Tools and methodologies in working and researching in practice

Raija Koskinen
12.12.2013 Hong Kong
Workshop on Practice Research in Social Work Practice
Themes for the presentation

How to do research in practice
• of experiences when working with the Masters Theses

A need to take a step further
• of the importance of disseminating and theorizing the research findings further within a local and international communities of scientists and practitioners

The tricky combination of openness and selectiveness in interdisciplinary settings
• Some current and further examinations
New Client Data System implemented in Child Welfare

The aim of the research:
• To find out more of the impacts of the implementation and use of information and communication technology in child welfare practices

Research questions:
• How is concrete work done in the child welfare unit during the change of the client data system?
• What actors are involved in the change?
• How does the change affect the actors and their space of agency?
New Client Data System implemented in Child Welfare

Theoretical base:
• The sociological concepts of agency (also non-human) and structure

Methodology and data:
• Action research as a methodological frame
• Roles of a practitioner and a researcher were combined
• Data collected 2008 – 2011 as a new client data program was taken into use in the city of Helsinki child welfare
Data arranged in eight categories

- Plans and decisions considering the implementation of a new client data system in the City of Helsinki organisation.
- Informative material
- Material for educational purposes
- Instructions for how to proceed in the application
- The researcher’s own diary kept during the field period
- Educational material and the researcher’s notes from a follow-up occasion
- The material that was produced in the unit during the field period when trying to manage the change.
- The working papers when describing and defining the work processes and a complete process chart.
Research in the milieu of practice and research

During and after the field period the data was brought back and discussed

- in the child welfare unit
- In the Mathilda Wrede Institute
- In the larger scientific community

⇒ All this in support for analyzing the data and theorizing
⇒ Results taken back to the child welfare unit and to the organisation, city of Helsinki at large
⇒ Research and the results used in developmental work?
Four stories describing the change

• Leading social work in child welfare with decisions, instructions and directives

• High turnover of personnel and its consequences for work practices

• The implementation of the Child Welfare Act in organizational context (two parallel stories)

• Children and clients in databases

(Actantial model used when constructing these stories from the data)
Agency in the period of change

Social workers’ agency
- Contradictory expectations & overlapping responsibilities
- Space of agency affected

The agency of data system
- Taking the role of actor (material agency)
- Affecting the work processes and social workers´ agency

(subject position used in analysis)
Results: the unintended consequences linked with NPM

- **Tension detected** between these in the fields of
  - legislation
  - organization and
  - social workers’ basic tasks
- Many elements creating tension linked with NPM (*New Public Management*)

(the model of coercion as a way to interpret the findings in data)
The threat to be punished

The question of money, of limited resources

The normative coercions within life world

Social workers basic task

Servicesystem (Organization)

Legislation (Child protection law)
The importance of theorizing in practice research

- Theories of Action
- Actor Network Theory
- The theory of domestication
- Institutional Ethnography
- Actor Relational Approach
- etc.
Results as a base for further research

Results of the Masters Theses (sociology, 2011)

- in the situation of inadequate human resource allocation for social work the use of data systems may result to unintended consequences

⇒ To serve the data system may become the first priority for social workers even though the basic task is to protect children

Research question for the PhD Theses (social work)

What kind of ICT is used in child welfare in Finland and how?

- The quantitative part aims to chart what kind of client data systems (and other ICT) are used in the Finnish municipalities in child welfare.
- The qualitative part aims to disseminate further how functional these systems are. The question of functionality focuses on how appropriate the use of the systems is in relation to the basic task in child welfare.
The search continues – some further examinations

Working with scenarious within the changing contexts:

**Findings of the use of ICT in child welfare in the city of Helsinki in relation to the national development in Finland**

- Paper presented and discussed in a PhD Course *Analyzing Welfare Institutions, Policies and Politics in China and the Nordic Countries* at Nordic Centre, Fudan University, Shanghai, P.R.C 17 – 21 October 2013

Searching for new methodological openings:

**Can Actor Relational Approach be Combined with Institutional Ethnography – What Could be the Benefits When Studying Information and Communication Technology Use in Child Welfare?**

- Paper accepted to a thematic group *Interdisciplinary Applications of Institutional Ethnography* at the XVIII ISA World Congress of Sociology 13-19 July 2014 in Yokohama, Japan
Central references


Koskinen, Raija (2013): One step further from detected contradictions in a child welfare unit—a constructive approach to communicate the needs of social work when implementing ICT in social services. European Journal of Social Work. DOI:10.1080/13691457.2013.802663


Thank you for your attention!

raija.koskinen@helsinki.fi