The Aalborg Statement of Practice Research in Social Work - Participation, Co-creation and Service Users' Positions

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This paper presents the sixth statement on practice research. Publishing statements on practice research has become a tradition since the very first international conference on practice research in social work took place in Salisbury, United Kingdom (2008). The tradition of the statement is to present and reflect on discussions and presentations taking place at the specific international conferences initiated by the international community of Practice Research in Social Work. So far conferences have taken place in University of Southampton, Salisbury, United Kingdom, (2008), University of Helsinki, Finland (2012), Hunter College Silberman School of Social Work, New York, USA, (2014), The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, China, (2017), University of Melbourne, Australia (2021) and Aalborg University, Denmark (2023). The conference statements are a reflection of how practice research has evolved at a given point in time. Naturally practice research is being developed, tried out and reflected in many ways all the time, but the conference themes and statements are emphasizing elements and issues that need more reflection and development.

This statement is based on the Aalborg conference that took place from 7 to 9 June 2023 focusing on the theme of co-creation and service user`s position in practice research. While previous conferences have focused on theories, definitions, research and the roles of practitioners in practice research, it was a natural part of the practice research development to focus on service users in practice research. The participation of service users, practitioners, researchers, as well as the collaboration and co-creation between the different actors is understood as the very DNA of practice research. Through such collaboration and the ongoing negotiation between the different actors in the partnerships, it is assumed that it is possible to enhance the research on social problems as they appear in practice (Joubert et al. 2022, McLaughlin et al 2020). Likewise, the collaboration between partners makes it possible to produce knowledge in new and joint processes. Thus, making it possible to transform the knowledge and finding into new and inspiring ways of doing social work, and to establish critical analysis of social work practice, theories and methods. As a part of a growing social policy agenda, the collaboration between researchers and social work practitioners has been increasing over the last decade, whilst the road to include service users in research remains challenging. Therefore, the focus of the Aalborg conference and this statement is specifically on service users' participation, positions and roles in social work practice research.

One of the first challenges in the collaboration between partners is the name given to participants and especially with the focus on service users at the Aalborg. The terminology used to describe service users has been discussed more and more during the last 10-15 years, especially in social work as the participatory processes have developed (McLaughlin, 2006; Kong et al, 2020). Service users have been referred to as experts by experience, experts with lived experience, lived experience researchers, community members, persons and citizens, often reflecting local issues and traditions. From our perspective the use of terminology is a very important evolving discussion. To choose a specific term and make it global at this point in time would be counteractive for a practice research approach as it calls for an ongoing discussionamong participants and decided by citizens themselves. As the term 'service user' has been used in the conference theme, we will stay with this term in the statement being aware that this term needs ongoing discussion.

Any conference themes and statements are influenced by the context. Hence, the Aalborg conference theme and this statement is influenced by a Nordic and specifically Danish context. An important part of the Danish and Nordic context is the welfare state. The welfare state is based on democratization processes which can be seen as creating a strong basis for practice research. In describing the core values in 'the universal social democratic welfare model' it is important to note the 'citizenship' (Goul Andersen,2007) or rather 'citizen' (meaning that all humans in a society are citizens. You don't need an approved citizenship to be a 'citizen'). The focus of the universal model is on welfare as a collective issue where all citizens are treated equally, where taxes fund the welfare services, where openness is a key value, and different interests reflects diverse experiences and perceptions which supports decision making. Furthermore, the philosophy of the welfare state supports collaboration, negotiations and dialogue which are essential elements of practice research. These are also central elements in the inclusion of service users, and, hence, part of the democracy perception and philosophy. To realize the potentials of the welfare state, the participation of citizens in the process is necessary, to address the emergence of the real problems of society can emerge. In practice research the focus on empowerment, dialogue and narrative approaches can be regarded as a part of engaging citizens – the service users – as a driving force in practice research – especially in participatory practice research (Andersen et al., 2020) – and participating in the ongoing development of a democratic society. The importance of democracy and the role of service users as driving forces, related to empowerment and story narratives are discussed further in the following sections.

Past highlights from previous statements on practice research.
To give an overview of the central issues being discussed at the different practice research conferences and, hence, a view of important steps and developments of practice research since the start of the practice research conferences and the community of practice research the following section will give a short summary of the conference themes and discussions. The summary is primarily based on the overview made in the Melbourne Statement of Practice Research (Joubert et al., 2023). Looking back to the Salisbury conference, practice research has evolved from a focus on engaging in self-reflective practice to research methodologies devoted to capturing the engagement of research-minded practitioners, practice minded researchers, and the research approaches of service users.

The Salisbury Statement (Fook & Evans, 2011) sought to focus on the need to define, develop and experience practice research, its structures, processes, interpretations of knowledge, and epistemology without the need for specific and complete definitions, terms, or standards. The goal of the conference was to explore the complexities of social work practice research and the tools for improving practice by engaging service providers, service users, and researchers. *The Helsinki Statement* (2012) focused on establishing a theoretical background and robustness in the practice research processes. Practice research was not viewed as a unique or different research method but rather a meeting point between practice and research that necessitates a process of negotiation every time and everywhere that it takes place. The evolving theoretical and methodological framework for practice research calls for flexible and collaborative structures and organizations (Julkunen et al., 2014).

Two years later in New York, the practice research community broadened its reach by engaging a wider group of interested practitioners, educators, and researchers, and those in other disciplines. A more inclusive vision emerged, embracing a focus on interdisciplinary activities and a more global outlook. *The New York Statement* also aimed to address the involvement of service users in research and to educate researchers, practitioners, and service users in practice research (Epstein et al., 2015). In drawing upon diverse methodologies used in practice research, it sought linkages with the mixed methods approach to evidence-informed practice. The practice research conference in Hong Kong in 2017 represented efforts to extend the evolution of practice research in relationship to different contexts and challenges. It included several scholars, practitioners, and others from countries not previously represented at practice research conferences, especially practitioners, universities, and service delivery associations. *The Hong Kong statement* called for the increased use of practice language to complement the preoccupation with research language, especially when involving practitioners in future conference deliberations (Sim et al., 2019). At the same time, there was a call to expand the evolving definition of practice research as well as practice research methods. As a result, the conference pointed out the paradox within the field; namely, the requirement for academic work on definitions, theories, and methods while at the same time making practice research less academic and more practice based. It was noted that this paradox becomes even more challenging when concerted efforts are made to involve service users in the design, implementation, and utilization of practice research.

The Melbourne Statement highlights that practice research is about promoting a sense of curiosity about practice that also challenges current wisdom through a partnership between practitioners, researchers, and service users, often in the context of social justice issues. Practice research involves the generation of knowledge of direct relevance to professional practice, and therefore, will usually involve knowledge that is generated directly from practice itself, thereby in a very grounded way. It requires diverse research methods to respond to the challenges faced by practitioners and to answer practice-based questions (Joubert, Webber et al., 2023).

The Aalborg statement builds upon the previous international conferences but with a specific focus on involvement of and co-creation with service users in research. The statement stresses both practical tools/approaches and theoretical foundations. While the tools/approaches are connected closely to communicative processes, the theoretical parts highlight democratic processes supplemented by narratives and empowerment approaches.

As relected in the brief summary of the practice research conference statements, there is no straight line for developing practice research and the knowledge production within given the global diversity. Different issues are important in different regions of the world. Some themes appear again and again – especially collaboration and participation – and other issues rarely re-occur. There are still several gaps in our knowledge about practice research which is probably the most significant common thread in the conference and statement processes: We are looking for gaps and new knowledge.

Themes and presentations at the Aalborg conference

In social work, the need for investigating and researching social work and for advancing new knowledge, methods and tools in social work has increased over the past years. To support such developments a close collaboration and commitment between social work practice, social work research and service users is needed to raise the profile of developing participatory practice research. The Aalborg conference focused specifically on the collaboration, the co-creation possibilities and the inclusion of service users in practice research by focusing on the following eight conference sub-themes:

- Challenges and possibilities in collaborations between partners - service users, practitioners, researchers etc.
- Aspects of power when different partners with different positions are to collaborate.
- Potentials and barriers in participatory processes in practice research.
- Philosophical, theoretical and conceptual foundations and inspirations in participatory approaches in practice research.
- Methodologies and service users' empirical participation in practice research.
- Connections, diversities and controversies between social work research and policymakers, practitioners, service users.
- Practice research collaboration and social work education/program.
- Ethical issues in collaborations between social work practitioners and/or service users and/or researchers.

Over 124 oral presentations, workshops, symposiums and posters took place during the conference. Furthermore, three keynote speakers presented thoughts and philosophy about the involvement of service users and people with lived experiences:

- Vishanthie Sewpaul (University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa): Emancipatory, Ubuntu Based Research and Ethics in Action: From Pain, Marginalization and Vulnerability to Empowerment, Change and Advocacy;
- Merete Monrad (Aalborg University, Denmark): Affective Conditions for Service-User Participation;
- Peter Beresford Brunel University London / University of Essex, UK): Shaping Our Lives: Challenging the Divisions.

Out of the 127 different presentations over 1/3 (46) included 'service user participation' as a theme, making it the most prominent topic at the conferences. In addition, the
Practice Research Collaboratives (planned and established at the Melbourne conference) met for the first time in person at The Aalborg conference in four hour sessions in the following symposia or workshops:

- Practice Research Impact, Translation & Influence;
- System Lens to Social Work Practice;
- Collaboration & Co-creation with Service Users;
- Organizational Supports for Practice Research;
- Diversity in Family Work

Participation, Co-creation and Service Users' Positions in Social Work

Practice research is still a developing research and intervention strategy in social work deriving from different epistemological and ontological approaches – for example science of the concrete (Flyvbjerg 2001), Mode 2 knowledge production (Kristiansson 2006; Novotny, Scott &Gibbons 2001) and transdisciplinary practice research (Stokols 2006). Practice research is not aligned with any specific methodological research approach and aims to apply research methods arising from different disciplines. It is, however, focusing on co-creation processes in ways that will make it relevant for both the different participants and the recipients of research analyses and findings. To emphasize both the relevance and quality of research, a close collaboration between knowledgeable and pivotal actors within the field is necessary. A collaboration involves the different actors who are included in the research process.

Participation

Collaborative research processes are based on the participation of all partners and the different kinds of knowledge being present among participants. Shared ownership among participants, where the responsibility is negotiated and distributed continuously between service users, practitioners and researcher in the research process, is an important part of the process (Andersen, Mejlvig, Uggerhøj 2022). Participatory practice research, hence, develops through a collaborative process in which the participants enter the world of others through communicative processes. It is within these communicative processes that the opportunity of giving participants an authentic voice emerges. Of course, the service users have the right to participate as well as the right to not participate or to partially participate in the research process. Service user participation has become more and more central to the process of developing participatory research. Increased service user participation in social work research, and the collaboration and co-creation between researchers, practitioners and service users has led to expanding the development of research approaches. The aim of service user participation in research is to include service user knowledge and experience – as driving forces – in the investigation of social work in order to: 1) to produce research knowledge that inspires the development of social work practice, 2) to improve the lives of service users, and 3) to develop more democratic research processes in general. Research in social work cannot limit itself simply to highlighting the service user perspective, it needs to make sure that the research corresponds to the actual and lived experience of service users, service practitioners, and service researchers.

Service user perspectives as driving forces

Service users as a driving force is a perspective and a knowledge repertoire where the knowledge and experiences of service users is understood as different from that of the practitioner and researcher. By highlighting and examining the service user perspective and experience, new understandings and new ways of asking questions may emerge in the research to both produce new knowledge and to empower service users. Empowerment defined as the service users right to

name their own reality and to act on behalf of this understanding: the power to name and the power to act (Andersen et al 2021). Service users have their own ways to prioritize the importance of different matters concerning their lives and relations with social work practice. The practitioners' way of understanding the current situation might be quite different. Both perspectives must, however, be acknowledged by the researchers when co-producing with practitioners and service users.

The paramount focus on the human view

In practice research reflections on ontology, epistemology and methodology are still a work in progress. Ontology is about fundamental assumptions about reality and its nature – for example the question of the specific human being and theories about the human including the classical opposites in scientific theory: Are human beings and society to be studied as objective realities or as subjects with opinions and intentions? Other ontologically approaches could be about understanding the character of social problems and social work, or about the perception of practice research as a scientific approach. The epistemological approach is about basic premises about what knowledge is and how it is acquire knowledge; for example, is knowledge gained by observation or by asking questions? Finally, both the ontological and the epistemological approaches lead the methodological question; namely, by whom and where are methods, strategies and procedures in research decided (Bøgild Christensen et al 2015).

The importance of discussions about different human views is understated in both social work practice and research. Participatory practice research, with the service users as a driving force, cannot be carried out without recognizing the human view and the possibly different human views. embedded among the research participants.
Different professions within practice research get their understanding from theories of philosophy, psychology, sociology, pedagogy etc. Likewise, researchers and service users are influenced by several factors in their human views. It is, thus, necessary that practitioners, researchers and service users can discuss and reflect upon their different human views, making it possible to reveal and deal with possible conflicts included in the research process, as the ontological approaches are stated by the participants.
The human view is difficult to define, as it contains many different understandings.
According to Hammerlin our human view expresses our basic notion of being a human being, like: How did we evolve as a species or an individual? What separates us from other living creatures? What kind of biological and social prerequisites are the foundation for growth and development? What motivates human beings, and what is the foundation for behavior and learning? The answer to questions like these will tell us something about what we believe a human being is and is capable of (Hammerlin et al., 1999).

In social work the humanistic human view, where a human is considered to be a subject, a unique self, who has freedom, responsibility and dignity, is often presented. This can be said to relate to The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations 1948), which present common rules that make it possible for people alle over the world to speak- and live together. Because we are human beings, we have the right to a life of safety and security. Article 1 says, that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights…" (United Nations 1948, article 1). In the important discussion of human rights article 19 says that "Everyone has the right to

freedom of opinion and expression, this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impact information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (United Nations, 1948, article 19). In 2016 the United Nations presented seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, for the world. Goal 16 is to "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels" (United Nations, 2016, Goal 16).

With inspiration from a Marxist view on humanity, Habermas states that human beings create our society, and thus they can change it. He sees communicative action as a kind of interaction, where the actors have a symmetric relation, share goals and recognize each other as equal actors. When this happens, power is eliminated and actors work together to create understanding for any changes in conditions in the social world that they have in common (Henriksen,2009). In Foucault´s understanding, the truth about human beings is that no such truth exists. On the contrary what we perceive as the truth about human beings, in a particular historic time, is involved in producing human beings. Apart from being a body (driven by biological laws), the cultural environment shapes feature and disciplines the human being (Henriksen 2009). At the same time, resistance can be developed as a form of productive power, which is why human beings can refuse to submit to a certain discipline.

These examples of human views underline the importance of examining the human view approach, in practice research in social work, where service user participation is essential, and the human rights and sustainable development goals serve as helpful examples to remind us to critically discuss and clarify the participants perspectives in participatory practice research.

Empowerment and Ethics

Empowerment can be seen as an element in a human view as principles, being ontologically and methodologically grounded, and emphasizing that the actors must define the challenges and problems and create the required changes themselves, referring to a strength perspective focusing on resources.

It is a complex construction as it is an approach to taking action that is value based in social work, a way in which to understand the social work as: a method in practice, a process and a product as well as a societal perception. In addition, this approach to humanity and ethics contains a subjective dimension of the individual experience and a structural dimension referring to the influence of the social distribution of power and access to resources.

Several interpretations of empowerment are available such as neoliberalism, social liberalism and socially critical interpretations and perspectives. According to Breton, the following dimensions are contained in the concept of empowerment: "social action, political awareness, the right to speak and, recognition of oneself as being competent and being recognized as competent in the use of power" (Breton 1994) Empowerment is also understood to include access to resources and knowledge sharing.

The process of moving from disempowerment to a greater degree of power over one´s own living conditions is initiated when it is possible to increase resources in empowering, focus on power issues and empower communications. Welfare work and practice research in social work as seen from an empowering perspective are part of the fight for social justice, social inequality and the absence of discrimination. Empowerment is a potent approach to action regarding service user positions in social work and practice research, where a service user can gain control over

disempowering factors, be viewed as an authoritative and critically reflecting person, who achieves social change through action (Andersen et al., 2021).

In addition, empowerment can be extended to apply to difficulties and opportunities for frontline social worker positions and practice researchers, in the way that these role frequently experience their professionalism threatened by long working hours, limited resources and lack of access to discussions of working conditions in the new public governance approach. But at the same time, it is the sense of professionalism that has to contributed as a vital resource among social workers, service users and social work practice researchers.

In addition to empowerment, it is important to broaden the perspective by drawing attention to the ethical reflections in research. Ethics can be seen as value-based considerations about options, actions and behavior to advance values or to avoid some values to be neglected. The values can be ideals like equality, social justice, honesty, trust, the dignity of the individual, and respect. In reflecting upon the ethical principles in practice research and discussing the human view it is possible to reveal the way a person perceives another human being. Of particular interest is the understanding of the interdependence between human beings, and thus the power relation. The ethical requirement is to remember, that our interdependence includes 'holding the lives of others in our hands' (Løgstrup, 1956, 2010.)
Summarizing the ontological, epistemological and methodological work in progress emphasizes that the human view, human rights, and the ethical focus are of crucial importance, when working with a practice research approach that builds on, negotiation, respect, equality, social justice, dialogue and participation – and between people in different positions.

Power relationship

The view on human beings appears in the action of research participants. In addition, power relations are experienced in action. Power is a basic component in social relations, and we are often subjects in discourses, For example, when a service user is offered frames in social relations which do not fulfill their needs, the service user can chose other frames for action. Power relationships can be described as productive, as a kind of stream that needs to be defined and understood. They are not static, because interactions between participants in the research process are only asymmetric by virtue of the different positions the participants occupy in the practice research (Andersen et al, 2020). In other words, the power of definition can be passed to all participants through communication, and all participants have the possibility to develop a critical discussion, reflection and assessment of the communication.

Power is omnipresent and cannot exist without resistance and struggles (Foucault, 1993). In practice research the struggles are understood as a place for negotiations that make communications to be a central part of the collaboration, where the participants, being in different roles, can use the nature of power to shape themselves.

To use the productive character of power it needs to be continuously studied where it exists, in action. Engaging service users in practice research as a co-researcher seems like a way for service users to expand their roles from research subject by, changing their service user positions to the position of a co-researcher, adding the necessary experience-based knowledge to the ongoing

development of practice. This is achieved by participating in decision-making related to planning, analyzing and disseminating the research, being part of a joint learning process and reflexivity.

The power of communication

Conducting participatory research is complex and emphasizes the equal participation of the service user by assuming the role as a co-researcher from the start to the end of the research process. Equality – understood as respecting and working with diversity – demands a collaborative and differentiated communication language, an examination of complexity and a focus on the power of communication. Establishing a partnership between service users and researchers, supporting empowerment processes and being aware of power issues are complex and require knowledge and skills in communicative processes.

It is important to be knowledgeable about the patterns of communication; namely, how to talk to people, respecting the service users understanding and how situations are experienced, including the words and descriptions used. For this purpose, the dialogical communication provides a position from which it is possible to create relationships in mutual learning processes between the participants (Phillips 2008). Communication based on a respect for diversity is a decisive and powerful foundation for shared ownership in research (Andersen et al, 2022).

The communicative perspective is based upon an understanding of dialogue as a quality where 'the speaker remains in the tension between standing on one`s own ground and being profoundly open to the other' (Pearce et al 2001:115), with the perception that one`s own perspective is partial, and that disagreements and differences are sources for further investigation. One of the difficulties in this approach is to regulate the communication in ways that the space is opened for different voices. In any social situation there are many different voices present. The service user, as well as the other participants, holds different voices at the same time – as a service user, a father or a voluntary employee etc. – and bringing forth these voices makes it possible to create a new and useful language in the research context. It is important to understand that the lifegiving element in every relational praxis is for individuals to be heard and to have a reaction. No one finds their voice if they feel overlooked or lack responses. In fact, there is nothing more terrifying for a human being than the absence of a reaction, according to Bakhtin (1984), who also states that meanings are produced dialogically in the tension between different and often opposing voices (Bakhtin 1981).

Another powerful communication setting is the narrative conversation of bringing stories into research. Stories are part of people's lives, and telling stories supports our understanding of experiences. The main idea in the narrative approach is that human beings create stories about their actions and their history (Bruner 2004), and that power, identity and intentionality are reflected in story-telling narratives, which exists in our interaction with each other. Narratives help us to create meaning in our lives. Using a narrative approach is a way to face and negotiate the different power positions in research as, for example, the service users own experience, understanding and assessment of the world. Likewise, the service user is supported to enter partnership and participation having service user knowledge and experience reinforced, by a deliberate use of narratives in the communicative processes. The service user actions, values and interpretations come to light. Identifying what is important to the service user and why can lead to

new insights and development within the research area. In short narratives are approached to support service user participation into the research process.

Continuing to elaborate on service user involvement as future conference topics.

In the western welfare state the value of democracy can be seen in the importance of service users' experiences and knowledge. However, this perspective is not always present in social work practice which demonstrates how research is facing a difficult task in participatory practice research processes.

When developing service user involvement in practice research, it is crucial that all participants in the process understand the societal context as a factor in defining the opportunity space that either is present or can be created. This insight easily leads participants to go beyond discussing and understanding participation and towards more broader understandings of democracy and democratic development.

The world's democracies are under pressure where uncertainties outweigh certainties, and the stability previously assumed as a starting point for development and challenges to well-known paradigms and practices has been replaced by uncertainty and fragility. The expected development towards more democratic and involving societies is being reassessed. This change will not only influence democracy, but also participatory processes in both social work and social work research – and may help us understand why the involvement of service users in practice research still is limited.

Future practice research stakeholders need to be aware of the challenges in the development of democracy when it comes to including service users and their perspectives as a part of building up shared ownership in research. Parallel to these more general and societal analyses and developments the involvement of service users includes the development of tools and concepts in participatory practice research processes.

Practice research needs to include the clarification and development of these central concepts in the coming years.
- What is the difference between involvement and participation in relationship to specific contexts and levels of democracy?
- How are reflections on equality and different collaborative roles related to more traditional understandings of positions and concepts in practice research?
- How can future international conferences and/or webinars on practice research focus on the education of social workers and how is it impacted by societal development related to developing practice research and the role of service users?
- How can we expand the communicative skills of social workers, researchers and service users in order to participate in the democratic dialogue in search of creating renewed platform for the development of service user participation in practice research?
- How will the link between social work education, practice and research reflect the communication competencies connected to values and the human view?
- What will it take to shape a pathway to protect democracy and participation in both social work and social work research?

Practice research often produces calls for changes, but there is also a need to develop strategies to create actions for changes. As a modern research strategy, practice research has the power (and obligation) to develop new strategies in research, including different perspectives in research processes and the impact of evolving democracies on social work in the future.

Summary

The presentations and the discussions at the Aalborg Conference led to several challenges for the future work in practice research. Challenges that need to be discussed among partners in practice research and hopefully highlighted at future conferences and webinars to expand our understanding of questions:

Service-users as major stakeholders in practice research in the future trying to change the conceptions of who is the real professionals in social work – and research
- How can service users become primary change-agents where practice research helps to reinforce their sense of agency in modern societies?
- How can human views and the ethics – including discussions and reflections of ontology, epistemology and methods – become the center of research awareness?

Collaboration as the central theme of practice research, because experience shows the difficulties in joining collaborative partnerships are related to powerful interactions:
- How can power relations and communications become a central focus in every collaboration?
- How can different kinds of collaborations reinforce democratization processes in social work research?
- How can research that focuses on change become closely connected with different kinds of collaborations in action?

Partnership as essential for practice research because the ability to form genuine partnerships needs to be based on a trustworthy access to multiple ways and views in every research area
- How can the multiple perspectives of other stakeholders be incorporated into social work research?
- How can social work research reflect an obligation to develop central concepts in practice research to reassure that practice research reflects modern societies?
- What role does social work education play in the incorporation of practice research into everyday in social work practice?
- To what extent can research, education, and practice in social work reflect, inspire and affect each other in parallel processes?

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