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Practice Research Methods in Social Work: Processes, Applications and Implications for Social Service Organisations

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Title = Practice Research Methods in Social Work: Processes, Applications, and Implications for Social Service Organisations

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Abstract

Although social work research is commonly rooted within social service settings, it can be difficult for social work researchers and practitioners to develop and sustain participatory studies that specifically promote knowledge sharing and service improvement involving organisational practice. One participatory approach is practice research, which involves social work researchers and practitioners collaborating to define, understand, and try to improve the delivery of health and social care services and organisational structures and processes. The two goals of this commentary are to introduce essential methods and approaches to practice research and to identify points of connection involving practice research and social service organisational studies. Our specific focus on practice research in statutory, voluntary, and private social service organisations reflects efforts to connect practice, theory, and qualitative and quantitative research methods to develop and share organisationally-situated knowledge.

Keywords: management; practice research; service delivery; social service organisations; social work research.

Teaser Text

Practice research occurs when social work researchers and practitioners work together to improve how social service organisations structure and deliver care. Our paper describes how to successfully implement a practice research approach in social work agency settings. We identify ways to help managers, frontline staff, and service users recognize their different roles and interests within social service organisations. We also explain how practice researchers and agency partners collaboratively seek to support learning and promote knowledge sharing. After

we provide a review of major frameworks and common processes of practice research, we offer examples of practice research studies in different types of social service organisations, and conclude with recommendations for co-facilitating practice research studies.

This paper offers an overview of practice research that focuses on the delivery of social work services in social service organisations. Practice research is a participatory method used by researchers to address the needs of vulnerable populations, notably poor communities of color, who receive health and social care services in formal organisational settings. Practice research (PR) is "a knowledge development process that focuses primarily on the roles of the service provider, service user, and the service researcher who all participate in defining the research questions and interpreting the findings" (Fisher et al., 2016). PR therefore seeks to improve social work and other social services and promote the well-being of service users; and functions as a collaborative process that minimizes power differentials between participants (Austin, 2020).

The macro-organisational context of PR studies includes concerns of managerialism amidst neoliberalism, involving increased professionalisation, the use of evidence-based practices, and the structuring of service programs around carefully defined performance measures in response to administrative and policy requirements (Harlow et al., 2013; Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012; Yan et al., 2017). The meso-organisational context of PR studies involves the development and sustainment of organisational spaces for reflection and sharing that support practitioner engagement in evidence-informed practice (Brandt, Roose, & Verschelden, 2020; Carnochan et al., 2017). The immediate context for PR is the bureaucratic encounters that involve staff and service users as well as practitioner use of research to promote organisational learning (Austin & Carnochan, 2020). With its specific focus on statutory, voluntary, and private social service organisations, PR aims to strengthen the collaborative capacity of practitioners and researchers to support service improvement and responsiveness to the perspectives of service users (capturing the expertise of experience).

In order to describe PR within organisations providing health and social care services, our paper is divided into four sections. First, we provide a brief introduction to PR to characterize its core elements. We also provide a brief review of the major approaches to PR, distinguishing between PR frameworks at different levels of practice and in different geographic contexts. We then identify how service users can benefit from PR. Second, we identify how PR processes can be integrated within social service organisational analysis, focusing in particular on how practice researchers and their agency partners (notably frontline staff and managers) collaboratively seek to improve social service delivery, support organisational learning, and promote interorganisational knowledge sharing. We also summarize PR processes that are based on the core concepts embedded in the *science of the concrete* (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Third, we illustrate the applications of PR for local authorities/counties and voluntary social service organisations with the use of three brief examples featuring methodological and ethical considerations for researchers using PR approaches. Finally, we conclude by identifying implications for social work organisational researchers participating in PR studies and proposing a future research agenda.

What Is Practice Research and Why (and for Whom) Does It Matter?

At its core, PR is a negotiated process involving multiple stakeholders (Uggerhøj, 2011). These stakeholders include statutory, voluntary, and private social service organisations; managers, staff, and service users within the organisation; researchers; and policymakers and community leaders. They all function within the context of intergroup communications, negotiation, and shared learning needed to address the gap between research and practice and support learning across role-based social, cultural, and organisational distances (Austin & Carnochan, 2020).

In order to address this gap, PR involves elements of both practice and research. The elements of practice include: (a) engaging and including diverse types of stakeholders; (b) an effort to rebalance power relationships across organisational contexts, by validating the experiences and expertise of participants at different levels of the organisation; (c) open and frequent conversations to promote dialogue and sustain norms of trust and reciprocity; and (d) an appreciation for the critical role of organisational supports (notably managers) for exploring service innovation (Uggerhoj, 2011).

Essential research elements of PR include the use of quantitative and qualitative data, as well as the reliance on evidence collected within the agency setting. The use of different types of evidence can generate two major research tensions; namely, balancing the breadth (as seen in large organisational surveys and administrative service databases) and depth (e.g., analysis of client case records, in-depth interviews) of research while navigating the tension between research rigor and practice wisdom displayed by practitioners and service users (Julkunen, 2011).

These practice and research elements are integrated into PR studies that evolve in response to ongoing and changing agency needs and priorities. Facilitated group dialogue is used to collaboratively identify practice concerns, conduct research in response to the concerns, and share findings with a focus on assessing current social work practices and identifying opportunities for improvement (Austin, 2020). PR involves power sharing and role shifting through reciprocal learning, as traditionally less-engaged stakeholders explore new roles (e.g., from service user to PR partner); and as managers and researchers reframe their traditional roles (e.g., exploring the emergence of practice-informed management research and research-informed management practice) (Fisher et al., 2016).

Practice Research as an Organisationally-Rooted Participatory Research Methodology

As one of several participatory social science research methods, PR reflects the emphasis of researchers on practice-in-context. In particular, PR shares a number of characteristics with participatory action research and empowerment evaluation. In each method, collaboration with service users and other stakeholder groups is central to identifying basic research questions that relate to practices, programs, and/or policies as expressions of larger institutional forces. Further, these approaches draw on diverse sources of literature, including practice and policy reports as well as academic research studies, to inform research questions. Lastly, collaborative collection and analysis of qualitative and/or quantitative data is carried out by research and practice partners across the three research traditions (Fetterman et al., 2017; Healy, 2001).

However, while PR shares many similarities with participatory action research and program evaluation principles, it also differs in several important ways related to goals, data sources, data interpretation, and the nature of knowledge development and dissemination (see Table 1). For example, a main goal of program evaluation includes the central role of specifying program objectives to inform funder or organisational decision-making in a narrowly defined area (e.g., continue, modify, or eliminate a program). In contrast, PR goals may be much broader, and intended to inform participants' conceptual thinking about current practice or service delivery and create dialogical opportunities without the same emphasis on direct implications for organisational decision-making. Differences also appear in the area of research dissemination. Specifically, program evaluation results are often used to support organisational planning in response to formal funding and policy requirements, and participatory action research is often used to support socio-political action or community change. In comparison, PR focuses more on service and practice improvement as well as the relationship between theory and practice, with the goal of encouraging more research-minded practitioners and more practice-

minded researchers (Saurama & Jullkunen, 2012).

[Table 1 About Here]

Another critical factor that distinguishes PR from other participatory research methods is the connection between social work practice and social service managers. Compared to action research and empowerment evaluation methodologies, PR is more explicitly organisational in understanding how managers, frontline staff, and service users make sense of their diverse roles and often competing statuses. PR is also more attentive to the collaborative interrelationships of service users, frontline agency staff, and managers in their interorganisational and institutional context. Finally, PR demonstrates an awareness of how questions of service delivery reflect the professionalisation of social work and social services vis-à-vis questions of organisational learning (Fisher et al., 2016).

Finally, another key difference between PR and its related methodologies can be found in the relationship of organisationally-situated theories vis-à-vis practice. For practice researchers, considerations of theory-informed practice, and practice-informed theory, are important (Fisher, 2011). The exploration and development of diverse theories (e.g., cultural-historical activity theory; Foot, 2014) helps practice researchers and participants identify shared practice challenges and explore possible solutions. For example, practice researchers can share lessons learned and practice implications of different theories of group-based learning and relational work, so that managers, workers, and service users can determine how each theory enhances shared understanding of service problems and possible solutions (Austin, 2020; Muurinen & Kaarianen, in press).

In sum, PR is explicitly rooted within social service organisations, with a basic goal of collaborating to improve the delivery of health and social care services and organisational

capacity within and between organisations (Austin & Carnochan, 2020). Practice researchers pay close attention to the delivery of frontline services as well as multilevel practice issues relating to managers, staff, and service users.

<u>Practice Research Frameworks</u>

The evolution of PR has reflected theoretical and practical developments. Practice researchers have used person-in-organisation theories of practice in an effort to explain the "everyday actions" (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1241) and "concrete activities" (Barley & Kunda, 2001, p. 76) that capture the relationship between agency-based service providers and service users. Researchers have also proposed ways of enhancing the practical relevance of research that involves social work researchers and practitioners promoting shared learning, with a goal of resolving fundamental service delivery dilemmas (Austin et al., 2014).

In response to these developments, the interrelated streams of PR have been explored in the form of collaboration and negotiation. For example, the foundational perspective of PR invites practitioners and service users to collaboratively identify opportunities to improve social work practices and organisational processes—particularly in response to administrative requirements and statutory mandates (Epstein, 2009; Fook & Gardner, 2007). Similarly, there are opportunities to negotiate across differing approaches and perspectives that practitioners, service users, and researchers bring to the knowledge production process (Uggerhoj, 2011).

Based on the original formulation of PR, Julkunen (2011) developed a typology of PR studies, distinguishing between practitioner-oriented, generative, method-oriented, and democratic models. In the practitioner-oriented model, the practitioner reflectively dialogues with others in order to address pressing practice issues. The generative model involves cycles of agency practice and research designed to connect practical knowledge to action by testing and

evaluating potential practice innovations. The method-oriented model involves the service user, practitioner, and researcher collaboratively developing practice-based knowledge as well as knowledge that can inform theory development and application. Finally, the democratic model focuses specifically on service users, practitioners, researchers, and organisational and system leaders using PR to advocate for practice reforms, thereby connecting PR to policy change (also see Fisher, 2013).

Although scholarship on PR has historically reflected the perspectives of Nordic and U.S. academic institutions and social welfare states, a globally diverse body of PR literature is emerging (Chan & Sim, 2020). This literature demonstrates that different PR studies may reflect different: political, policy, and organisational contexts of social service delivery; research methods; understandings of service user and practitioner involvement and collaboration; and understandings of practice (Sim et al., 2018).

How Can Service Users Benefit from Participating in Practice Research?

Empirical research on benefits accrued by service users when engaging in PR is currently limited. However, preliminary evidence suggests that benefits can be organized in terms of empowerment processes and measurable outcomes built on the service user premise of "nothing about us, without us" (Beresford & McLaughlin, 2020). Such processes invite PR participants to learn how to participate in non-hierarchical relationships that ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion among service users and providers. This partnership relationship often involves joint problem-solving as well as developing a critical consciousness leading to an alliance through the articulation of shared and different needs and challenges (Fook & Gardner, 2007). Engaging in this process can help service users gain a greater understanding of the contextualized nature of social problems they face.

Another key benefit of participating in PR involves expanding the capacities of service users to amplify their own voices and assume the position of representing the perspectives of peer-colleagues (Austin & Carnochan, 2020). Service users may advocate internally (in response to management directives) and externally (in response to policy dicta and fiscal requirements). As they engage in advocacy efforts, service users can also increase their skills in identifying and accessing community resources (e.g., job training programs that enhance employability). The process of engaging in humanizing power-sharing relationships using dialogical communications between service users, staff, and managers can thus involve a shared search for community resources and organisational funding needed to maintain service delivery at needed levels (Ramon et al., 2019).

The benefits of service user involvement do not necessarily lead to major organisational changes when the focus is on modifying or improving direct service or managerial practice. However, service user involvement can lead to both changes in practice as well as changes in organisational policies and structures (Julkunen, 2011; Fisher, 2013). Through involvement in PR, service users can also participate in training and other learning-oriented events as co-equals with staff and other community stakeholders. These opportunities can involve service users playing critical roles of knowledge navigation and translation within social service organisational contexts, particularly where service user perspectives are needed to translate deep knowledge of program and policy gaps to staff, managers, and policymakers (Muurinen & Kaarianen, in press). Such PR efforts can help spur organisational change and the development of new approaches to system transformation. For service users, skills acquired through participation in PR can also be leveraged in future advocacy efforts or employment opportunities (e.g., serving as a consultant or

staff member based on their expertise of experience with a particular social issue) (Voronka & Grant, 2021).

In summary, some of the major benefits derived from service user involvement have been documented (Natland & Celik, 2015) by noting the transition of service user from functioning with a sense of shame or trauma to one of pride and empowerment, in addition to learning how services can be evaluated and improved based on timely and strategic input from service users. A major limitation related to service user involvement could be that their involvement in which their service user experiences are contextualized or revisited could result in being retraumatized (e.g., reliving the experiences of being homeless, incarcerated, unemployed, physically disabled, or mentally disabled), especially when acquiring the "big picture understanding" of the pervasiveness of social problems in the larger society (Muller & Pihl-Thingvad, 2020).

The next section identifies common approaches for practice researchers to collaborate with agency-based practitioners and managers in support of service user preferences.

Integrating Practice Research Processes into Social Service Organisational Analysis

PR processes reflect the evolving interests of social service organisational researchers and practitioners, as seen in their concerns with the formal delivery of contract-based public services, with specific focus on service access and equity considerations (Jindra et al., 2020). In a similar way, PR processes capture the concerns of managerialism as a response to neoliberalism and austerity, especially in European, Australian, and Asian social welfare contexts (Alexander & Fernandez, 2021; Yan et al., 2017). Underlying these interests is an abiding focus on studies that validate and feature the perspectives of service users and service providers (Harlow et al., 2013; Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012). These studies reflect decades of organisational research, as seen in Table 2 (for a review, see Austin & Carnochan, 2020). The overarching effort is to

democratize knowledge sharing within social service organisational settings by identifying complementary ways for service users, practitioners, researchers, and advocates to contribute to social service delivery.

[Table 2 About Here]

For social service organisational scholars, PR processes support exploratory, explanatory, and interventive research aims. In exploratory research, PR is used to identify the diverse organisational experiences of service users and service providers (Austin, 2020). These exploratory studies are analogous to participatory needs assessments. In contrast, explanatory PR examines connections between service, program, or policy logics, and identifies broken or missing logics reflecting needed resources (notably, time, funding, and training). For example, the identification of gaps between needs and services often reflects historically and/or currently unaddressed service needs (as seen by service users), program needs (as perceived by frontline staff), and organisational learning and policy implementation needs (as viewed by agency leaders) (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012; Spitzmueller, 2018). Finally, PR can support intervention studies that involve the co-design, co-development, refinement, and sharing of new practices within programs (e.g., practical innovations that benefit service users and frontline workers) (Schalock et al., 2014).

PR-based social service studies can be viewed from the perspectives of the *science of the concrete* ("SOC") (Flyvbjerg, 2001) that invites researchers to propose person-oriented research questions related to those individuals and groups most impacted by the issues at hand. The SOC also asks researchers to focus on small practices that support big events or processes by exploring everyday activities and their contexts that connect people and their organisational milieu. Finally, the SOC involves engaging multiple stakeholders while reducing power

differentials. In PR, managers are viewed as essential linchpins who facilitate shared learning, by validating the multiple organisational identities of participants.

Although social service organisational research based on the SOC can take many forms, it ordinarily begins with question formulation around one or more practical problems or concerns. As elucidated by Austin and Carnochan (2020), PR questions can take a variety of forms but generally involve three fundamental questions: How can we improve social services and, more broadly, enhance opportunities for health and social care?; How can we amplify the voices of service users?; and, How can we sustain small innovations and promising practices in social work, particularly in different organisational and policy settings? Jointly defining PR questions involves validating the perspectives of each type of participant. Questions derived from the perspectives of service users and staff require considerable outreach in order to engage and amplify service user and practitioner voices (e.g., via service user- and staff-led meetings) (Uggerhoj, 2011).

In comparison, organisational and policy-focused research questions are often formulated by senior management in regards to intra-organisational issues (e.g., cross-departmental coordination and collaboration) and interorganisational issues (e.g., contracting and implementation challenges involving statutory, voluntary, and private social service organisations) (Fisher, 2013). Negotiating among the diverse types of research questions involves explaining why the questions are relevant for different groups, how each envisioned research study can support mutually beneficial goals, and what benefits and challenges might arise as a result.

Other key concepts of the SOC that support PR studies include collaboration and engagement with partners based on persistent communication, representation of diverse

memberships, fostering inclusiveness, engaging in difficult conversations, and consensus building. Other needed skills involve managing critical tensions, often relating to the responsibilities and expectations of different PR stakeholders. Additional tensions reflect the evolving demands of the organisation vis-à-vis its institutional environment. These tensions need to be addressed through shared dialogue in PR teams (Julkunen, 2011).

As the PR team coalesces, it informs research design, data collection, data interpretation, and research dissemination and utilisation in unique ways (Austin, 2020). For example, the more traditional use of literature reviews is to ensure that the research questions and study design are informed by the latest peer-reviewed research studies, by reflecting their findings, key concepts, research methods, and implications for future research. In comparison, building on existing knowledge in PR may also involve review of organisational documents, grey literatures, and the practice wisdom of practitioners and service users (Austin & Carnochan, 2020).

In PR, literature reviews can also become ends in themselves. For example, PR-informed literature reviews can assist in reframing service processes (i.e., identifying how service users and practitioners understand the theories of action underlying service logic models); help staff to become more evidence-informed by reflecting on diverse practice literatures; and inform managerial decision-making processes. Similarly, in contrast to the traditional scholarly approach of disseminating research findings via peer-reviewed publications in academic journals, practice researchers also share findings directly with service providers and service users in the form of reports and presentations so that practice partners can identify novel applications and more effective approaches to practice.

Applications of Practice Research for Social Service Organisations

This section provides three brief examples of PR-based organisational studies. The

institutional context of the examples reflects a longstanding PR center located in a U.S. public research university, a regional consortium of county organisations that administer statutorily required social services, and a regional consortium of nonprofit organisations that provide voluntary social services. Regionalisation of PR efforts is not uncommon, particularly when organized through academic-practice partnerships involving research, education and training, and service functions (often in metropolitan areas).

PR centers serve as network hubs for developing service, workforce, and program studies in response to institutional and local demands (e.g., new policy implementation requirements impacting service delivery). They share PR-based knowledge in order to advocate with local and regional policy and practice bodies, and work to promote mutual support and shared leadership among social service organisations. From the social service organisational perspective, consortium membership and affiliation with the PR center can advance knowledge development and utilisation that might not otherwise be possible due to considerations of cost, research capacity, or timing (Schalock et al., 2014). While some PR centers are university-based (Austin et al., 1999), others are located in public settings (e.g., ministries of health and social services) (Muurinen & Kaarianen, in press). However, the general purpose of PR centers is similar to centers providing applied evaluation and technical assistance.

For over 25 years, the PR center from which the following examples are drawn has supported collaborative, usable knowledge related to the management and improvement of social work services across the public and nonprofit social service sectors (Austin, 2018). Its studies have involved research at the frontline, organisational, and interorganisational levels, ranging from qualitative agency-based case studies to large quantitative surveys that span public and nonprofit organisations across the region. The studies have supported the collection and sharing

of three types of research evidence as noted by Nutley and colleagues (2007). The first type relates to conceptual evidence that is often drawn from exploratory PR studies, that are designed to support future applications. The second type includes persuasive research evidence that often involves explanatory PR, and is used to advocate (within organisations) and externally (notably, with policymakers, funders, and civic leaders). And the third type involves instrumental evidence that often relates to explanatory or interventive PR that is designed to support practice improvements (notably in response to identified service and training needs).

To illustrate some of these PR-informed studies of service delivery, we note the purpose of each study, and then summarize its use by study partners and the consortia of local authorities/counties and nonprofit social service organisations. As each study evolved, practice researchers attended to the perspectives of organisational partners through persistent communications, relational work centered in interpersonal and small group meetings, managing tensions in response to ongoing and new challenges, and celebrating successes.

The first example involved an exploration of the attributes and sustainability of pioneering nonprofit social service organisations through in-depth case histories (Austin, 2013) and focused on the organisational developmental needs of long-serving nonprofits. The study partners and regional consortium of nonprofit social service organisations expressed significant interest in findings, leading to requests for self-assessment-based organisational and management support tools designed to promote frontline service improvement.

The second example was a survey-based study of how frontline and management practitioners across 11 county-based public social service organisations engaged in evidence-informed practice. The quantitative aspect of the study noted the importance of organisational roles and resources, and individual practitioner attitudes towards practice and innovation, in

supporting different levels of evidence use (McBeath et al., 2015). The qualitative component of the study identified the specific cognitive, interactive, action, and compliance dimensions of evidence-informed practice that are embedded within agency-based social and organisational practices and priorities (Carnochan et al., 2017). This explanatory study resulted in the provision of recommendations to the 11 county social service organisations, focused on identifying needed resources and opportunities for peer sharing and social support.

The third example involved a mixed methods study examining the collaborative nature of nonprofit contracting amidst technical challenges that reflect the underlying complexity of social service delivery. Qualitative, comparative case study analysis was used to explore the multiple dimensions of relational contracting between nonprofit and county social service organisations in three counties (McBeath et al., 2017). The quantitative component of the study entailed surveying nonprofit and county social service organisations across different counties to assess the importance of cross-sector communications, trust-building, and shared client accountability for collaborative contracting and social service outcome achievement (Carnochan et al., 2019; Chuang et al., 2020). Study findings identified the need for public-nonprofit social service contracting support structures and processes, including: regularly scheduled cross-sector meetings to identify emergent needs and promising service approaches; and cross-sector training and technical assistance to promote collaborative contracting and improved service outcomes.

Each example involved engagement with agency directors, division heads, senior managers, and line staff. In each study, the research design and reporting process was iterative between levels, in support of facilitating communication on broadly relevant topics involving diverse staff groups. Overall, these and other studies from the specific PR center have regularly featured critical information exchange sessions, involving agency staff presentations of local

practices as well as research staff presentations of research syntheses, and in which the audience is cross-division and multi-level.

Methodological and Ethical Considerations for Practice Research-based Organisational Analysis

PR methods complement social service organisational research methodologies in at least two ways. First, PR offers an alternative to traditional organisational research that relies on quantitative analysis of elite surveys (notably agency directors). In comparison, PR studies incorporate diverse types of data (e.g., use of agency documents, interviews, focus groups, surveys) and the perspectives of individuals at different levels of analysis (including administrators and managers, frontline staff, and service users). These qualitative and quantitative data collection methods are intended to address common source bias and validity concerns. Mixed methods PR studies therefore need to anticipate concerns about the perceived trustworthiness, credibility, confirmability, and dependability of the data (e.g., by pilot testing survey instruments and interview guides). [For a summative review concerning how to promote the rigor and relevance of PR studies, see Austin & Carnochan, 2020, pp. 183-189].

Second, PR provides a balanced response to the understanding of researchers as either directing and managing the research process, or serving in subsidiary roles. In comparison, PR is a participatory process in which the research interests and perspectives of the researchers and practitioners are actively negotiated, and often reflect multiple objectives (Fisher et al., 2016). As noted previously, these include instrumental objectives (e.g., to use PR to enhance understanding of services and programs, and/or to support organisational learning) along with process and interactional objectives (e.g., to support PR-based participation and collaboration). Among the most challenging aspects embedded in negotiations are values-based objectives that are designed

to enhance equity and empowerment through PR projects.

Practice researchers therefore need to be prepared to take on co-facilitative roles on issues ranging from research question formulation to the interpretation, use, and wider sharing of PR findings in organisations and broader contexts. These co-roles are essential for addressing group dynamics and cross-sector challenges, celebrating shared wins, and fostering inclusiveness and active dialogue. Working through these critical tensions depends on power sharing—particularly for practice researchers and senior agency staff vis-à-vis frontline staff and service users—and reflects key elements of intergroup dialogue amidst difference (Austin, 2020).

While there is a wide range of ethical issues associated with PR that draws heavily from social science research, some of the more prominent issues include service user and case record confidentiality, final report contributor equity, teamwork accountability derived from participatory decision-making in search of consensus, and adherence to data source protocols. The theme of confidentiality is wide ranging. It includes respecting the confidential nature of service user information collected as part of a PR project. It also involves the confidential discussions among research team members, who can include service users and staff. A final concern relates to the ethics of the timely reporting of the research to service users, other agency stakeholders, and the larger community (e.g., elected officials, other organisations, and researchers). In essence, PR involves the various ethical views of three different communities; namely, the research community, the service provider community, and the service user community. The convergence of these three perspectives can be challenging for the various participants to both understand and accept.

These methodological and ethical considerations lead to four suggestions for social service organisational researchers when co-facilitating PR studies to enhance their ability to

anticipate common PR challenges. First, PR presents communication-based coordination challenges (involving questions of trust, ethical dilemmas, and available expertise), as practice and research partners may need to dialogue regularly amidst already-demanding work schedules. Second, partners may face changing and/or limited capacity for and engagement with PR, particularly as practice and research roles and priorities evolve. Third, navigating PR projects requires attending to differing perspectives on the time frame to generate research results, viewed as fast by university standards and slow by agency standards. Fourth, practice researchers need to demonstrate the capacity to convert research implications into practical recommendations for organisational change given the limited experience with the unique aspects of organisational cultures that differ across participating agencies and research institutions. Underscoring these suggestions is the importance of practice researchers and agency partners remaining flexible with respect to different role-based expectations and university vs. agency-based priorities.

Implications and an Agenda for Social Work Researchers

We conclude with two major recommendations for social work researchers and practitioners in the social service organisational milieu. First, developing, maintaining, and supporting collaborative, trust-based *relationships* is essential for PR studies. Relationship-building involves recognizing mutually beneficial capabilities and shared objectives across different organisational roles (e.g., service users, staff, and managers within the agency, and practice-informed researchers inside and outside the agency) to advance collaborative planning. Supporting relationships can involve power-sharing to promote mutual respect and trust as well as social support, particularly amidst the complex dynamics of PR teams. Sustaining relationships calls for transparent information-sharing, consistent communication to address evolving practice and research dilemmas, and reciprocal risk-taking that respects the negotiated

boundaries of various partners. Finally, sustained relationships often require continuous boundary spanning within the organisation and between agency and university partners.

For productive PR relationships to evolve, an ongoing assessment of practice and research relationships includes monitoring evolving organisational and community contexts, revisiting shared goals in light of changes, and managing PR project expectations in response to evolving stakeholder needs and ethical challenges. Relational work is perhaps the most essential dimension of collaborative, participatory research with social service organisational partners.

Second, for practice researchers and agency-based practitioners, the balancing of diverse relational commitments requires sustained *self-reflection*. Self-reflection involves considering the tensions between the breadth and depth possible in empirical research as well as between the commitment to peer-reviewed empirical research and the investment in practice-based research (e.g., grey literatures, agency statistics, practice wisdom). Self-reflection also relates to addressing the different expectations and emphases of service users, staff, managers, and other agency stakeholders as well as the different collaborative roles that researchers are required to play when they are invited to step up as co-leaders or step back (e.g., comfortably serving as a research consultant), depending on the specific needs of the research team in its organisational context. These reflexive considerations are centered in an ethos of collaboratively improving service delivery to enhance service user well-being.

While reflecting on identified tensions is a critical aspect of the efforts of practice researchers in relationship with agency-based partners, it is also essential for researchers located in university-based settings. Self-reflection on these tensions can involve deeper questions of how to: (a) reconcile the often-competing expectations of one's academic home, one's social service organisational partners, and one's role as a scholar-researcher; and (b) reframe these

competing expectations into complementary aims. Regular dialogue involving practice and research partners concerning these two issues can involve iterative processes of shared debriefing, deconstructing, and redefining key needs. The overall goal is to find win-wins that benefit the university, agency, and oneself in carrying out research and disseminating practical knowledge in community-based organisational settings.

In order to identify mutually beneficial PR opportunities for social service organisational researchers, we propose a research agenda in the form of 10 questions designed to promote speculation and dialogue as illustrated in Table 3. The array of questions captures the tensions related to the different ways that practice researchers: engage and consider collaborating with possible agency partners; transition from the development of participatory research studies to their dissemination in complex agency contexts; and sustain participatory studies in larger institutional settings. The questions seek to capture a lifecycle of participatory research projects at different stages of organisational development and across different contexts.

[Table 3 About Here]

In summary, PR is a participatory, organisationally-focused approach that combines the search for practice-relevant knowledge with qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to enhance services and promote organisational improvement in diverse contexts. PR therefore complements participatory methodologies as well as other applied social science methods used in social service organisational analysis. The future challenges include promoting more participatory studies of social service organisations as well as articulating additional perspectives on PR processes, applications, and implications.

Table 1. Comparing Practice Research with Other Research Frameworks*

	Frameworks		
Methods	**Community-based participatory action research (PAR) -- -- address social problem**	**Program evaluation (PE) & intervention research (IR) -- outcomes, outputs, & return on investment**	**Organisationally-based practice research (PR) -- improve practices and service delivery**
Framing & negotiating the development of research questions	Community population or geographic area	Decision-oriented or objectives-oriented	Organisation's service providers, service users, managers & policy makers
Identifying sources of literature & practice wisdom to inform research questions	Community members & databases	Organisational members & "theory of change" documents	Organisational members & documents
Specifying data collection processes	Quantitative & qualitative (borrowed/created) -- multiple study designs (interviews, focus groups, surveys, etc.)	Quantitative & qualitative (borrowed/created) -- multiple study designs (RCTs, pre/post, longitudinal, cross-sectional)	Quantitative & qualitative (borrowed/created) -- multiple study designs (interviews, focus groups, surveys, data-mining, etc.)

Defining data analysis & interpretation processes	Shared analysis & interpretation with various stakeholders	Internal and/or external expert data analysis & interpretation	Shared analysis & interpretation with various stakeholders
Implementing research dissemination processes	Community problem-solving & implementation	Decision-making & funder accountability	Service & practice improvements
Articulating knowledge development processes	Socio-political action & community change	Service redesign & organisational planning	Practice-informed theory & theory-informed practice

*Adapted from Austin & Carnochan, 2020, p. 199.

Table 2. Complementary Types of Practice Research with Social Service Organisations

1.	Case-based social histories of vulnerable populations to capture aspects of service user coping capacities, and the use of ethnography to reflect dimensions of unaddressed service needs.
2.	Growing recognition that information buried in service user case records provides valuable insights into both service user experiences and practitioner efforts to provide services.
3.	"Survivor research", where service users play leading roles in defining research questions, gathering data, interpreting data, and identifying implications within the context of "nothing about us, without us".
4.	Valuing policy implementation research that also focuses on implementing practice implications in the form of community-based organisational recommendations.
5.	Dealing with reactions to evidence-based practice and experimentally-tested services research within the renewed calls for evidence-informed practice that values multiple sources of knowledge, particularly in communities of color

Table 3. New Directions for Practice Research-informed Social Service Organisational Analysis

Identifying Shared Research and Practice Foundations
1. How can social service organisational researchers draw on the *science of the concrete* (Flyvbjerg, 2001) to frame studies involving diverse service users, managers, and staff in response to evolving institutional needs and calls for social justice?
2. How can researchers integrate attention to organisational practice in relation to traditional explanatory and interventive theories in order to promote the utility of both for practitioners and scholars?
3. How can researchers collaborate with social service organisations that reflect different developmental needs or different stages of readiness for collaboration?
4. When collaborating with practice partners, how can academic researchers negotiate their roles and responsibilities while attending to the different expectations associated with different agency and academic norms?
Building Practical Considerations into Research Processes
5. How can researchers validate and actively incorporate the perspectives and needs of practitioners in co-developing research questions?
6. How can social service organisational researchers collaborate with key agency partners around research design and ethical issues amidst new and continuing organisational challenges?
7. How can researchers share study findings in ways that are useful to different groups of

stakeholders (i.e., service users, workers, managers, organisations) and academic scholars?
Sustaining Practice-focused Research at Local, Institutional, and International Levels
8. How can university and agency partners support practice-focused researchers with their bicultural engagement in academic research and agency-based practice?
9. How can academic and agency-based leaders support (a) the development of practice-focused social service research and (b) interorganisational knowledge sharing through communities of learning?
10. In order to institutionalize professional learning and development opportunities for practice researchers and social service organisational researchers at national and international levels, how can scientific societies pursue opportunities for cross-pollination and collaboration (e.g., collaborative PR clusters or special interest groups)?

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