

Feb 14 2013

Some reflections on social care research: The aspirations

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In the last of our three part series on the [joys, tribulations](#) and aspirations of social care research [Martin Knapp](#) and [Ann Richardson](#) look toward the future of social care research. This involves a greater commitment by researchers in the dissemination and knowledge transfer strategy from the beginning of a research project to the role of a social media in ensuring that research is reaching the wider audiences it is relevant to, including people who use services and carers who should ultimately be made a part of the research project from the beginning.

Given these challenges, what can be proposed to improve the dissemination and, more importantly, the impact of social care research? Although much could be done on a variety of fronts, we focus here on actions that can be taken by researchers themselves or by their broader professional organisations. First, social care researchers need to be alert to the practical benefits that can arise from their investigations and ensure that others – particularly research commissioners, users of research findings in provider or commissioner bodies – are aware of these as well. Whatever the temptation to embark on ‘blue skies’ research with no immediate or obvious practical value (‘because it is interesting’), researchers will find few supporters of such a course, especially in the current economic climate. Research proposals should – and normally do – seek to identify the likely practical outcomes, and research reports and other outputs should, of course, strive to find and communicate them.

Although this sounds obvious, researchers should ensure that the methods they employ are suitable to the topic or issue, and that their studies are carried out with appropriate rigour. This is the case whether they are undertaking large quantitative investigations, small qualitative studies or other sorts of research. This is not to argue that most social care research is not rigorous, but it is disappointing still to see poorly designed and implemented studies. One of the aims of the [NIHR School for Social Care Research](#) is to improve research capacity in social care, and among the mechanisms we are using in pursuit of this aim is the commissioning of methods reviews. Another is the organisation of events that help to spread knowledge and skills. For example, we want to explore how far social care research could gain from contacts with researchers in other fields, such as health care and housing research.

Researchers need to take lead responsibility for dissemination of their findings. They cannot assume that others will do the job for them. As knowledge transfer experts repeatedly remind us, communication of results needs to be planned at a study’s inception, not when writing the last paragraph of the final report. Many researchers will (rightly) complain that they have not been given sufficient time or resources in their project to fully disseminate their findings, having to write the proposal for their next study at precisely the time they are trying to finish their current work. Research commissioning bodies are often culpable and sometimes (irrationally) unsympathetic. But if researchers were to plan their dissemination or knowledge transfer strategy at the outset, there might be less risk of them expending time writing heavy reports that no-one will read or crafting articles for arcane academic journals that few people have heard of, and even fewer will ever access.

Some findings may be of most interest to people who use services and their carers, so that an appropriate vehicle for dissemination might be general mainstream media or weekly magazines. Indeed, there is a need to raise the media profile of social care in general and of social care research. An avalanche of blogs and the chirruping of Tweets might not be to everyone’s taste, but these can be useful ways to make a wide range of people aware of new evidence.

Some research commissioning bodies – and the [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) is one that comes to mind – have sponsored training in dissemination methods, and generally there is much better appreciation today of how, when and where to be aiming to transfer knowledge from research to those communities that might be able to use it. In the School for Social Care Research we are working with a number of organisations and individuals to suggest ‘pathways to impact’: a set of suggestions and experiences that might help to improve the translation of research evidence into practice. There is a need for exchange: for research providers and research users to better understand and trust each other and to appreciate the pressures under which each works.

Another set of aspirations is for research to be more proportionate, timely and pragmatic. Not every study needs a systematic literature review before it can get into the field. Nor does every project need to start with a survey of local authorities or provider organisations, especially since many of these bodies are feeling bombarded with requests for information and experiencing budget cuts. For quantitative studies, there are usually ways to work out what size sample is needed, yet many social care researchers seem unaware of such possibilities. There is rarely a need nowadays to develop a completely new tool for measuring needs or outcomes, given that we already have some excellent such instruments in most areas of social care. Perhaps most importantly, whatever the focus and whatever the methods, there is no justification for collecting evidence that will not actually be used.

Finally, research really does need to be participative, with greater involvement of people who use services and carers from the very outset. More attention is now being paid to the need for user-controlled research, which offers numerous advantages but also practical and conceptual challenges.

Onward and upward

Compared to even just a few years ago, social care research is in a much better place than it used to be. Research methods are more robust and improving on both the qualitative and quantitative fronts. There is much greater involvement of people who use services or provide care and support. There is better communication of findings. But in a paper that might already be heavy on truisms, here is one more: the need to guard against perfection becoming the enemy of the merely 'good'. Austere times demand imaginative responses.

Knapp M, Richardson A (2012) Some reflections on social care research: joys, tribulations and aspirations, *Research Policy & Planning*, **29**, 3, 147-151

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