In Praise of Practice:

What we can learn from practice based research conducted as ethical inquiry

Paper presented to the symposium conducted by Growing Research into Practice, School of Social and Cultural Studies, Massey University, Auckland NZ

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This presentation will consider:

- Practice-based research, meaning and purpose;
- Practice-based research, professional knowledge and learning;
- Professional knowledge and late modernity;
- Dilemmas we face;
- Conclusion - praiseworthy practice.

Perspectives on Research

The Higher Education Research Data Collection exercise in Australia uses the OECD definition of research which comprises, among other things:

> Creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man (sic), culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications.

It can and should include: inquiry driven by curiosity; research that is theoretical; or empirical; and/or that conducted with the field of practice.

Practice based research: Meaning and Purpose

- Practice based research derives its meaning from its affiliation with that which people do as they go about their professional business.

- Its principal purpose is to seek to understand the complexities of practice in order that improvement can take place.

Practice based research:
A Rich Heritage

- It draws strongly upon the tradition of what has become known as 'action research'. For which Carr and Kemmis (1986) provide a classic definition:

  - Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out (p162).

Action Research
as social intervention

- Kurt Lewin is generally credited as the person who coined the term 'action research'.

  - The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management or social engineering. It is a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. Research that produces nothing but books will not suffice (Lewin 1946, reproduced in Lewin 1948, pp. 202-3)

Practice-based research and the Creation of Knowledge:

- Knowledge about practice is basically gained through a process of mutual understanding - a so called "double hermeneutic" process. It involves problem posing and problem solving. It is gained through dialogue and is a form of practical philosophy. It is not done alone.

Knowledge Creation beyond the Academy.

- Gibbons et al (1994) developed our understanding that knowledge creation is not exclusively a matter for the academy, but may be socially produced and distributed in the form of *Mode 2 Knowledge.* In a second work Nowotny et al (2001) also noted that the great systems of modernity: State, Market, Culture and Science itself are becoming increasingly blurred.

Knowledge's Moral Purpose

- Practice based research assumes that the subjects involved in it constitute a group with common objectives and goals, interested in a problem that emerges from a given context in which they play various roles: university researchers and practitioners alike. It is research that has at its heart the public good; it has a moral purpose.

Communicating practice-based research:

- To fulfil its moral purpose practice based research must be open and transparent and made widely available.

- Research may be made public but is it made available? "… perhaps too much research is published to the world, too little to the village" (Stenhouse, 1981).

The Language of Research Publication:

- In the quest for comprehensibility we need to avoid 'Mumbo Jumbo' and obfuscation.
- Alan Sokal, the physics professor at New York University, seduced the editors of *Social Text* with his spoof on the fallacy of objectivity, and subsequently commented:
    - Fair enough: anyone who believes that the laws of physics are mere social conventions is invited to try transgressing those conventions from the windows of my apartment. I live on the twenty-first floor. (Sokol, in Wheen, 2004, p. 91).

Professional Knowledge Building and Late Modernity

- Banks (1998) enumerates five specific changes in organization and practice that have consequences for social workers (for example) in a late modern world these being:

  - *Fragmentation:*
  - *Burgeoning government guidelines and procedures:*
  - *Changing role of the social worker:*
  - *Increased importance of user participation:*
  - *The rise of 'consumerism':*

Professional Knowledge Building and Govern-mentality

- Governments, by their very nature, seek to eliminate the shades of grey from practice; the less the ambiguity the greater the exercise of control over the service being offered by the practitioner. There is a great fondness for what has become known as 'evidence based practice', a phrase worth interrogating.

Dilemmas - Boundaries and Compatibilities:

- What happens, for example, when warrants for local action clash with warrants for wider reform?

- What happens when insitutional ethics and accountability requirements do not match?

- What happens when resources and time-frames differ one from the other?

Ethics and the Consequential Stakeholders:

- To what extent are c/s given the right to exercise informed consent?

- What provision is made to ensure confidentiality and anonymity?

- Who is consulted?

- What are the opportunity costs?

- How is the user voice sustained and nurtured?

- How is the information yielded through user voice disseminated and acted upon?

Beyond an Ethic of Care:

- What is it to 'think ethically'?

- No theory of ethics can effectively prescribe how practitioners, either academics or field based, can and should act on a daily basis. It must come from within.

- It is not just a matter of skill, but one of wise judgment and having a regard and respect for others. We need to transcend the procedural and move to the substantive.

Conclusion: Praiseworthy Practice

- As Adam Smith (1759) has written:
    - The most sincere praise can give little pleasure when it cannot be considered as some sort of proof of praise-worthiness. It is by no means sufficient that, from ignorance or mistake, esteem and admiration should, in some way or other, be bestowed upon us. If we are conscious that we do not deserve to be so favourably thought of, and that if the truth were known, we should be regarded with very different sentiments, our satisfaction is far from being complete.

Practice based research deserves praise, but must also be praiseworthy.