

# **Knowledge co-creation and university-agency partnerships: magic concepts to close the research-practice gap?**

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The move towards evidence-based practice and policy in social work has been accompanied by an increasing recognition of a 'cultural gap' between research, policy and practice. Managers and practitioners often do not implement the direct findings from academic research. At the same time, researchers often fail to integrate the perspectives of practitioners in developing research designs and interpreting research findings. Shonkoff (2000), among other authors, portrays the research, policy and practice communities as three separate cultures, defined by unique characteristics, yet with similar goals. During the last years concepts as 'co-production' or 'co-creation' (e.g. Regeer & Bunders, 2009) and initiatives as 'agency-university partnerships' (e.g. Bellamy, Bledsoe, Mullen, Fang & Manuel, 2008) are embraced as new 'magic concepts' and strategies for closing this gap. To produce outcomes that really matter, it is increasingly recognized that relevant stakeholders (policy-makers, practitioners, service-users and researchers) should be involved in social work research. But beyond theoretical considerations, we know little about the implementation of those concepts or what the possibilities and the barriers are. In this paper we reflect upon a partnership between the university of Leuven and a social service agency. Our methods, techniques (a mixed advisory board, discussion days about the literature review, in-depth-interviews with service users, participant observations of client-worker interactions, homogeneous and heterogeneous focus groups, ...) and the possibilities, pitfalls and bottlenecks of our project will be discussed and embedded in a broader discourse on different types of knowledge, knowledge creation and power dynamics. We illustrate the ethical complexities of service-user involvement and reflect upon the specific position and task of the practitioner-researcher (who works both at the university and the social service agency) as an intermediary and facilitator of a joint learning process.

Keywords: co-creation, university-agency partnerships, service-user involvement