
An Article in the Study “Research and Social Work in Urban Areas. Evaluation of Models of co-operation between research and practice”.

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Setting the scene

This paper is a case study of a research and development project that was carried out at the Heikki Waris Institute between 2005 and 2007. The Heikki Waris Institute is a nexus of social work practice, research and education. The Institute is a collaborative network between the University of Helsinki and the municipalities in the metropolitan area. The Institute is working under the auspices of the city of Helsinki’s Social Services Department. The University has allocated to the Institute fifty percent of a professorship and a lecturer, Helsinki SSD six social worker-researchers, and Espoo, Kauniainen and Vantaa (other cities of the area) fifty percent of a professorship. In principle, the idea of a new project will be presented in and approved by the steering committee of the Institute and afterwards, the project will be entrusted to the researcher, the professor and the head of the Institute. The main idea of the Institute is to strengthen context-related knowledge of social work. Social workers from different branches of the social work sector, mainly from child protection and social work with adults, have engaged the research projects for two years. Every social worker has the responsibility to contribute to the collective pursuit of developing the concept of practice research and to participate in the tuition of new social work students.

The research was initiated around the time we were keenly trying to find a way to do research differently. That is why we consider this project to be a good example to demonstrate that. There are two different approaches regarding the alternative story. On the one hand, our empirical case is based on the book The alternative story – what is meant by transformative social work? (Koskinen 2007). On the other hand, we described a kind of meta-story about the first steps into our journey to develop a new approach to social work research, that we have started to call”practice research” (Satka et al., 2005).

At the beginning of 2005, Helsinki SSD was going through a huge organisational change. SSD is the biggest employer in Finland, with 11,000 employees. Social services were organised according to the life cycle model; the objective was, however, to gain economical savings by merging smaller units to bigger ones. Many employees were moved from one task to another, mostly team leaders and other people in higher positions in the management. In field work as well, the tasks were rearranged and divided in a new way between social workers (qualified through universities) and social care workers (qualified through polytechnics). The result was that the personnel got upset
and frustrated. According to a new strategy of the SSD, the target of social work with adults was concerned with empowerment and with the reinstatement of service users into the working life. This activation policy was organised in order to prioritise service users into segments. Social workers had to concentrate on young adults and the somewhat older people who were expected to be employed after some rehabilitating activities. Social care workers had to concentrate on caring for people who were not suitable for the labour market, but who were not allowed to receive a pension either. The SSD needed more information on how social work processes involving adults should be arranged and how they could be more effective. This brought to light the urgent need for new perspectives and a deeper understanding of the mechanisms to obtain social changes. An activation policy was set up using the concept of transformative social work with service users. When trying to conceptualise transformative social work, the project was touching the fundamental grounds of social work itself. The term ‘transformative’ is not new; in Swedish it called ‘förändringsarbete’ (Swedner, 1979). The Finnish social work system has adopted a lot of terminology from Swedish and English contexts. The objective of the project was to give a new and lively meaning to this old-fashioned term.

While planning the project the professor and the head of the Institute were hesitant to the close connections and practical expectations that were linked to the project by the management in SSD. It was clear that the project should serve the interests of the administration and the management. But the management also wanted to see the project realized by a team and not by one single researcher, something we in the Institute all agreed on. This team had to engage to the research and to the development project. A practice-based research design was constructed in the proposal of the procedure.

**Research process**

Anna-Kaisa Koskinen (at present Tukiala), a young social worker, was hired for the project. During a few years, she had been working as a practitioner in the team that was supposed to carry out the project. That particular social services centre (Southern Centre) was known to have some innovative and development-minded social workers (e.g. the personnel had been trained in narrative therapy for social work). The team had just been merged with another team that was not that interested in new approaches. The project worker had difficulties in finding enough recognition for her position as a team developer in both teams. She also struggled to get the teams to work together for the benefit of the project. Some more experienced practitioners made clear that they had had enough of the overwhelming changes and endless project life that they continuously had to deal with. They were also very sceptical and untrusting towards the strategy of the SSD. At that stage, it was clear at the Institute that there was an urgent need to arrange a meeting with the teams. The professor and the head of the Institute used their authority to make sure the reluctant teams supported and participated to the project. The key topics were the following: what is meant by transformative social work? Is social work harnessed to change the way people think or live, or does it strive for better living conditions? The topics of the first discussions were the ethics of social work; the practitioners felt these ethics were thrown away in activation endeavours. During the first winter, there were many field meetings between two teams and two professional groups, social workers and social care workers.
The top of the organisation still supported Koskinen, the project worker, strongly. The director of SSD was keen on following the project; she was almost its godmother, and at the time, she also was the chair of the steering committee of the Institute. An accompanying committee was created; the participants came from management positions, university, the Institute, and also included two senior colleagues. It was quite self-evident to form an accompanying committee, because in the former project, we discovered the significance of that kind of group. The function of the committee was to support the researcher, and it succeeded quite well in doing that. However, at the beginning, there was no exact manuscript or even a plan for the project. But somehow, it was evident that the workers and the clients were involved closely from the very start. Because there was no strict plan, it was not necessary to change it in the course of the proceedings. This kind of experiment was quite demanding for the researcher.

Some of the social workers formed a `developing group´, supporting the project worker. With them, she started planning the research design. The research and development design was comprised so that the knowledge production was closely connected to the service delivery level and so that the practitioners were constantly aware of the process. They were participating in all phases, especially in establishing the research problem. It required flexibility, patience and continuous dialogue that sometimes even lead to frustration. It was extremely important for researchers to listen to the field workers, but in a way that could still keep their own researcher´s perspective. Having this kind of pilot group is essential to our way of research. In the Institute, we have tried to construct a model that presents researchers as social workers and social workers as researchers.

The project worker also participated in the service users´ case work and service users´ groups. She wrote field notes, observed and interviewed at the same time.

The process was set up so that the researcher was periodically in the field working with her colleagues. Afterwards, she held a withdrawing session at the Institute in order to conceptualise and write down her ideas. Evidence was given to the team as feedback for further analysis. In every round of the development spiral, the process was enriched by relevant theoretical and research literature. During the analysis phase, the researcher´s role was emphasized more strongly. Later, in the interpretations phase, the practitioners were participating more actively again; they were checking the results. Their role was to be critical readers and reflectors. The last six months were mainly reserved to writing the report.

Afterwards, we can say that the length of the period in the field should have been considered more thoroughly in advance, especially at times when attraction to the field was at its highest. Researchers tend to find it easier to collect data and spend days in the field than to work systematically and to concentrate on analysing the data in the `ivory tower´, and to endure the slowness of the abstract process which may also test the self-confidence of the researcher. At that stage, the role of an experienced supervisor is important.

In the project, the concept of transformative social work has been approached from different angles. On the one hand, there were age-specific working models for adult service users; the youngsters with mental or addiction problems and the long-term unemployed were treated differently. On the other hand, the working methods were divided into individual casework, group work and work on a structural level. Integrating service users into the project was consciously designed from the beginning. A café called `Corner´ was set up for the young and marginalized service users who had no place to go, a photography club called `Camera Obscura´ was created to illustrate the eve-
ryday life of both the service users and the social workers. In order to do social reporting by using photography, exhibitions were arranged (the Railway station in Helsinki, Conference in Groningen, Conference of the Social Worker’s Union, the press, etc). The traditional case work was rearranged so that the helping process was divided into three new phases inspired by the narrative therapy training:

1. Negotiation: intensive and active listening to the service user’s perspective;
2. Offering options: a systematic work following a forethought;
3. Making the new story visible: mutual cooperation and ending the process.

The project was shedding light onto the continuum, between research and development; there is no clear-cut line between them. This created a totally new kind of research design. The project was a very good example of the combination of all focal dimensions we understand to be part of the concept of practice research: research, practice development and education. One student’s master’s thesis had a topic that was related to the project. In the process, a new kind of partnership was set up with the researcher, the practitioners and the service users. By the end of the project, the service users expressed to have been empowered in different ways, although it was not meant to be a service users’ participation project. The aim was more implicit: empower the practitioners to meet the service users` in a better way. After the project was finished, practitioners and service users presented the project together on different occasions. This kind of working method is not about doing research as such, but about creating a cultural milieu that allows practice research to happen.

Looking back

The `customer`, the SSD, defined the main idea as follows: what should be done?. However, the content and its multifarious details were specified together with the researcher, the network and the co-researchers into the following question: how we will do it?. The head of the Institute and the professor were also helping to define the objectives and the roles. The search for mutual advantages from different interests is an undercurrent that gives flavour to the life of the Institute. In this project, and in many others, we have made good use of the idea of boundary work formulated by Etienne Wenger (1998). In a true dialogical process, you have to accept that when approaching the boundary zone, neither of the partners can dictate its own objectives. Instead, you need to be patiently seeking for mutual understanding and you have to negotiate about the goals. Afterwards, while reflecting the whole project, it has become clear to us that we could have succeeded better in doing the boundary work.

The deep-going organisational change caused frictions in this particular project. The management articulated expectations and hopes that were in discrepancy with the project’s `own` objectives. The expectations towards the project were massive. All the agents surrounding the project found themselves in a position in which they were supposed to solve almost every acute problem the organisational change had evoked. One of the issues that came up, was dealing with the work division between social workers and social care workers. The researcher found it hard to keep enough distance to the management of the organisation. The attraction by the other social workers in the team was also sometimes that strong that it needed a lot of balancing and taking distance from the practice in order to secure the realisation of the research. The support that was supposed to
be given to the researcher, was not enough. Doing research closely related to the field between the field and the management, was new and experiences were few.

The management operated separately and not very transparently. The accompanying committee was not actively involved; one member of the committee was representing the management, but the committee’s work concentrated mainly on the contents of the project. When we recall the situation, there should have been more discussions and argumentation for and against the different objectives, but somehow, that had not appeared on the agenda. We could hypothesize that there was some kind of unconscious aversion towards `wicked´ items, and that there was another kind of support for the researcher.

The researcher often consulted the professor with methodological questions. The professor was engaged right from the beginning, but the design was so practice-based and empirical that the researcher’s own knowledge on research procedures was considered to be enough. Because in Finland, our educational system for social workers guarantees research skills for all social workers, it is not crucial that an academic researcher is involved when making decisions that concern the collection of data and analysis. Academic support becomes more important afterwards, as a dialogue together with the development ideas in the field and the conceptualisations and theory-making in the final phase of the process. Intertextuality and discussion with other studies came along with the process (Kristeva, 1969;1980).

When the project was taking its course, the researchers in the Institute were also concentrating very consciously on the conceptualisation of practice research. Practice research in social work knowledge production is practice-based and practice-oriented. The main focus is directed towards practice development, and more conscious use of social work methods and instruments. Practice research was seen neither as an administrative inquiry nor as an academic pursuit; it uses social theory and well-known and recognized research methods, but its goal is to improve social work practice. The criterion of adequacy makes up its relevance for the field work. The ideas of pragmatism, action research and ethnography are near to the concept.

We also intensely discussed the methodological innovations we did in all of our research projects. Although the starting point of the projects was that they had to be relevant for practice, we were thinking about the scientific soundness too. We were aware of being discriminated and criticized for doing second-class research that did not benefit social work research; on the contrary it could even be harmful. Still, we were enthusiastically exploring and seeking new ways of doing research. The question was: what are the similarities and differences in relation to the traditional way of doing research? The project researcher was one of the key figures contributing to the agenda. In the project, the team emphasized the new kind on relationship between the research subject and the research object, the focus. Echoes of those discussions were heard in the Institute. We wanted to question some traditional presuppositions of good research practices. Social workers are more or less explicitly scrutinizing their own work. For instance, we talked about the Mertonian Norms of Science, and especially the norm disinterestedness (objectivity) evoked many critical discussions. Traditionally, a researcher is supposed to be an independent and value-free actor. This means that there is a clear difference between the subject and the object. All kinds of dependences have been excluded or at least minimized. The influence of the researcher has been seen as distorted and downright harmful. The researchers did not want to `rise above´ the research `focus´and did not want to be free of the personal engagement of helping people by doing research. By involving dif-
different ways to the everyday life of social workers and service users, they were `contaminating’ the research scene (McLaughlin, 2007:37). It was some kind of `flow’ of experience as a whole.

The data-collecting phase was spontaneous, process-like and open to all participants. In the analysis phase, the methodological procedures were much stricter. The most important criterion for this kind of research was the reflective thinking procedure, done by the researcher herself. That in itself is, however, not enough. The idea is to involve co-researchers from academic, practice and/or service user circles. This is the challenge we are taking on in our new projects. Part of the problem of service users will be discussed (e.g. how to involve service users?). The discussion about subject and object in the research process has remained a permanent topic at the Institute.

After the project was finished, the social worker went back to field work for two years. Now, the researcher/social worker has started up a new project that focuses on social reporting. The project is based on the ideas of the previous research. In this new project, the people involved are partially the same, but the development network is extended, as more people are involved in different teams.

The project has helped us to understand that the mutual benefit of common knowledge/data production is a more important motivation for cooperation in the projects than just the creation of personal contacts. Practitioners and service users are really interested in producing knowledge that will be conceptualized and transformed to other contexts, even scientific ones. We emphasize also that the organisation culture has to be development-minded, permissive and encouraging (understanding even the faults). In this particular project, there were no scientific motives or ambitions, although all the elements for a good academic research were present. It is possible to do research exterior to university, and to do it differently; however, it is not easy.
Bibliography


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