HELSINKI STATEMENT ON
SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE RESEARCH[1]

I. Background on the International Network on Social Work Practice Research

In 2008, a group of international social work researchers met in Salisbury (UK) to explore the nature of practice research in social work. They developed some preliminary consensus that became known as the Salisbury Statement on Practice Research[2].

The Statement arose from a concern that the contemporary emphasis on evidence-based practice was not adequately addressing the complexities of social work practice and the tools for improving practice. Social work and its clients might therefore be better served if we gave a stronger emphasis to practice priorities and to more active engagement with practitioners as researchers.

This is reflected in the description of practice research:

> Practice research involves curiosity about practice. It is about identifying (effective) and promising ways in which to help people; and it is about challenging troubling practice through the critical examination of practice and the development of new ideas in the light of experience. It recognizes that this is best done by practitioners in partnership with researchers, where (researchers) have as much, if not more, to learn from practitioners as practitioners have to learn from researchers. It is an inclusive approach to professional knowledge that is concerned with understanding the complexity of practice alongside the commitment to empower (practitioners) and (address) social justice (issues), through practice. Practice research involves the generation of knowledge of direct relevance to professional practice and therefore will normally involve knowledge generated directly from practice itself in a grounded way. (Salisbury Statement on Practice Research in Social Work, 2011, p. 5).

Since 2008, there have been many changes in the practice of social work and social work research, and in the social structures underpinning social welfare. In 2012, a group of social work researchers met in Helsinki to re-examine the developments in practice research and update the Salisbury Statement.

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[1] This statement is compiled by the 2nd International Conference Scientific Committee composed of Ilse Julkunen, Chair (Finland), Michael J. Austin (USA), Mike Fisher (UK), and Lars Uggerhøj (Denmark) and is based on presentations made at the conference in Helsinki, Finland, May 2012.

[2] Salisbury Statement on Practice Research in Social Work (2011), *Social Work & Society,* 9(1). 4-9

The changing landscape of practice research

Practitioners and researchers share a common interest in finding ways to improve social work practice. This process involves an ongoing search for better and more effective ways of helping people through the design and delivery of effective social services. While there is little doubt that some areas of practice need improvement, it is also clear that research can play a role in identifying ways of improving practice. This process is particularly challenging given social workers work with extremely vulnerable and powerless people, whether they are children in need of protection, adults with learning difficulties or older people at risk of mistreatment.

This is the context in which evidence-based policy and practice appeared to offer the hope of greater certainty about what works, but this has rarely been delivered. In many areas, we do not have the volume or the quality of research to know conclusively what is effective.

The financial crisis that has engulfed many Western welfare states has reduced expenditure on services and on research. Thus, at a time when it becomes even more important to know what is effective (because we have less money to spend), we have less research to inform these decisions. We need relevant knowledge for better practice in complex and uncertain situations.This reality reinforces the need to tap into the experience and expertise held by practitioners about priorities for research and about the best ways that research can improve practice. For example, the development of 'data-mining' has shown how practitioners can use routinely collected practice information to improve practice.

Another development since 2008 is that the number of studies of practice research initiatives has significantly increased. Studies have shown the changing relationship between university and practice-based research call for raising the standards related to practice research. Studies of Nordic practice research explore the range of relationships between research and practice, and studies in North America reinforce the need for organisational supports for research-minded professionals.

In Finland research on the development of national policy and organizational structures to support practice research has identified four models of practice research: the practitioner-oriented, the method oriented, the democratic and the generative model (*Practice Research in Nordic Social Work)*. The common goal in all the models is to bridge the gap between research and practice.

These development call for increased understanding of the range of activities within practice research as well as theory that can inform and practice that can inform theory. At the same time we need to include ongoing analysis of changing welfare structures and economics in order to effectively promote practice research within the context of scarce resources.[3]

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[3] Austin, M. J., Santo, T. S. D., & Lee, C. (2012). Building Organizational Supports for Research-minded Practitioners. *Journal of Evidenced-Based Social Work*, *9*, 1–39.
Driessens, Saurama, E, Fargion, S (2011) Research with social workers to improve their social interventions. European Journal of Social Work, 14, 1, pp.71-88.
Fisher, M. (2013) Beyond evidence-based policy and practice: reshaping the relationship between research and practice, *Social Work and Social Sciences Review.*

II. Evolving Philosophies and Methodologies of Practice Research

Practice research is not a specific research method but rather a meeting point between practice and research that needs to be negotiated every time and everywhere it is established. In essence, practitioners are not going to become researchers, nor will researchers become practitioners. What is critical and interesting is the exchange of perspectives.

The theoretical and methodological framework for practice research calls for flexible and collaborative structures and organisations. Therefore practice research cannot be captured by a single philosophy or methodology, but need to evolve its own philosophies and methodologies for defining practised-based knowledge within the context of supportive and flexible organizations. There are at least two approaches that can be used to address this challenge; namely, the 'Science of the concrete' and 'Mode 2 knowledge production'[4].

The science of the concrete can be described as a pragmatic, variable and context-dependent science comprised of the following key elements:
- *getting close to reality* (the research is conducted close to the phenomenon studied),
- e*mphasizing little things* (research studies the major in the minor),
- *looking at practical activities and knowledge in everyday situations*
- *studying concrete cases and contexts* (research methodology is context-dependent),
- *joining agency and structure* (the focus is on both actor and structural level) and
- *dialoguing with a polyphony of voices* (the research is dialogical with no voice claiming final authority)

Epstein, I. (2010) *Clinical data-mining: Integrating practice and research*. New York: Oxford University Press. Epstein, I. (2011) 'Reconciling evidence-based practice, evidence-informed practice, and practice-based research: The role of clinical data-mining', *Social Work*, *56*(3), pp.284-288.
Julkunen, Ilse (2011)Knowledge production processes in Practice Research – Outcomes and Critical Elements. Social Work & Society, 9, 1, pp.60-75.
Marthinsen, E, Julkunen, I (2012) Practice Research in Nordic social work. Knowledge production in transition. London: Whiting & Birch.
Saurama, E, Julkunen, I (2011) Approaching practice research in theory and practice. Social Work & Social Science Review, 15, 2, pp 57-75.
Shaw, I. and Lunt, N (2012) 'Constructing practitioner research' *Social Work Research* 36, (3): 197-208. doi: 10.1093/swr/svs013.
Shaw, I. and Lunt, N. (2011) 'Navigating Practitioner Research', *British Journal of Social Work* 41 (8): 1548-1565. doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcr025. Shaw, I. (2012) Practice and Research Aldershot: Ashgate Publications. pp10-17.
Uggerhøj, L. (2011). Theorizing practice research in social work. *Social Work and Social Sciences Review*, *15*(1), 49–73. Uggerhøj, L. (2011). What is Practice Research in Social Work - Definitions, Barriers and Possibilities. *Social Work & Society*, *9*(1), 1–20.
[4] Flyvbjerg, B. (2001) *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*, New York: Cambridge University Press
Nowotny, Helga, Scott, Peter, Gibbons, Michael (2001) Re-Thinking Science.
Nowotny, Helga (2003) Democratising expertise and socially robust knowledge. Science and Public Policy; 30 (2), 151-156.

The science of the concrete includes dialogue with those who are studied, with other researchers, and with decision-makers as well as with other central actors in the field. In contrast to the traditional research approaches guided only by academic norms, practice research using both practitioner and researcher frameworks are discussed and evaluated by a number of partners, including lay people. This process takes place in public spheres and involves an interaction between many actors, each of whom represents different interests and contributes a variety of competences and attitudes.

Mode 2 knowledge production is based on interactions between many actors, each and every one of whom represents different interests and contributes a variety of competences and attitudes. It is characterized by a collaboration-oriented structure and network as well as in an environment of organizational flexibility.Within mode 2 knowledge production are multiple and different expectations about knowledge development as well as research design and data analysis. Instead of focusing on possible conflicts between different stakeholders, mode 2 knowledge production seeks collaboration among those with different needs and interests where all partners agree to engage in ongoing reflection on differences.

Practice Research as a negotiated understanding

Social work practice deals with relationships, interactions and reciprocity. Practice research deals with the relationship between research methods and related theories and the nature of social work practice. Practice research, thus, reflects the relationship and interactions between researchers and professionals as well as the relationship between research and service users. Practice research is relational by its very nature and knowledge development is something that comes about after practice, action and experience.

Based on an understanding of science of the concrete and mode 2 knowledge production, practice research can be defined as:

I. Focused on:
   - a critical research that describes, analyses and develops practice;
   - a process where curiosity, critical reflection and critical thinking from both researchers, practitioners and users are in focus;
   - a close, binding, committed and locally based collaboration between researcher/research settings and practitioner/practice settings in the planning, generating and disseminating of research;
   - a participatory and dialogue-based research process relevant for developing practice and validating different expertise within the partnership;
II. Using a methodology that represents:
   - research based on academic standards, and encouraging explorative and emancipatory approaches;
   - research built on experience, knowledge and needs within social work practice;
   - research where findings are interpreted and disseminated through dialogue with practice and reflecting learning processes in practice;
   - research that, within a social work context address concrete and pragmatic issues.

- both empirical studies as well as theoretical studies that challenge practice in new ways.

Both research and practice share responsibilities for defining the issues to be explored and interpreting the results. Everyone (researchers, practitioners and service users) brings experience and expertise to the knowledge production, dissemination and utilization processes based on a negotiated understanding that each partner has something to contribute and that each partner has an important role to play in the collaborative process.

III.   Practice Research and the Goal of Robust Research

The theme of the 2012 conference included reference to creating 'robust' practice research and the conference papers gave considerable attention to what 'robust' might mean in practice research. The concept of robust research needs to be understood within the context of social work practice that involves ever more ambitious agendas, increasing numbers of actors and stakeholders, and more complex processes of change. It is crucial to perceive the nature of social work practice as shaped by context and structural conditions as well as shaping itself and its surrounding conditions. Practice research that seeks to generate socially relevant knowledge needs to reflect this context.

Social work practices are historically formed and shaped by the mission and values of the institutions in which they are located as well as the social policies impacting the organizations. Practices are complex and undergoing constant change and therefore practice research need to reflect these complexities and their impact on practice in order to study and understand them. It is however not just a question of studying how things have evolved or how they work, but also how services can be improved and under what conditions as well as how changes affect the compositin of actors and their networks.

Since practice research involves 'the science of the concrete', this context-sensitive approach can be considered a precondition for socially robust knowledge production. It combines an interest in describing, explaining and theorizing about practice by using knowledge as a means of improving practice and by testing and exploring new ways of working. Thus, we ensure that the outcomes are relevant *in* and *for* practice while at the same time engaging in knowledge development.

Socially robust knowledge is a central element in Mode 2 science where knowledge production calls for moving beyond questions of effectiveness by focusing on the relational dimension of socially robust knowledge where reflexive analysis and deliberation about values and interests address praxis and thereby promote value rationality over epistemic rationality in order to produce knowledge that matters.

The concept of robustness emphasizes not only the research process but also the practice context, cultural differences, and the changes that knowledge production facilitates when findings are disseminated through dialogue with practice in order to reflect a learning processes. Achieving social robustness in practice research may include:

- Negotiations throughout the research process
- Incorporating the dissemination elements into the research strategy
- Taking into account the embedded values and emotional and political dimensions
- Being strategic about choosing collaborative partners
- Validating the outcomed in large and external networks

One of the critical issues is to identify possible actors or stakeholders ready to invest in common practice opportunities and possibilities and/or themes. This process involves deliberately inviting different actors to participate and encourage debate from the outset.

IV.   Building on the Past to Explore the Future

This Helsinki Statement represents an innovative process of capturing the highlights of previous international conferences in order to provide a foundation for the 3rd international conference in 2014 in New York City (USA). In its four short years of existence (2008-2012), a talented and farsighted group of social work practitioners and researchers have laid a new foundation for practice-based research that is rooted in the everyday experiences of social workers and those they serve. The Helsinki Conference in May 2012 provided an important venue in a Pre-Conference format for featuring the work of those engaged in practice research at the Mathilda Wrede Institute for Social Work Practice Research (Swedish) and Heikki Waris Institute for Social Work Practice Research (Finnish) – both affiliated with the Helsinki Department of Social Services and the University of Helsinki. Visits to the Institutes provided opportunities to demonstrate the involvement of service providers and users in the design and implementation of research projects as well as the role of social work research faculty located at local universities.

The theme of the overall Helsinki Conference focused on the process of generating more "robust" research that parallels and augments the rigor and practice utility of other more academically-based models of social work research. In this regard, it featured the contribution of Epstein's approach to "mining" existing administrative and case record data routinely found in social service organizations. In addition, the conference gave attention to how practice research might be "framed" within the theoretical context of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) associated with the pioneering research of Engeström at Helsinki University. Energized by those provocative approaches, the conference moved forward the philosophy and methodology of practice research, raising new issues about how theory informs practice and practice informs theory.

This Helsinki Statement is designed to provide some guidance in the planning of the 3rd International Conference on Social Work Practice Research in 2014. Several themes emerged from the Helsinki Conference that would benefit from further attention and analysis. Some of the major themes include:

I.   Engaging a wider audience of interested practitioners and researchers around the relevance of social work practice research related to:

- Deliberating public policy; how do findings from practice research get translated into new, more service user relevant policies and practices?
- Deliberating the changing context of practice; how could practice research inform the impact of merging health and social services in numerous governmental locales around the world?
- Integrating senior management in order to develop the necessary organizational supports for social work practice research;
- Inviting other research colleagues to adopt a trans-disciplinary approach to the dissemination and utilization of social work practice research; what are some of the best ways of disseminating social work practice research through a multi-actor approach?

II.   Engaging a wider audience of social work educators and researchers regarding the role of social work practice research methodology in the educating of future practitioners related to:

- expanding the domain of social work practice research to actively include service users and engage in inter-disciplinary dialogue about the connections to survivor research carried out primarily by service users
- engaging in the process of transforming practice questions into practice research questions through the active use of critical reflection and critical thinking (educating the future research-minded practitioner)
- engaging researchers in the exploration of applied research methodologies in order to locate them within the domain of social work practice research