

Sixth conference – Aalborg, Denmark (2023): Practice Research related to Participation, Co-creation and the Role of Service Users

Building upon the knowledge generated at the first five international conferences on practice research described in the previous sections, the sixth conference sponsored by Aalborg University in Denmark in 2023 featured the role of service users in the co-creation and participation in practice research. The themes of the four-day conference (124 presentations, 3 keynote presentations, and 5 symposia related to the new Practice Research Collaboratives that meet regularly between international conferences since the 2021 Melbourne Conference) reflected the challenges associated with the terminology used to identify service users (e.g. experts by experience, experts with lived experience, lived experience researchers, community members and citizens). The major themes are reflected, in part, in the future Special Issue of *Research on Social Work Practice* planned for 2026 and include:

- Challenges and possibilities in collaborations between partners - service users, practitioners, researchers etc.
- Aspects of power when different partners with different positions are to collaborate.
- Potentials and barriers in participatory processes in practice research.
- Philosophical, theoretical and conceptual foundations and inspirations in participatory approaches in practice research.
- Methodologies and service users' empirical participation in practice research.
- Connections, diversities and controversies between social work research and policymakers, practitioners, service users.
- Practice research collaboration and social work education/program.
- Ethical issues in collaborations between social work practitioners and/or service users and/or researchers.

Conference themes and statements are influenced by their societal context and the Aalborg conference theme is influenced by a Nordic and specifically Danish context; namely the welfare state where democratization processes create a strong foundation for dialogue (where all citizens are treated equally, where taxes fund the welfare services, where openness is a key value, and different interests reflects diverse experiences and perceptions that support decision making). In essence, the philosophy of the welfare state supports collaboration, negotiations and dialogue which are essential elements of practice research.

Practice research is still a developing research and intervention strategy in social work that is derived from different epistemological and ontological approaches – for example science of the concrete (Flyvbjerg 2001), Mode 2 knowledge production (Kristiansson 2006; Novotny, Scott & Gibbons 2001) and transdisciplinary practice research (Stokols 2006). Practice research is not aligned with any specific methodological research approach and aims to apply research methods arising from different disciplines. It is, however, focusing on co-creation processes in ways that will make it relevant for both the different participants and the recipients of research analyses and findings.

In practice research, reflections on ontology, epistemology and methodology are still a work in progress. Ontology is about fundamental assumptions about reality and its nature – for example the question of the specific human being and theories about the human including the classical opposites in scientific theory: Are human beings and society to be studied as objective realities or as subjects with opinions and intentions? Other ontological approaches could be about understanding the character of social problems and social work, or about the perception of practice research as a scientific approach. The epistemological approach is about basic premises about what knowledge is and how it is acquired; for example, is knowledge gained by observation or by asking questions? Finally, both the ontological and the epistemological approaches lead to the methodological question; namely, by whom and where are methods, strategies and procedures in research decided (Bøggild Christensen et al 2015).

Collaborative research processes are based on the participation of all partners and the different kinds of knowledge being present among participants. Shared ownership among participants, where the responsibility is negotiated and distributed continuously between service users, practitioners and researcher in the research process, is an important part of the process (Andersen, Mejlvig, Uggerhøj 2022). Participatory practice research, hence, develops through a collaborative process in which the participants enter the world of others through communicative processes. It is within these communicative processes that the opportunity of giving participants an authentic voice emerges.

The aim of service user participation in research is to include service user knowledge and experience – as driving forces – in the investigation of social work in order to: 1) to produce research knowledge that inspires the development of social work practice, 2) to improve the lives of service users, and 3) to develop more democratic research processes in general. Research in social work cannot limit itself simply to highlighting the service user perspective, it needs to make sure that the research corresponds to the actual and lived experience of service users, service practitioners, and service researchers.

By highlighting and examining the service user perspective and experience, new understandings and new ways of asking questions may emerge in the research to both produce new knowledge and to empower service users. Empowerment is defined as the service users right to name their own reality and to act on behalf of this understanding: the power to name and the power to act (Andersen et al 2021). Service users have their own ways to prioritize the importance of different matters concerning their lives and relations with social work practice. The practitioners' way of understanding the current situation might be quite different. Both perspectives must, however, be acknowledged by the researchers when co-producing with practitioners and service users.

Establishing a partnership between service users and researchers, supporting empowerment processes and being aware of power issues are complex and require knowledge and skills in communicative processes. It is important to be knowledgeable about the patterns of communication; namely, how to talk to people, respecting the service users understanding and how situations are experienced, including the words and descriptions used. For this purpose, dialogical communication provides a position from which it is possible to create relationships in mutual learning processes between the participants (Phillips 2008). Communication based on a

respect for diversity is a decisive and powerful foundation for shared ownership in research (Andersen et al, 2022).

Another powerful communication setting is the narrative conversation of bringing stories into research. The main idea in the narrative approach is that human beings create stories about their actions and their history (Bruner 2004), and that power, identity and intentionality are reflected in story-telling narratives, which exists in our interaction with each other. Using a narrative approach is a way to face and negotiate the different power positions in research as, for example, the service users own experience, understanding and assessment of the world. Likewise, the service user is supported to enter partnership and participation having service user knowledge and experience reinforced, by a deliberate use of narratives in the communicative processes. In short narratives are approached to support service user participation into the research process.

By highlighting the ontological, epistemological and methodological work in progress emphasizes that the human view, human rights, and the ethical focus are of crucial importance, when working with a practice research approach that builds on, negotiation, respect, equality, social justice, dialogue and participation – and between people in different positions. In reflecting upon the ethical principles in practice research and discussing the human view it is possible to reveal the way a person perceives another human being. Of particular interest is the understanding of the interdependence between human beings, and thus the power relation.

Recommendations for future conference topics

When developing service user involvement in practice research, it is crucial that all participants in the process understand the societal context as a factor in defining the opportunity space that either is present or can be created. This insight easily leads participants to go beyond discussing and understanding participation and towards more broader understandings of democracy and democratic development.

Practice research often produces calls for changes, but there is also a need to develop strategies to create actions for changes. The presentations and the discussions at the Aalborg Conference have led to the following challenges for the future work in practice research:

Service-users as major stakeholders

- How can service users become primary change agents where practice research helps to reinforce their sense of agency in modern societies?
- How can human views and ethics – including discussions and reflections of ontology, epistemology and methods – become the center of research awareness?

Collaboration as the central theme of practice research

- How can power relations and communications become a central focus in every collaboration?
- How can different kinds of collaborations reinforce democratization processes in social work research?

- How can research that focuses on change become closely connected with different kinds of collaborations in action?

Partnership as essential for practice research

- How can the multiple perspectives of other stakeholders in different societies be incorporated into social work research?
- What role does social work education play in the incorporation of practice research into everyday social work practice?