

4. The Research–Practice Relationship and the Work of Edward Mullen

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Abstract

The question of the relationship between research and practice is longstanding and central to our understanding of how to improve social work practice. Mullen's work on practitioner–researcher collaboration has contributed a key perspective by emphasizing the need for mutual respect and outlining how to overcome barriers such as communication (particularly stereotyping) and philosophy (explanation vs. prediction as a goal). This chapter will initially contrast Mullen's early work on this topic while at the University of Chicago with his later work at the Center for Social Work Research at Columbia University, which were separated by 19 years and substantial developments in social work research. We then explore this issue in relation to the now substantial body of work on family group conferences. This field is interesting because the research has originated in practice innovation (rather than arising from researchers), a process characterized as enquiring social work practice. Analysis has suggested that despite this process and the collaborative ethos that Mullen's work embodies, advocates of evidence-based practice remain unconvinced of the need to engage directly with practice to develop knowledge. In particular, these advocates misrepresent the work because they fail to understand the model, what makes it work, and why it matters. This leads to an analysis of structural issues related to practitioners developing greater research literacy and the need for researchers to become practice literate. Finally, we note that there remains an additional step to involve the third player in this debate: the people who use services.

4.1 Introduction

The theme of this chapter is Ed Mullen's contribution to the evolving relationship between research and practice. One of the advantages of a retrospective (particularly of a long academic life) is to examine how positions emerge and develop over long periods of time, rather than as responses to transient circumstances. If we chart the explosion of social work knowledge from the 1960s to the present day, Mullen's work spans this entire period, starting from his position in 1967 as a lecturer in the Graduate School of Social Work at Adelphi University and culminating in his position in 2015 as emeritus professor at Columbia University School of Social Work.

During this period, we saw the significant growth of scientific research in social work, including the development of task-centered practice as one of the first models emerging from practice itself and the evolution of empirically based practice to challenge assumptions that professional values are a sufficient basis for intervention. On either side of the millennium, we saw the rise and then the decline of evidence-based policy and practice (EBP) as the core framework for understanding the relationship between research and practice. As the 21st century enters its mid-teens, we are seeing a resurgence of practice research that emerges from and directly addresses social work practice.

This is therefore an old issue in social work, but one that requires constant negotiation. The use of research-based knowledge is intended to increase the likelihood that people will benefit from social work. Problems in the relationship between research and practice thus jeopardize the welfare of social work clients. These problems include the fact that in many developed countries, the production of research-based knowledge has been separated from practice: university-based scholars undertaking research are rarely directly involved in practice. One result is that research is rarely driven by questions arising from practice and rarely oriented toward developing practice models that work in day-to-day services. Instead, national research agendas are driven by policy makers or the interests of researchers and tend to focus more on understanding social issues than on practice that would

provide working solutions (Stevens, Liabo, Witherspoon, & Roberts, 2009). Conversely, practitioners tend not to focus on research as a way of improving services, relying instead on their professional values and practice wisdom.

The position has been made worse by some versions of EBP. In the United Kingdom and North America, some advocates of EBP have displayed a lack of empathy toward practice, sometimes to the point of alienating their audience. Although Sackett and Haynes (1996) insisted in their definition of evidence-based medicine on the "integration of individual clinical expertise with best available external evidence from systematic research" (p. 380), Macdonald and Sheldon's (1998) adaptation of the definition to evidence-based social work entirely omits the reference to professional expertise in interpreting evidence:

Evidence based social care is the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions regarding the welfare of those in need. (p. 11)

Researchers may even blame practitioners for obstructing research:

For example, practitioners have provided the experimental intervention to the control group. Some practitioners ... just forget; others feel bad for the client and decide (without telling the researcher) that their concern for the client takes precedence over the research design. Still, others, despite saying that they understand the research design, really do not understand it—and thus do not even realize that they are violating it (Rubin, 2006, p. xiii).

In this landscape of distrust and blame, what lessons can we derive from Mullen's work on the relationship between research and practice?

4.1.1 An Early Framework: 1978

In 1978, Mullen published "The Construction of Personal Models for Effective Practice: A Method for Utilizing Research Findings to Guide Social Interventions." This was a complex attempt to describe a systematic

approach for practitioners to integrate research-based evidence into their working knowledge (personal practice models).

The paper has typical Mullenian touches. Rather than a purely theoretical piece, it drew on empirical experience of a research use project by the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago. The reference to personal practice models demonstrates a commitment to recognizing and understanding the working knowledge possessed by practitioners. The research–practice task is to integrate new evidence into practice knowledge (and never to suggest that research evidence simply replaces practice knowledge). Mullen (1978) acknowledged that practitioners draw on a range of evidence, including "principles and guidelines derived from practice wisdom and a priori reasoning" (p. 46). At the same time, he recognized that research often demonstrates that many interventions are found to be "relatively ineffective" (p. 47), echoing the strand of skeptical empiricism that so strongly characterizes North American social work research and is to some degree the hallmark of a researcher committed to using research to improve practice. Also typical of Mullen's approach is the clearly laid out, five-step process of research use, including significant attention even at this stage to the question of the adequacy of the evidence of effectiveness. Research outcomes were described as "asserted," and practitioners were asked to judge "the nature of the research designs and the threats to validity of each study" (p. 55).

As Mullen (1978) himself noted, however, this approach to ensuring research use is dependent on high-quality "secondary reviews of research findings, which in turn are dependent on quality primary research studies" (p. 59). Although he was optimistic that these resources were becoming increasingly available to practitioners, at this stage there was no questioning of the origins of the research or whether the practitioners should be involved in undertaking it. The job of the academic is to build better systems for ensuring that practitioners make use of research.

4.1.2 A Focus on Building Partnerships: 1995 Onward

Mullen's move to Columbia University in 1987 and his subsequent directorship of the Center for the Study of Social Work Practice beginning in 1992 crystallized some changes in his perspective on the relationship between research and practice. Shirley Jenkins, the founder of the center, had long sought to overcome the gap between research and practice through a close partnership with practice, initially the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services and subsequently a wide range of New York city and state agencies (Jenkins & Mattaini, 1992). These partnerships provided a different kind of dynamic between research and practice, one in which practice concerns became the reference point for research and development and the utility of research-based evidence was paramount.

This change in perspective is visible in a high-profile edited book published by Mullen in 1995 with Peg McCartt Hess: *Practitioner–Researcher Partnerships: Building Knowledge From, In, and for Practice*. Although the bulk of the book is a collection of 12 chapters from leading academics, it is the vision of the editors that provides a new perspective. After noting the "deepening rift between the research and practice communities" (p. 3), the editors called for "approaches that advance practitioner–researcher partnerships in generating knowledge" (p. 4). The authors detailed the issues in communication, power, autonomy, and epistemology that obstructed the development of partnerships.

Although partnership with practitioners has always been a theme in Mullen's work, the earlier approach was to ensure that knowledge created elsewhere was made available in a systematic and useful way to inform practice. The 1995 book signaled a new approach in which knowledge itself was to be jointly created, recognizing practitioners as informed colleagues in identifying research questions and collecting and analyzing data. Writing three years later in the *Scandinavian Journal of Social Welfare*, Mullen (1998) reinforced these themes. He noted that "university-based social work researchers have too often engaged in research that has proved of little relevance in practice" (p. 157) and that the key task was "to narrow the gap

between the practice and research communities that mitigates against development of relevant practice knowledge" (p. 152).

Evidencing a trend in his thinking that would ultimately prove influential in his approach to EBP, Mullen (1998) went to argue that "good practice must ultimately be judged by the utility and generalizability of the findings for social work practice. One way to increase the likelihood of utility and generalizability is to conduct the research in universities and social agency partnerships" (p. 158).

Thus, in the 20 years between 1978 and 1998, Mullen's work demonstrated a key change in the epistemology of social work knowledge. The application of social science methods to social work in the 1960s had been extremely damaging, despite (often) the best of intentions. Research had shown poor outcomes for social work interventions and worse still, had cemented the gap between practitioners and university-based researchers. Mullen's initial attempts focused on mitigating the alienation that practitioners felt from research by devising detailed processes for assimilating research-based evidence into practice. Later, the problem was seen much more clearly in terms of the process of knowledge generation, and Mullen's work from the 1990s onward signaled the key change toward a respectful partnership with practitioners and a recognition of the value of the "process of building knowledge from, in, and for social work practice" (Mullen, 1998, p. 157).

4.2 The Example of Family Group Conferences

The development of family group conferences, as a model emerging from practice and only subsequently explored by researchers, exemplifies many of the issues that are central to improving the research–practice relationship.

Family group conferences provide a model for making serious social work and social care decisions about the welfare of children, young people, and adults. Their major development has been in the children's sector, derived primarily from the work of practitioners in New Zealand in the 1980s (see Marsh & Crow, 1998). The conferences involve the extended family and in

essence ask the family to decide whether or not there is a welfare problem of a severity that needs action and if so, what action should be taken. To answer these questions, the professionals, typically social workers, provide information to the family about the problem or problems, resources that could help, and any legal issues that may dictate that some options are unacceptable. The conferences are convened by a coordinator who is independent of social services and who carefully contacts the extended family, prepares them and the professionals for the conference, and chairs the conference itself (in an active manner). At the heart of the conference, following a period of information giving and exchange between professionals and family, is a period of private family time during which the family debates the two key questions (concerning the nature and severity of the problem and what should be done). The resulting decisions are refined and recorded during the final part of the conference. The conferences rely on social services providers making a strong commitment to carry out the family plans unless there are serious legal reasons not to, in which case arguments against the plan should be made during the conference.

These conferences have shown an ability to involve many more extended family members when compared with other forms of decision-making practice and to generate significant additional family resources for children, with a strongly increased likelihood that the family will decide to retain their care within the family network (Marsh & Crow, 1998).

Since the mid-1980s, there has been worldwide growth in family group conferences. By 2005 they were established in at least 17 countries, including Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Brazil, the Netherlands, and South Africa (Nixon, Burford, Quinn, & Edelbaum, 2005). It is clear that the conferences' focus on reflecting the culture of the family concerned, unique to each family's particular context, can allow them to be used in highly different cultural and national settings (e.g., Roby, Pennell, Rotabi, Bunkers, & de Ucles, 2014). On the other hand, the great majority of reported projects are from the United States (143 of the 225 respondents to the 2005 survey by Nixon and colleagues).

Although the spread of family group conferences has been substantial, the quantity in any one country has often been limited. Outside of New Zealand, where they are part of the law, they are nearly always carried out as projects rather than mainstream activities. In the United Kingdom, for example, it took approximately 15 years to build up to nearly 70 projects, with the majority performing small numbers of conferences each year, and another 10 years to add approximately 10 more projects to this total (Brown, 2015).

4.2.1 Practice Context

There are many reasons for the remarkable, albeit slow and patchy, spread of this decision-making model. We will highlight several with particular relevance to how research and practice interact in this area.

- Family group conferences are by any standard a radical change to past professional practice in decision-making conferences. For example, the family effectively invites the staff to the conference, not the other way round, and the family, not the staff, meets alone to consider what is to be done.
- As previously noted, they are still relatively small in scale (88 of 196 projects reviewed by Nixon and colleagues in 2005 had involved fewer than 10 conferences during the previous year). So the practice is relatively scarce.
- The practice is simple to describe but surprisingly complex in practice because of the very wide diversity of families and situations that are directly reflected in the process; for example, family members who attend often vary widely in number, advocates may be used in different ways, the conferences can take short or very long periods of time, and so on.

The practice is therefore difficult to understand and to engage with, providing an ideal example to consider in the context of practice–research relationships.

4.2.2 Research Context

There is now a substantial body of research regarding family group conferences (or in a few cases claiming to be about conferences, a point we

will return to later). A literature search for the term *family group conference* yields hundreds of references, but a more reliable review by Connolly, Morris, Pennell, and Burford in 2009 found approximately 70 research studies. By 2015, the number is certainly well more than 100.

Studies have covered the format of the conferences (timing, venues, cost, etc.), the people invited and attending and their responses, and key principles such as views on private family time, the work of coordinators, the welfare decisions that can be covered, and the implementation process. There is certainly a major body of research that has a strong connection with practice.

4.2.3 Practice—Research Relationship

So given a complex practice and a substantial body of research, what is the relationship between practice and research and how does this example relate to the work of Mullen?

A significant number of studies have been sponsored by practice agencies, and some have been undertaken by practitioners themselves. Practice has taken the lead in involving research, in contrast to some of Mullen's examples in which the research community initiated the relationship. For their part, researchers to some degree also think the practice is worth researching and there are some major research projects that have been undertaken. However, despite the positive evidence for the model that is conveyed by the studies, there is still difficulty in getting the practice beyond the project stage, as previously noted.

Despite an apparent joint approach to generating knowledge, practitioners are clearly not responding as fast, or as much, as would be expected to this substantial body of positive research. This may be due to the general lack of research in so many social work practice areas (Marsh & Fisher, 2005)—a context that could well generate a low level of interest, engagement, or knowledge about research on family group conferences. It may also be related to a lack of critical appraisal skills when reading the research and a feeling that they "do all that already"; in addition, practitioners may feel that

they lack the agency to act on the research due to constraints of the growing "rulebook culture" of much modern social work practice (Marsh, 1986, 2008). It may be due to the role of research as a practice driver. For example, Rauktis, McCarthy, Krackhardt, and Cahalane (2010) found that a major influence in the adoption of the conference model was having it introduced by a neighboring service agency. As in other professions, it is often practice colleagues who are the most influential in driving change.

This example also demonstrates the enduring concern identified by Mullen regarding whether or not researchers truly understand the practice. Some researchers seem to struggle to pay sufficient attention to understanding the model that they are researching. Family group conferences constitute a decision-making process. The decision itself can be studied and assessed, but in the months following this decision there will be many service, family, and contextual differences that affect postconference outcomes.

Welfare, health, and social outcomes will have a sophisticated relationship with the decision made at the conference. Yet some researchers fail to analyze this and focus on outcomes as if they are independent of the quality or quantity of service that a child actually receives following the conference decision (e.g., Berzin, 2006; Sundell & Vinnerljung, 2004). Others fail to recognize the problem, reporting the studies as important evidence (Little, 2011), whereas others include them in major systematic reviews designed to analyze "rigorous comparison group evaluations" (Lee, Aos, & Miller, 2008, p. 1) despite the substantial underlying mistake regarding the purpose of conferences. Confusing the conference purpose can be compounded by major problems regarding model fidelity. For example, Berzin (2006) and the 2008 systematic review by Lee et al. included projects involving conferences that had no private family time, despite this being a core part of the model (Merkel-Holguin & Marcynyszyn, 2015; Rauktis, Bishop-Fitzpatrick, Jung, & Pennell, 2013).

Despite a model of the research–practice relationship that should generate a greater commitment among practitioners and focus research more directly on practice issues, progress is slow. We have some practitioners seemingly

not responding, or at least responding very slowly, to the positive research messages about conferences, and we have some researchers carrying out major research studies that misunderstand the practice. Put differently, the good practice development does not seem to be making the most of the research and good research is hampered by some studies that profoundly mistake the nature of the model in terms of purpose and method.

What does this tell us about the research practice relationship and Mullen's call for a more equal partnership?

4.3 A Research-Competent Practice Community and a Practice-Competent Research Community

Mullen's work acts as a significant guidepost in the changing relationship between research and practice, demonstrating the need to build long-term knowledge production partnerships between universities and agencies and pay close attention to ways of building on the knowledge already held by practitioners. However, the evolution of EBP has recreated the very structural inequalities that Mullen identified as in need of review. Significant strands of EBP have demonstrated a disdain for and distance from practice that have no place in partnerships for knowledge production (Fisher, 2011, 2013). The example of family group conferences demonstrates the difficulty of "building knowledge from, in, and for social work practice" (Mullen, 1998, p. 157). In essence, structural weaknesses in practice hamper its ability to develop its own knowledge base and leave it unable to play an equal role in the relationship with research.

Building on Mullen's work, therefore, requires attention to structural aspects of the research—practice relationship designed to achieve a greater prominence for research in the practice world and a greater prominence for practice in the research world. This not the venue to develop detailed arguments, but we can identify the main issues that need to be addressed.

Starting with practice, we have argued for a research-competent practice (Marsh, 2007) in which practitioners start from the premise of needing,

having access to, and engaging strongly with the best research. The intention is to make science "genuinely intrinsic" (Marsh, 2007, p. 18) to social work—in terms of qualifying education, subsequent access to research training, and opportunities to receive research funding—and to engage on more equal terms with university-based colleagues. This echoes concerns in McCart Hess and Mullen's 1995 book to identify the conditions in which research partnerships can develop, with particular emphasis on differences in power and autonomy. Making science intrinsic to social work would also agree with Shaw, Lunt, and Mitchell's (2015) call for increased emphasis on practitioner research, in that research should increasingly spring from practice concerns and be underpinned by methods that are feasible in everyday services. However, we do not suggest that practitioner research should be regarded as a discrete form of research in its own right, nor that practitioner-led research has a distinctive contribution to knowledge that cannot be achieved through research with shared origins.

From a research perspective, we have argued for the development of problem-solving knowledge for practice (Marsh & Fisher, 2008) and practice-literate research (Fisher, 2011, 2013). This will require social work researchers to give as much emphasis to their practice literacy as they want practitioners to give to their research literacy. To achieve this, the research community needs different principles. For example, the starting point for research needs to be the concerns of practitioners, rather than the priorities of researchers or policy makers; the assumption should be that practitioners already possess relevant knowledge and the research objective is to build on it with the goal of not only generating understanding but also testing models that work in day-to-day practice.

The emergence of practice research (see Austin, Fisher, & Uggerhøj, 2014; Marthinsen, Julkunen, Uggerhøj, Rasmussen, & Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2012) offers a model for achieving this goal. Practice research is defined as research that "originates in the concerns of practice and develops practice-based solutions; and is based on a collaborative, developmental approach that respects the knowledge held by practitioners, and engages practitioners in

the research process" (Fisher, 2013, p. 25). The most developed model, in Finland, places university researchers in agency settings and engages practitioners in developing their research skills on projects that respond to their concerns (see Julkunen, 2011). Julkunen (2011) argues that the model changes the basis of knowledge production: "Social-work-practice research knowledge is tied to the need to develop practice. It promotes interaction and equal discussion among different actors in order to enable change" (p. 64).

These structural issues in the research–practice relationship can almost always be overcome through goodwill and mutual respect (as Mullen's work demonstrates), but their influence is so pervasive that they need to be addressed if joint knowledge production is to become the norm.

Two further factors must also be addressed to build on Mullen's work on the research–practice relationship. First, the research–practice relationship has three interested parties rather than just two; the third partner is people with experience of services, whose direct knowledge of the processes of receiving interventions and the outcomes they seek should be part of high-quality knowledge production. The original Salisbury Statement on practice research (Salisbury Forum Group, 2011), for example, emphasized that people who use services are partners in knowledge production, and the later update by Austin et al. (2014) called for practice research "to actively include service users and engage in inter-disciplinary dialogue about the connections to survivor research carried out primarily by service users" (p. 13).

The final issue is the strength of research findings and their influence on practice, an issue to which Mullen himself has recently returned (Mullen, 2015). In stressing how evidence should inform practice, EBP advocates have tended to rely on a hierarchy of research-based knowledge, emphasizing the superior knowledge claims of trials involving randomization. Such trials are relatively rare in social work (compared with health care), expensive and difficult to achieve successfully, and many organizations producing guidelines for practice (such as the Social Care Institute for Excellence and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in the United

Kingdom) embrace a more inclusive approach to what counts as evidence (see Fisher, 2014; Kelly et al., 2010). Critical to this approach is the concept of evidential relevance, or "the applicability of the evidence to outcomes of interventions in contexts which are typical of where policies, programs, and services will actually be provided in the complexity of service organizations" (Mullen, 2015, p. 4).

Mullen's call to incorporate relevance as a key criterion in evidence assessment is a profound challenge to the research community, and one that emphasizes the need to recognize the importance of the knowledge held by practitioners. Fundamental scientific principles about the quality of evidence that should influence practice must be set in the context of practitioners' knowledge of operational conditions that influence whether that evidence is actually useful in practice. Once again, we are returned to the key issue at the heart of social work research and of Mullen's work—the quality of the relationship between research and practice.

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