The Transforming Methodology of Social Work Practice Research

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This paper describes and reflects the recent multifaceted developments of practice research methods at Heikki Waris Institute in collaboration with the Department of Social Research and the municipalities of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. During the past ten years the agents of the Institute – professors, lecturers, students, research social workers as well as in the field - have developed a cyclic and collaborative method of functioning. It consists of three elements: 1) collaborative developing of social services, 2) trialogical learning in close connection with 3) research. We have recently gained evidence that this model of vivid and ongoing collaboration relationships can also serve as a base for novel openings in research methods. The first case is a study which promotes and investigates the idea of collaborative discovery as a form of service between social workers and a group of clients with similar experiences. Originally the idea of collaborative discovery was an unexpected result of a previous project with unemployed young people. Presently the young, who have experienced a child protection intervention, are developing new identities and improving skills for social life in co-operation with professionals. Do these experiments also lead to a professional method of collaboration? The second case is a study of the relations of space and social interaction in municipal social welfare agencies. It is testing whether experimenting and prototyping in a space is a valid research method by asking: what are the benefits and challenges of the method in relation to the aims of social work practice research? Also this study has its origins in the previous research findings of the Institute. Finally, and in the light of the research examples, the paper concludes the potentials of the collaborative approach for the progress of the research methods in the future.