To contribute to maintaining and improving standards in services
- To fulfil requirements of registration bodies, national professional specifications & QAA subject benchmarks
Contribute to meeting Global Standards for SW Ed & Training

• “Knowledge of social work research and skills in the use of research methods, including ethical use of the various research paradigms, and critical appreciation of the use of research and different sources of knowledge…”

Some research questions

- Is expenditure on ‘prevention’ worthwhile?
- Does family therapy help with mental health problems?
- Do reality orientation programmes improve functioning of older people so that they can live longer independently?
- Is it more effective to treat depression with medication or with counselling (‘psycho-social therapies’)?
- What works in helping people with mental health problems or a disability to find employment?
Types of Questions

- **Effectiveness** of an Intervention
  - E.g. The effect of exercise for people with dementia?
  - mobility, daily living tasks, morbidity, mortality, carer burden

- **Perspectives** on Needs & Care Processes
  - E.g. the views of adults with physical disability on the main barriers to social inclusion?

- **Cost and Cost Effectiveness**

- **Factors** (Causation of a problem)
  - E.g. what ‘causes’ (factors correlate with) mental health difficulties amongst recent immigrants to the country?

- **Decision Making, Prediction of Harm, Prognosis, Assessment inc. validation of Tools...**
Different Kinds of Questions

- **Perspectives**: What do older people think of their experience of hospital discharge arrangements?

- **Outcomes**: What is the effect on likelihood of returning home for at least six months of different hospital discharge arrangements?
Need “a fundamental step change in breadth, depth and quality of the UK research base in social work and social care”

What IS Social work research?

- “Social work research consists of any disciplined empirical or scholarly inquiry (research, evaluation or analysis)... intended wholly or to a significant degree to address the purposes of social work”

- IE how will the study inform social care practice, management, policy or training

Social work or social care?

• In research, generally use the term “social care” in a way comparable to the way the term “health care” is used

• IE as an umbrella term for the range of services, organisations and contexts within which professionals, assistants, administrators, managers, support disciplines etc work to provide social care including social work professional activity

• *For this purpose not drawing a distinction*

• *Social work research informs social care*
Multi-disciplinarity in research?

- Priority: develop multi-disciplinary research
- OR
- **Priority: strengthen social work research to give credibility and professional ownership**
Methods for social work research?

- Do methods *belong to* a ‘discipline’?
  - Eg psychology, sociology, education, nursing

- The choice of most appropriate method depends primarily on the *research question* and *feasibility* and not on the topic or the fact that the method is used by some other discipline
Selection of method

- “I want to use qualitative because the qualitative paradigm is closer to social work paradigms…”
- [= I do not want the hard mental effort of justifying a method to suit the question or learning a new method]
- “…Now what I want to do is to compare A with B…”!!!
Evident in Some Publications!

• “... drawing on case studies, the authors develop the idea of ...”
• = I visited my mate who is doing similar sort of work and we compared notes over a pint of Guinness and neither of us had studied this thoroughly enough to make a decent journal article of what we had done, but we thought that if we threw our thoughts together and wrapped them up with some lubricated philosophical reflections ...
An Efficient Design??

• “We plan to conduct 93 interviews with clients across the geographical area, followed by 57 interviews with social care staff delivering the service ...”

• What is the purpose?

• Why this many interviews?

• How is sample selected?

• Is there a more efficient way?
The Research Cycle (1)

- Deductive research is concerned with rigorously testing hypotheses (theories)
- Hypotheses for testing arise from inductive (usually qualitative) research
- Deductive research often identifies anomalies & gaps for further exploration inductively
The Research Cycle (2)

- Inductive research is concerned with exploring and developing themes that can be built up into theories
- Themes identified become factors for deductive research
- Areas for exploration may arise from deductive research
1) Design or Theoretical Approach

- Cross Sectional Survey
- Qualitative Study (IPA, Grounded Theory, Ethnography, BNIM, Discourse Analysis etc)
- Longitudinal Study
- Experimental Study
- Case Study
- Action Research
- etc
2) Data Collection Tools

- Questionnaires (postal/web)
- Interviews
- Focus Groups
- Data Extraction from files (paper/computer)
- Observation
- Diaries
- Vignettes (case scenarios)
- etc
Case Study

- A case study is an intensive analysis of an individual unit (e.g., an event, person, group, team, organisation) stressing developmental factors in relation to context (Wikipedia)
- Especially if exploratory, unusual, complex or dynamic circumstances
- Useful for describing rare cases, legal precedent, mapping systems (e.g., information with services)
- Useful for ‘practitioner research’
- How generalisable?
- Single case experimental design?
Action Research

- Approximates to a quality improvement process
- May be easier to get ethical approval as QI rather than as “research”!
- *Research and Development funding bodies are usually more interested in funding (generalisable) R than (local) D*
Cross-Sectional Survey Design

- Eg using questionnaire, file data
- To compare or measure difference amongst a population of eg clients, family carers, staff
- To examine the correlation between attributes of the population
- Cross tabulation is fine at MSc level; for PhD and funded research should generally be using tests of significance (ie protocol needs a power calculation)
Longitudinal Surveys

- Studying the same group of subjects at intervals over a period
- + Useful to measure growth & change
- - Slow to produce results
- A strength of British research (uninvaded for 1000 years – good public records!)
  - + potential for identifying risk factors
  - + potential for linking computerised data sets eg census with social work records
Qualitative Approaches

- Explore meanings & perceptions build a new conceptualisation, theory or model that will be useful in our understanding of processes (“what is going on for those taking part ...”)
- PS Sample size ~ “saturation”
- General “thematic analysis” is fine at MSc level; for PhD and funded research should generally be using elements of an identified deeper theoretical approach
Thematic Analysis

IPA:
+ focus on lived experience

Grounded:
+ focus on social (inc. work) processes
+ building a model

Discourse Analysis:
+ how language enacts identity

BNIM:
+ interview structure
Person living alone loses confidence to continue to do so

Person living with family carer who is no longer able or willing to meet needs

Health and social care staff endeavour to maintain person at home by raising confidence or meeting needs through improving informal supports or providing equipment or services.

Older person’s needs met by provision of equipment and range of services at home including home care?

YES: Recommend continuing to live at home

NO: Recommend admission to Institutional care

A model of health and social care professionals’ judgements about whether an older person with increasing needs should remain living at home or enter institutional care

Experimental Design

- What is the effect of a particular intervention in terms of measurable outcomes (including self-report measures)?
- Very lacking in social work in Britain
- Perhaps skewed by REF UoA definitions
- Essential for gaining public funding for interventions by Social Workers
Challenges in experimental studies

1. Defining the intervention (intervention fidelity)
2. Defining outcome measures
3. Balancing external with internal validity
4. Eliminating confounding factors
5. Ethical and legal issues
It can be done!

• There are now over 70 systematic reviews on the Cochrane Collaboration website (www.cochrane.org) of interventions that could be undertaken by Social Workers

• Most of the studies reviewed are randomised controlled studies of effectiveness of the intervention
A few Cochrane Reviews (1)

- Life skills programmes for chronic mental illnesses
- Family therapy for depression
- Problem solving skills for schizophrenia
- Family interventions for bipolar disorder
- Psychosocial treatment for opiate abuse and dependence
- Therapeutic communities for substance related disorder
A few Cochrane Reviews (2)

- Reminiscence therapy for dementia
- Validation therapy for dementia (= Reality Orientation)
- Psychosocial interventions for reducing fatigue during cancer treatment in adults
- Personal assistance for adults (19-64) with physical impairments
- Interventions for treating depression after stroke
- Subjective barriers to prevent wandering of cognitively impaired people
- Non-pharmacological interventions for wandering of people with dementia at home
A few Cochrane Reviews (3)

- Massage and touch for dementia
- Physical activity programmes for people with dementia
- Respite care for people with dementia and their family carers
- Discharge planning from hospital to home
- Interventions for preventing falls in elderly people
- Care home versus hospital and own home environments for rehabilitation of older people
Mixed Methods - *justify*

- **QuaLititative then quaNTitative =**
  - Preliminary study identifies factors to measure
  - Helps determine sample size for significance by indicating range of variable

- **QuaNTitative then quaLitative**
  - Quotations bring numbers to life
  - Increasing use in government reports
  - Useful for audit & service evaluation
Process: Knowledge from Research

- **Need a social work equivalent to medicine development:**
  - Theory - why might it work?
  - Laboratory experiments - does it ever work?
  - Animal experiments – does it work on a living creature where there is no threat to humans?
  - Tests on healthy volunteers - safety
  - Tests on those with the illness – effectiveness
  - Post-approval reporting – side effects in the general population including co-morbidities
For example
- Methods for studying decisions
A Decision Model

IN (1) – client, family and community data

IN (2) – knowledge, skills, values of decision makers

IN (3) – organisation systems, policies, standards, culture

OUT – result of decision
QUIZ: what method for...?

- How do the characteristics of the decision makers correlate with decisions made?
- What cognitive processes do decision makers use?
- What influence do organisational factors have on decisions?
- How do client factors influence decisions?
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Getting Real on Methods

*nearly* THE END

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www.ulster.ac.uk/staff/bj.taylor.html

PS – a wee advert  >>>>
Coming soon... and also…>

- Contains 7 chapters each devoted to a different aspect of social work research, addressing recent developments and current issues
Decisions, Assessment, Risk and Evidence in Social Work (DARE)

- Monday 2nd & Tuesday 3rd July 2012
- Templeton Hotel, Templepatrick, Northern Ireland (convenient to Belfast International Airport)

Plenary Speakers:

- Professor Hazel Kemshall, De Montfort University, Leicester who has published widely on risk assessment and management with adult client groups including criminal justice
- Professor Aron Shlonsky, University of Toronto who has published widely on risk assessment and predicting harm in child welfare, and on evidence based practice in social work

- www.socsci.ulster.ac.uk/irss/dare2012/index.html