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Some reflections on social care research: The joys

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Social care researchers, like their colleagues in other fields, are generally too busy investigating the needs and concerns of others to turn the spotlight around to consider their own activity. But it is a useful exercise, from time to time, to reflect on the impact of the research task on researchers themselves and on others involved in the research process. This is the first in a three part series where [Martin Knapp](#) and [Ann Richardson](#) look at the joys, [tribulations](#) and [aspirations](#) of social care research to help those working in social care research to take stock and gain some insight into paths they might usefully explore.

To begin on a positive note, social care researchers have much of which they can feel proud. Over the years, they have sought to respond to the enormous, complex and increasingly prevalent needs of individuals and their families, as well as wider communities. In a world where the news in social care is often bleak, with great pressure on resources and growing expectations on all sides, the role of research has proved highly important, and potentially of greater influence than ever before.

New policies or practices have been introduced in some areas, creating a need for evidence on their actual impact. In addition, for some user groups, there are growing numbers of people needing care, for instance of older people with personal care needs or cognitive impairment, necessitating research attention on how best to meet such needs. The results of countless studies have enabled governments of every hue to develop policies more wisely and in ways that reflect the genuine needs of those seeking care. The numbers in need, the specific nature of the needs of both service users and those who care for them, the efficient and effective use of resources have all been highlighted through the efforts of both quantitative and qualitative social care researchers.

From the perspective of researchers themselves, doing social research is often stimulating, even fun. This is not a frequently noted aspect of the research endeavour, but should not be forgotten. Researchers may enter this field seeking a challenge, and in the social care world they are rarely disappointed, for there are few easy research questions or simple policy or practice solutions. The skills needed to undertake research are considerable—from the ability to obtain information (whether by in-depth interview, focus group or in other ways to generate primary data, or by seeking out sources of extant knowledge), analyse such evidence and then write it up in a readable style for dissemination.

In short, the process of undertaking research involves a great deal of day-to-day learning, not always transferable from one study to another. Often working with colleagues in the same or other disciplines, there is also the satisfaction of finding agreed understandings. And there is also a special pleasure from doing research into problems which are genuinely important to people's lives.

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