Advancing Social Work Research
Strengthening the disciplinary foundations for advocacy and impact

The Research Team

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Research Focus: Providing sensitive and responsive care, re-enablement, early aging intervention and systematic evidence reviews.

Project aims and research questions

Enhance conceptual, methodological, and empirical understandings of the distinctive nature of social work research and its contribution to human services policy and practice.

- What is the scope and quality of social work research in the human service fields of child protection, aged care and disability in Australia?
- What are the strengths and limitations of this body of research?
- What is the impact of social work research on human services delivery in the selected fields?
- What strategies can advance social work and human service research productivity, uptake and impact in Australia?

Ageing & Aged Care

- Between 2007 and 2014 the average publications was consistent but low at 14.4 papers per year, with most (65.7%) only publishing once in this field.
- High interdisciplinary collaboration – most social work researchers published in a multidisciplinary team (89.8%) and in non social work journals (84.9%).
- High proportion (70%) of articles published in international journals.
- Main research topics were health (24.1%) and elder abuse (15.7%).
- A minority (24.1%) discussed social work specifically or included social workers as participants.
- A smaller minority (14.8%) involved older people in ‘additional’ research activities.

Key messages for ageing & aged care field

- Interdisciplinarity is high and a clear strength of social work research in this field.
- But is social work research becoming co-opted by health focus?
- Need more research examining the diversity and complexity of social work with older people and its outcomes.
- Need to increase involvement of older people in research
- Need to increase funding base and support early career researchers.
- How to build the profile of ‘gerontological social work’ in Australia?
Child Protection

- 2007-2014 (7.5 year period) 255 papers with Australian SW authors, average 35 papers per annum
- 66% of authors published only once during the period; 15 authors published 6 or more (around 1 per annum).
- Australian researchers are not parochial – 40% of publications were in international journals (mostly child welfare journals rather than SW).
- Most common topics were out of home care and child protection systems (topics reflect most frequent authors).
- 47% non-empirical, 33% qualitative, 10% quantitative, 10% mixed methods. (Tilbury, Hughes, Bigby & Osmond, 2017)

Key messages for child protection field

- Large number of researchers is a plus, but once-only publishers is concerning – need to develop SW research careers
- Sustained programs of research indicate depth and focus
- Research has international significance
- How to increase visibility of SW research base, given SW is a leading profession in the field

Disability

- 124 SW papers between 2007 to 2015, average 13.8 p.a. & growing
- 3 authors accounted for 63.0% with most authors only publishing once.
- Most articles were published by interdisciplinary journals and 79.0% were authored by a multidisciplinary team.
- Research tended to be descriptive - dominant topics were health and wellbeing (n=34: 27.4%) community and civic participation (n=28: 22.6%).
- Gender, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, rural and remote issues and use of participatory methods are gaps. (Bigby, Tilbury & Hughes, 2017)

Key messages for disability field

- Multidisciplinary teams is a plus
- Social work disability research makes a distinctive contribution; it is contextualised in service systems or policy, has a focus on community and civic participation and social relationships
- Make the social work connection explicit, in order to enhance SW research visibility and application in practice and education.

Australian social work research compared

- ERA 2012, ERA 2015, REF 2014: Within Australia, social work research quality rated well compared to criminology and policy & administration.
- SW productivity per FTE slightly lower; policy & administration generated around double the income.
- Most SW research funding from government and industry, about 20% Aust competitive grants (compared to 50% for crim)
- 30% of Australian submissions compared to 70% of UK submissions achieved a rating of excellent or world leading.
- Adding impact measures to Australia’s research assessment criteria likely to benefit social work.

UK Research Assessment Exercise

- Examining RAE results began to explain limits of social work research influence on practice and evidence based policy.
- The numbers of researchers and funding was small, much less than other applied disciplines in health care.
- From 1996 to 2001 the quality of research improved but resources and the number of researchers and research centres was the same – issue of critical mass (Fisher & Marsh, 2003).
Importance of research

- All types of (good) research are useful - not just evidence of what works
- Inform policies, program design and implementation.
- Innovative ways of working in the human services.
- Extend the evidence base for interventions.
- Strengthen professional foundations for practice impact and advocacy.
- Theory development is vital e.g., critical reflection requires theory.
- Research is crucial to place of social work in universities

Challenges

- Low investment in social work related research and supporting infrastructure (requires sustained programs of research).
- Inadequate workforce training and career development.
- Tensions between research and practice

Discussion Points

- The value of research to the profession
- Strengths and limitations of social work research
- Research foundations for practice impact and advocacy
- How can researchers be supported to move beyond a single publication?
- Strategies for building social work research

More information on Griffith Uni website


Or go to www.griffith.edu.au and search for ‘advancing social work’

References