

Feb 11 2013

Some reflections on social care research: The tribulations

Laura Clohessy

The second of our three part series on the [joys](#), [tribulations](#) and [aspirations](#) of social care research focuses on the many challenges and obstacles faced by social care researchers from the conception of research projects to the dissemination of findings. [Martin Knapp](#) and [Ann Richardson](#) discuss how the lack of understanding of the research process from commissioners to social care practitioners can impact not only the research process but also its uptake into practice and looks at the negative effect poorly conducted research can have on the reputation of research in general.

Research is not always a bed of roses. First, many social care researchers experience real problems arising from the nature of their job. Their status within their employing organisation often tends to be low. Many work alone and have few people to whom they can go when they need advice or help. Even those working in an ostensible team may have full responsibility for one aspect of a joint task, so that little expert assistance is readily available. Deadlines can be a constant worry, especially when there is slippage in earlier aspects of the planned activity arising from causes outside the researcher's control. And, of course, the jobs of many researchers are insecure, dependent on short-term contracts, so that many experience on-going anxieties about their own professional or financial future.

In addition, every social care researcher also knows that many obstacles are – unwittingly or otherwise – put in their way in the course of trying to do their work. They often work in a context of considerable misunderstanding of the nature of the research process. Regrettably, those who commission such research are sometimes naïve about its inevitable limitations. They tend to want results quickly (often 'yesterday') and therefore to resort to funding short-term projects which researchers themselves know cannot reflect the complexity of the issues addressed, or adequately answer the important questions. Some research commissioners think that the answers to their questions are already known if only researchers would trawl existing findings or, worse, reinterpret such findings in ways inappropriate to the nature or location or service user group. More worryingly still, some policy-makers may be tempted to seek research merely to confirm decisions already taken, viewing the process of research more as buttress than beacon.

It can be difficult for researchers to stand up to these demands – or seek to explain why they are inappropriate – when they are dependent on these same individuals or organisations for their future contracts and therefore their employment. This is a particular challenge for a researcher employed in a setting such as a university where independence, transparency and freedom of expression are viewed as paramount. Many senior researchers know they could double their salaries overnight by setting up the kind of consultancy that gives the customer exactly the results needed to support their business interests or policy aims. Indeed, the research task calls on political skills in which many researchers were never trained and which they may not be keen to exercise.

Social care researchers also face challenges from other sources. People working at the front line of services, who are often asked to assist the research process, can also create obstacles for the researcher. Some local practitioners do not understand the complexities of research design, such as the processes of piloting or randomisation, arguing that it is unethical to include some of the people they support and not others, or do not appreciate that some evidence-gathering approaches such as focus groups are necessarily time-consuming. They may be reluctant to include particular individuals or families in a study on the grounds they are not 'typical' or, alternatively, because they are not felt to be 'up to participation'. In some cases, this may even be from a fear that such people will reflect badly on local provision. With the best of intentions, people working in services may want to alter the wording of questions on well-validated questionnaires, arguing that the wording of long-established, validated tools is inappropriate to a particular service user group or context. Some even continue to question the benefits of asking the opinions of those who use services or their carers altogether. (This does not mean that the researcher is always right, and there are plenty of instances of researchers being deaf to helpful suggestions of field staff, for example, but the process of negotiating a research study can sometimes be enormously time-consuming and frustrating for everyone concerned.)

We cannot discuss the tribulations of undertaking research without mentioning the need for ethical and governance approval. Each is an essential element for successful research, but each can cause difficulties for the researcher. Indeed, whatever the very reasonable premise underlying current requirements, virtually every researcher has at one time or another been seriously frustrated by the processes. In the social care area, tricky questions can arise over issues such as mental capacity, and it is beholden on the researcher to prepare properly by gaining a clear understanding of the legal framework and how it plays out in a particular empirical study. Where researchers often feel that the right balance might not have been struck is when ethics committees or governance leads probe into the planned methods in ways that appear to go beyond their remit or skills. But then those committee members or leads might counter that poorly designed, hard-to-implement research wastes the time of individuals and organisations when it cannot answer the questions it purports to address.

Of course, once research has been commissioned and undertaken, problems can arise with the use, dissemination and take-up of the results. Many a researcher presenting quantitative evidence has been told that 'each individual is different' and it is therefore inappropriate to reduce life's 'rich tapestry' to a set of generalised numbers. Conversely, those presenting qualitative data are often confronted with the view that such information is not based on sufficiently large numbers or is in other ways not representative or robust. Or some of the potential users of a study might challenge the underlying motives of the researchers, for example seeing work that is funded by government as politically motivated. Some people involved in policy or practice seem to be reluctant to use research results at all, and research reports often lie unread by those for whom they were intended. (It might be added that this is sometimes because they are written in verbose, impenetrable style. Researchers also need to remember that busy decision-makers do not have the time to search for journal articles to keep up with the latest findings. Many academic journals are also accessible only to subscribers.) The emphasis being given today to better access to research findings is very welcome in this respect, although the economics of open access publishing remain challenging.

Equally harmful, the evidence from research reports may be used selectively. Reports may be read, but only to seek out evidence that supports particular policy positions. Carefully worded prose that sets out the methodological limitations of a study may be ignored, whether by accident or for reasons of time or political convenience, with only the headline findings passed on to political masters or wielded in some media release to support a particular argument. As a result, the caveats so commonly necessary to describe and define the robustness of findings are lost. Researchers can end up with ideas or evidence ascribed to them which were never intended or, indeed, written.

Social care researchers can also be met with a blanket distrust of all research, making it difficult to argue from their carefully collected evidence. Some sceptics argue that most such research is undertaken solely for political reasons, such as when an economic evaluation is seen to be simply a means to argue for the reduction of public expenditure. It therefore follows, it is argued, that it would be better not to fund research at all. Some implicitly suggest that research is an alternative to action and, given an inevitable shortage of resources, it is much more important to fund frontline services than 'waste' resources on studies.

There is also a prejudice arising from poorly conducted studies undertaken by those outside their profession. A great deal of quasi-research is carried out by auditors, inspectors, task forces and the like who do not usually refer to themselves as 'researchers' but who nonetheless carry out work that is, to all intents and purposes, identical to that which occupies people who are referred to by that term. Their investigations can frequently be intrusive, poorly designed and poorly analysed. They are often undertaken with absolutely no ethical approval or independent peer review. (Indeed, some reports from such bodies only cite other reports by similar bodies – or themselves – seemingly oblivious to an evidence base from more robustly conducted research. And yes, it is also true that researchers can be terribly, even pathologically, 'precious' about methods and processes, and are often poor communicators of what they have found.) Similar problems can arise with student projects, sadly sometimes undertaken without adequate or skilled supervision – and still sometimes undertaken without adequate ethical review. All such activity, although carried out for well-intentioned reasons, can end up reflecting badly on social care research more broadly.

This entry was posted in [Social care research](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).