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# Promoting a practice-minded culture in research organizations

# Het bevorderen van een praktijkgerichte cultuur in onderzoeksorganisaties

# Promouvoir une culture de la pratique dans les organismes de recherche

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*Very few people will doubt the need to use science to improve the results of social work practice wherever possible. A European meeting in 2009, comprising social work researchers, practitioners and policymakers, expressed concern that the available results of social work research are underused, and that the relation between science and practice can be improved. The meeting called for a research-minded practice. In this article, we build on three case studies of urban social work research to explore a new perspective in which, in addition to a research-minded practice, practice-minded research is needed to bridge the gap between science and practice.*

*Keywords: Evidence Based Practice; Social Work Research; Diffusion of Innovation*

*Weinigen zullen betwijfelen dat het nuttig is om onderzoek te gebruiken om de praktijk van sociaal werk te versterken. Een Europees congres eind 2009, met deelnemers uit*

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*sociaal werk onderzoek, beleid en praktijk, formuleerde bezorgdheid over het onderge-bruik van de beschikbare resultaten uit sociaal werk onderzoek en de moeizame verhouding tussen wetenschap en praktijk. Het congres riep op om te komen tot een onderzoeksgerichte cultuur in sociaal werk praktijk. In dit artikel gebruiken we drie casestudies van stedelijk sociaal werk onderzoek om een nieuw aanvullend perspectief te ontwikkelen, namelijk dat van een praktijkgerichte cultuur in onderzoeksorganisaties.*

*Personne ne doutera du fait que l'amélioration des pratiques et résultats du travail social demande de recourir, lorsque cela est possible, à la recherche. Lors d'un colloque européen en 2009, rassemblant des chercheurs en travail social, des praticiens et des acteurs politiques, il a été souligné que les résultats pertinents de la recherche sur le travail social étaient sous-utilisés, et que les relations entre science et pratiques pouvaient être améliorées. Les participants du colloque en ont alors appelé à une pratique attentive à la recherche. Dans cet article, fondé sur trois études de cas de recherches conduites sur le travail social urbain, nous élaborons une nouvelle perspective pour laquelle, en plus d'une pratique attentive à la recherche il conviendrait de faire de la recherche attentive à la pratique, afin de réduire le fossé qui sépare souvent science et pratique.*

## Introduction: the need for science and the quality chasm

Within both social work research and social work practice (and among those who fund both), there seems to be a widespread consensus about two elements. One is that social work practice, in order to be efficient and effective, can and should be informed by results from research, be it social work research or from allied sciences such as sociology or psychology. The other is that practitioners could benefit more from existing research results.

Just as patients want to be treated by a dentist who has kept up with developments in their profession since graduation, clients want to be dealing with a social worker or community development worker who has kept up to date with professional developments. Professionals learn, first of all, in and from practice; and secondly, from effectiveness research on interventions. Consequently, in several Western countries, there is a quest for evidence based social work, conducted with a zeal comparable to the quest to turn ordinary metal into gold. Practitioners, however, often lack time and scientific support to really learn from these experiences. We know from effectiveness research that good intentions and hard work alone are not enough to make good practice. Some well-meant interventions have adverse effects, where the

desired results are not achieved, or other unforeseen effects make for negative net total results. Examples from other professional fields can serve as clear warnings for such adverse effects of interventions. While the chemical DDT was good for a Nobel Prize in 1948 and used widely as a pesticide and in the fight against malaria, it was only after Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring* that the negative effects changed usage. Closer to social work, there is the famous example of the 'scared straight' intervention, aimed at preventing crime by taking young (potential) delinquents on prison visits. Although initial evaluation showed some positive effects, later research convincingly showed not only smaller effects but even negative effects (Finckenauer & Gavin, 1999; Petrosino *et al.*, 2000).

These examples come from different professions and times, indicating that well-meant interventions can and do still include the risk of adverse effects. Clients expect professionals such as social workers to be aware of such possibilities, to keep up to date with outcomes of effectiveness research, and to adjust their professional interventions accordingly.

The other element of the general consensus is that current social work practice is not making full use of the available research results. Research has more to offer; there are missed opportunities in the sense that practitioners do not take full advantage of the existing research results. Consequently, the ceaseless call for more social work research is complemented by a call for increased implementation of research results in social work practice.

Social work is not alone in seeing a divide between research and practice. These calls echo across what has been called the 'quality chasm':

> In any one societal sector (populated, for example, by food-based micro-entrepreneurs, or city-level transportation and parkway planners, or nursing home owners and staff), the state of the science (what researchers collectively know) and the state of the art (what practitioners collectively do) coexist more or less autonomously, each realm of activity having little effect on the other. In the United States, this situation has been referred to as a 'quality chasm' by the US Institute of Medicine. (Dearing, 2009, p. 504)

### Stickiness of research results

The chasm between research results on the one hand and practice on the other is not uniform. There are varieties in the sense that some social work practice organizations have a well established record in reaching out to research and implementing relevant findings in their work, e.g. Barnardo's in the UK (Frost, 2007). Also, some social work interventions seem to travel well across the divide between research and practice, and find their way easily into a wide variety of social work agencies, e.g. Triple P Positive Parenting programme or family group conferencing (Brown, 2007). Other social interventions, such as community mediation, are implemented, evaluated and tested around the world (Spierings & Peper, 2002). Apparently some social work organizations and some interventions make research 'stick' to their practice, and some research results have a higher 'stickiness factor' than other research.

These concepts are well known from the field of economic geography. Scholars identified 'sticky places' where the production industry tends to locate and stay more readily than in 'slippery places' (Markusen, 1996), or 'cherry picking' where producers are selective in the markets where they target their products and services (Graham & Marvin, 2001, p. 233). An example could be found in a map of the UK published by the BBC early in 2009 indicating where wireless access to the Internet was available. It was clear the hotspots concentrated in the big cities, whereas the rural areas where wireless Internet access would be very useful were labelled as nonspots. These rural areas were clearly not a sticky place for this technology. This also relates to the work of Everett Rogers on the diffusion of innovations, and how several characteristics of both the innovation as well as the adopter and their context may result in differential uptake across time and space (Rogers, 2003).

The examples of Barnardo's, Triple P and community mediation are exceptional. Social work and social work organizations seem to function as slippery places, where the overwhelming majority of research results fail to stick. Social work research results seldom seem to inspire social work practice. Most research appears to be stemming from Anglo-Saxon countries (like the three examples above), with a strong tradition of evidence based work, and other countries mainly have to rely on translating and adapting the outcomes to their local contexts.

The remedies being suggested tend to aim to change social workers and their organizations into sticky places, where research results are easily picked up and translated into practice. These remedies include focus on the research mindedness of social workers, including an increased attention to research attitudes and skills in social work education. Implementing research skills and the appropriate attitudes in social work education would generate 'the research-minded practitioner who is seen as essential to development and long-term survival of social work within these fragmented and contested times' (McLaughlin, 2007, p. 12).

Additionally, there has been some focus on the way social work organizations relate to research results. Such analysis has partly been descriptive in nature, but underlying this there was always the prescriptive notion that social work agencies should be thinking about and developing towards research-informed practice (McLaughlin, 2007, p. 166). One of the key documents in this area was commissioned by the UK's Social Care Institute of Excellence (SCIE) and described a typology with three models (Walter *et al.*, 2004). There is, first, the research-based practitioner model in which the main bridge between research and practice is the individual practitioner, who keeps up to date with what research has to offer in relation to his/her practice. Secondly, there is the embedded research model in which research results are taken on board in standards and procedures, and thus enter the processes of social work. Here it is no longer the individual practitioner but the designers of the standards, procedures and the like who are the bridge between research and practice. Finally, there is the third model of organizational excellence. Here, it is the leadership and management of a social work organization which guarantee a research-minded organization culture. These three models are

not mutually exclusive, but complementary to each other. This typology has been widely-cited, and some have expanded it, e.g. with the model of the learning organization (McLaughlin, 2007, p. 171).

This type of analysis has focused on the differential slippery nature of social work organizations and identified key elements that can make them more 'sticky places' where research results are more likely to inform practice.

Some initiatives do not rely solely on the stickiness of social work organizations, but have developed intermediary structures, bridging the distance between social work research and social work practice. One could label them as research warehouses, where the collective output of the research community is shelved and displayed and made attractive for 'shopping' practitioners (or their policymakers or managers). They basically follow the idea of the Cochrane collaboration in medical sciences. Social work variants include the Campbell collaboration, research in practice and making research count. Together, such initiatives have been referred to as 'the evidence network' (Gray *et al.*, 2009).

Surprisingly, this focus on social work practice environments and the energy going into intermediary structures is not complemented by analysis of the research process itself. Overall, this part is considered to be an autonomous process, a black box of which only the outcomes are visible and need attention in order to get them informing practice. By not paying attention to the research process itself, all research is treated as having the same quality, as being equally sticky. The problem thus becomes mis-represented as solely the responsibility of social work practice, and not also the responsibility of social work research.

In this paper, we argue that a great deal can be gained in bridging the gap between social work research and practice by also looking into the research process. Can research be more or less sticky, interesting, influential? Equivalent to some practice being research-minded, some research can be practice-minded while some has little or no practice mindedness. Describing three case studies gathered in the context of the 2009 international conference on social work research and practice (Antwerp), we try to identify and explore some of the elements that might influence the practice-mindedness of social work research. What are the building blocks for an outreaching attitude of researchers towards their audience in professional practice? Are there any critical success factors within the production cycle of social work research that make research results sticky? With these questions in mind we turn now to our three cases.

## Case studies: Rotterdam, Saint Etienne, Eindhoven

### Rotterdam

In Rotterdam an inter-organizational management group asked a research team from Rotterdam University of Applied Science to develop an effectiveness assessment tool for a community development intervention called *Pact op Zuid*. The research team prepared a plan that was revised several times and then authorized by the programme manager of Pact op Zuid (Spierings & Meeuwisse, 2008).

Three types of organization were involved in formulating the central research question: the boroughs (responsible for Social Work and Public Space), the housing associations, and the city council. In total, this made for nine participating organizations. Together, these organizations acted as a public–private partnership targeting social, environmental, economic and safety issues in a comprehensive approach for a part of the city where 190,000 citizens live. The effectiveness assessment tool needed to satisfy the interests of all partners. Therefore, the definition of the research problem was considered to be important by all involved. The research team was asked to organize a level playing field from which each of the partners could assess the effects of the programme from both its own organizational objectives and the collective objectives.

The research project started in 2006 and was still running in 2010. The starting point is complex. Looking back, the decision to start the process by interviewing the executives of the nine organizations and several additional political representatives in order to define the research problem was crucial for the stickiness of the research results and the support for the tool in actual practice. Full text transcripts were written of each interview and evaluated by each executive. Also, a comprehensive report was written and presented to the inter-organizational management team. Researchers and practitioners (at strategic, tactical, and workplace levels) chose interchanging roles. The task of developing a tailor-made effectiveness assessment tool was organized as a learning network, in which a configuration of six people together developed products in constant communication. A lot of effort was put into an open communication strategy between the team members, in order to bridge the gap between social work research and practice by allowing practitioners (all of them academics) to influence the research process. Equivalent to some practice being research-minded, the research in Rotterdam was practice-minded.

The research team consisted of different roles: a policy advisor to the City, a university-programme manager, a professor, the programme manager of Pact op Zuid and several researchers. Also, different disciplines and competences were combined in the team: an economist-practitioner, an urban planner-practitioner, an information technologist-practitioner, an urban sociologist-researcher, social geo-grapher-statistician-researcher, and a psychologist-researcher. Some members of the team met weekly, others every month. Every team member contributed to the production of knowledge. The relations within the research team were non-hierarchical. The team members felt they were given an innovative task as a group: developing a multi-purpose information system. Group identification played in important part in order to be able to fulfil this task (Homan *et al.*, 2007).

The project was innovative in its publication culture and methods of dissemination. For every intended product (like picture books, poetry and visualized statistics) full colour, handmade prototype versions were developed, numbered and auto-graphed (signed) by the project leader. In addition plans were made for delivery, discussion, and consensus forming to and between the executives of the participating

organization for every product. Prototypes were developed by a two-person team (the urban sociologist and the psychologist). The prototypes were then discussed with the other team members (the advisor and the two programme managers and the statistician). This team discussed the content, form, quality, possible impact, strategy to present the final products to the executives and preparation of the decision making process by the executives.

Consequently, dissemination of research results started from day one. Meetings were organized at regular intervals in order to enhance flexibility in timing, flexibility in agenda and flexibility in methodology. There were horizontal relationships between participants, non-linear ways of working together. Attention was paid to the difficult phase of dissemination, when in-group identification of the products would be transferred to out-group identification. Other methods of dissemination were developed, by giving newly developed creative artefacts (handmade prototypes functioning as presents) to each new receptive audience. One of these artefacts (a very small booklet of 5 × 10 cm) was then produced in 500 copies, and executives were claiming this small book defined their workload because they finally had a smart instrument (Quote: 'This little booklet tells me what I have to do tomorrow. Now look at your dossier!'). Giving 'presents' like this small booklet and the limited edition numbered and autographed prototypes was done in order to use the idea of group identification to improve the publication culture, practice receptiveness and relevance of the research. Those working together knew each other and came to respect each other's commitment and professional qualities. By collectively translating the ideas to a wider circle, they transferred their mutual trust to other levels of decision making.

The research team received the assignment to develop a second edition in 2009. They were also contracted to develop a product covering every neighbourhood in the city as a whole. The research process and the cooperative knowledge production connected to it is ongoing (with the same team members except for one).

*Saint Etienne*

The social work project from Saint Etienne concerns a programme for local development for integration (insertion and assimilation of migrants) initiated by the national authorities in 1996 (ADLI, 'Agent de Développement Local pour l'Intégration', or agency for local development and integration). In 1996, when the ADLI mission was first conceived by the Ministry of Social Affairs together with a Turkish community organization, the target population was specifically Turkish migrants and the role of the ADLI social workers was a traditional mediator/ interpreter's one. This programme was an experimentation which derives from the French classical policy of not taking into account specific minorities as such (Autant-Dorier, 2008). Today the programme has been developed in 14 departments in France and the role of the ADLIs has changed into a mission of local development. The redefinition of the mission is one of the results of the collaboration between researchers and one of the main actors of this programme, CREFE (resource centre

for social workers and teachers on migration issues). This centre developed collaborations with researchers through an 'expert committee' which gave advice over several years. The sociology research centre of the University of St Etienne had a long tradition of applied research.

For the researcher, the key issues were: How to give a place and recognition to migrants in our society? What new social work practice is needed? Which competences and conditions must be guaranteed? The social partners, in turn, hoped that the researcher would enhance their understanding of the reasons why and how a scientific view on local development as a tool for integration opens important perspectives for the resolution of problems, in addition to supplementing the traditional social work approach.

The first step of collaboration was regional, consisting of an analysis of practices with social workers. The purpose was to understand what kind of social intervention they were developing and to give them support. At the end of 1999, a meeting for all ADLIs in France was organized at the national level. Employers and national authorities were also invited. A synthesis report was drafted and distributed to all participants. The quality of this document and the results of the observations led to the recognition of a methodology linked with local development. In 2000, the Ministry commissioned CREFE to coordinate a national network of ADLIs, including the participation of the researcher. The objectives were formulated by the CREFE's Director and the researcher and were then discussed with and approved by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

In 2004, the scope of intervention of the ADLI programme was extended to all migrants (and not just to Turks only) and expanded to new departments. The Ministry gave additional orientations to the research: they wanted CREFE to train the new partners (from the new ADLIs recruited in 2004 and also their employers and local policymakers), and they asked for evaluative reflections about their own priorities.

The methodology of research was oriented at being of immediate practical usefulness (a national meeting to share experiences, an Internet forum, a guidebook on the intervention process). Results of previous analyses were presented and discussed, and work was carried out on new themes like 'competences and training for ADLIs', 'conditions for a good implementation of the programme', and 'partner's relationship building'. Testimonies about experiences and practices were collected and analysed collectively. Everyone contributed to the production of knowledge. After each meeting, CREFE's Director, network animator, and the researcher transcribed the comments, identified the most significant ideas and edited analytical minutes on the main results. These were presented at another meeting or distributed to every participant in a paper version. Additionally, a specific training session for the ADLIs on 'local development and evaluation' was organized in 2007. This aimed at developing good practice, sharing experiences of the most experienced ADLIs, and transmitting some benchmarks for these issues.

Theoretical choices and tools for analysis were mainly proposed by the researcher, while the researcher sought as far as possible to learn from social workers. Today, it is not possible to say which idea was brought up by the researcher and which by the social workers or their managers; ideas were developed together, discussed and thought through. Products were written and co-signed by researchers and practitioners together.

Therefore, we acted on the conviction that there is no fundamental distinction between practitioners (here social workers) and scientists. This is definitely true in our case since the two persons in charge of the network and some of the social workers have masters degrees in sociology or political sciences. This is not about having on one side a scientist who says what is true and on the other a practitioner who does what is right. Both are producing knowledge, both are involved in social matters and uncertainty and both have a role to play as citizens (Callon *et al.*, 2001, 2009). The main advantage identified in this experience lies in pulling practitioners out of their daily work preoccupation and in drawing them into reflection and thinking, and *vice versa* for researchers.

### Eindhoven

There seems to be a long-term tradition of doubting the efficiency and effectiveness of social work, greatly influenced in the 1970s by Joel Fischer, the 'father of professional doubt' (see www.historyofsocialwork.org). His publications had telling titles like 'Is casework effective?' and 'Does anything work?' (Fischer, 1973, 1978). Note the use of the question marks! In the Netherlands, the impact of this work was substantially increased by work from scholars such as Hans Achterhuis. For any profession, doubt can be healthy, and can be a critical ingredient of a reflexive practice. This resulted in social work having to account for its efficiency and effectiveness. Accountability can be a great incentive to become (or remain) a learning profession.

In the Netherlands the framework for accountability is predominantly at the city level, as social policy became decentralized under the 1994 Welfare Law and more recently under the Social Support Act of 2007. The city council and the alderman responsible for social welfare develop the social policy and annually contract out the necessary work to private social work agencies. Typically, social work is carried out by subsidized non-profit organizations and not by the local authority itself, nor by commercial organizations (subsidies are gradually being replaced by tendering processes). Each year, non-profit organizations have to (re)negotiate their contracts with the local authority, and account for the work done the previous year. Most Dutch local authorities use the so-called policy-steered contract-financing methodology (in Dutch the 'beleidsgestuurde contractfinanciering', known as the BCF-methodology).

In recent years, there has been a growing concern that the way accountability is organized becomes a bureaucratic burden that draws resources away from the real work.

Within the context of a long-term research cooperation between the city of Eindhoven, Fontys University of Applied Sciences and local social work agencies, a research project was carried out to improve the accountability processes to contribute more to the quality of social work. Over the course of about 10 months, research staff from Fontys, staff from the city council, and staff from three social work agencies worked together to outline the weaknesses of the current procedures and to design improvements. Rather than the local authority or the agencies providing financial resources to the research institute, they committed their staff to become temporary partners in the research endeavour. Building on the experience in earlier joint research projects, the relations within the research team were described as 'non-hierarchical'. This implied that staff from a participating social work agency were more than a data source on their accountability procedures; they were involved in the definition of the research problem and the analysis of the data, the literature review, reporting of results and other aspects of the research. A critical precondition for this way of working was the availability of some resources at the research institute that were not earmarked for specific projects, but available to work on research questions emerging from practice.

The results of this project were published in a book (Steyaert & van den Biggelaar, 2008a) as well as in an article in the national social work journal (Steyaert & van den Biggelaar, 2008b). Both are published as open-access and consequently are freely available through the Internet (see http://www.steyaert.org/jan/publicaties/2008EigentijdsMeten.pdf). Interestingly, even two years later these publications are still being downloaded more than 300 times per month, which is almost certainly a much higher figure than the average number of times a printed article is looked at. Results from the research project were also reported and discussed in a meeting with the alderman and members of the city council, and used in teaching activities in the school of social work. The research team also met and discussed results with the people who designed and currently maintain the BCF-methodology at the national level.

Having described three of the case studies gathered in the context of the 2009 international conference on social work research and practice (Antwerp), we return to our exploration of the building blocks of practice-minded social work research. We can extract three such building blocks from our cases (other cases are described in the other articles to this special issue of the journal, and add to our analysis). These relate to the process of research—the start of the research, the research process itself and the (dissemination of) outcomes of the research.

## Where does the research question come from?

Discussion on the use of research in professional practice often focuses on the end results of research processes, on whether the outcomes are used in practice or professionals have access to and read the scholarly journals. Such an approach treats science as a black box of which only the use of the outcomes is relevant, and their

quality should be sufficient to guarantee usage. Our cases indicate that such focus unnecessarily limits the discussion. A fertile relationship between research and practice already starts at the very beginning of any research endeavour, with the identification of the research question. Practice can be involved in defining the research question, not as an object but as an active subject. As such, dissemination of research results, or at least investing in a context that has 'sticky' receptiveness to research results, starts from day one. What is needed is not a token representative of social work practice sitting in on committees that decide on research funding, but a more extensive openness of research agendas for the full complexity of practice, researchers participating in meetings of practitioners, and practitioners co-defining research problems and developing research plans. Flexibility on the part of social work researchers seems to be a critical success factor to achieve this flexibility in methodology and flexibility in timing and resources.

The (lack of) *flexibility in methodology* in research has been caricatured by referring to the scientist as Procrustes,[1] a character from Greek mythology. On the well-travelled road between Athens and Eleusis, he ran a small hotel. Procrustes apparently had the idea that every guest had to fit the size of his beds, and stretched those who were too short or amputated body parts from those who were too tall. Eventually, so the myth goes, he was killed by Theseus who forced Procrustes to make his own body fit his beds.

In the caricature scientists have been described as a modern variety of Procrustes who make problems fit their methodology by stretching and amputation. Scientists familiar with survey and SPSS or SAS will know the research practice of redefinition, fragmentation and reduction of any research problem until it becomes a problem that fits these methodologies. That is, of course, contrary to the underlying values of research methodology, by which one has to choose those methodologies that fit the research question and not the other way around.

Scientists who aim to follow the problem as co-defined by practice will need not only flexibility in methodology, but also *flexibility in timing*. Social problems do not follow the deadlines of research funding organizations, and sometimes practice can't wait to address the problems while the time for the writing and acceptance of a research proposal passes and eventually the research is carried out. Social workers cannot 'freeze' emerging social problems until sufficient research results are available to inform their practice. The problems social work is facing are time-sensitive, and consequently do not have the same stability over time as problems in the area of physics or medical care; rather they change with developments in society and constantly need fine tuning for the right social intervention (see e.g. Steyaert & Gould, 2009).

In the three cases it becomes evident that each research deals with an emergent matter for social-urban policies. Research appears as an intrinsic part of the local public policy development itself. Social policy experimentation and the timing of research coincide. The researcher chooses to contribute to policy orientations and

interrogations. The researcher works with open-ended research budgets available, for which the precise content and deadlines could be set independently of funding organizations. The quality control on the spending of these budgets followed afterwards, at which time the choice of research topics and timeframes had to be justified. The funding organization made explicit that following the research needs of professional practice was an important quality criterion. As such, this funding organization defined quality as a process parameter, whereas most funding organizations define work with programmes that circumscribe the content of the research.

The process-approach allowed for more openness towards involving practice partners in co-defining the problem to be researched, as we can see in these three cases.

## Interlocking roles of research and practice

We now turn to the core of the research process itself and look at the interlocking roles that developed between practice and research in the three cases. When research is considered to be an autonomous process, it appears as if a black box exists where only the outcomes are visible, and need action in order for those outcomes to inform practice. By not paying attention to the research process itself, all research is treated as having the same stickiness, as being equally interesting, fascinating or even classic (Davis, 1971, 1986). The use of knowledge then becomes the responsibility of social work practice, instead of the responsibility of the researcher and the practitioner together. By looking at the research process itself, much can be gained by analysing the practice mindedness of research for bridging the gap between social work research and practice.

From the three case studies we learn that interlocking roles between research and practice may be helpful to bridge this gap. What forms can these interlocking roles take in practice? Working in a multi-disciplinary team was important in Rotterdam to organize a level playing field between the many partners involved in establishing the effectiveness of the intervention. It was multi-disciplinary not between several sciences, but between several types of professionals. Informational diversity—difference in knowledge, perspectives and ideas—seems to have the potential to enhance the functioning of the team. In Eindhoven, communities of practice were developed in analysing and improving the practice of accountability. Co-production of knowledge between the practitioner and the researcher, both sociologists, was a form that bridged the gap in Saint Etienne.

Critical success factors are: the rising level of educational qualification in both research and practice, working in and with large organizations with a lot of brainpower, working with innovative (non-routine) professionals from both worlds (research and practice), and operating together on a regular basis. In Saint Etienne the researcher chose a participatory position—a flexible and open stance towards practice—and tried to learn as much as possible from social workers. As stated, there

is not, on one side, a scientist who can say what is true, and on another side a practitioner who can do what is good. Both are producing knowledge. In Rotterdam, all participants in the research felt proud to be part of an innovative team, and group identification was carefully enhanced (Homan *et al.*, 2007).

Looking at the evidence from the case study in Rotterdam, it appears that the transfer of practical knowledge is supported by face-to-face contact (Davenport & Bibby, 1999). It even seems to speed up the process when participants know and trust each other.

One question has not been answered yet. How does multiplication work? What makes some research activities stand out enough in order to attract the attention of other practitioners? What are the building blocks for an outreaching attitude of researchers towards their audience in professional practice? Are there any critical success factors within the production cycle of social work research that make research results interesting and sticky? 'Interpreting the social impact of theories ... [may] ... contribute to our understanding of both the common sense and scientific perspectives on reality' (Davis, 1971, p. 309).

### Scholarly or professional communication?

In the French context, there is a strong tradition of applied research, through for instance the Center for Applied Research and Studies, now called Modys (Micoud, 2009). One of its first academic conferences was about 'expertise situations and socialization of knowledge' in 1985 (http://sciences-medias.ens-lsh.fr/scs/article.php3?id_article=193). The Netherlands has an internationally innovative position in terms of scholarly publication through the wide dissemination of open access publishing. Both the Eindhoven and Rotterdam research described earlier in this article were carried out by universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands. These universities have a less stringent focus on international blind peer reviewed publications than traditional scientific universities. As such, the results of both projects could be communicated in a greater variety of ways, and digital versions of all publications were freely available to all those interested in the results. This is a key element in increasing the 'stickiness' of research results.

'The ultimate goal of using science in social work is to shape the behaviour of practitioners. To be useful, science must make it out of the laboratory and into the field' (Kirk & Reid, 2002, p. 167). Probably very few people will disagree with this statement. It is consequently all the more surprising that in reality science rarely makes it outside of the realm of science itself, and that the way science is communicated is not tailored towards the information culture of practitioners and their organizations. Scholarly communication these days favours journal articles, where the focus has increased significantly in recent years. Most Western universities have developed procedures for staff selection and promotion that rely heavily on publication achievements, often limiting it to those publications that appeared in international journals that use blind peer review. A limited set of these international

journals have been assigned an impact factor (for example, the *European Journal of Social Work* has no impact factor). Publications in journals with higher impact factors are more helpful for scholarly careers. The running joke among academic researchers is that it is not important how much funding a research proposal generates or how relevant it is to the progress of our understanding, but how many publication opportunities it offers. Research results can be and are sliced up into 'smallest publishable units' (Broad, 1981) and it is up to the reader to glue all the pieces together again. The 'publish or perish' culture in this way acts like a fragmentation bomb. One glimmer of hope in this area is the recent interest in systematic reviews and meta-analyses as systematic ways to synthesize research findings (Lundahl & Yaffe, 2007), although some have methodological concerns about these developments (Lundahl *et al.*, 2009; Nugent, 2009).

Very similar to the way this context disciplines scholars in their communication behaviour, universities are disciplined in their behaviour by initiatives such as the UK's research assessment exercise (RAE, soon to be replaced by the Research Excellence Framework) and the various comparative league tables which rely heavily on number and nature of publications. League tables relying on other criteria also exist (e.g. *The Scientist*'s annual 'best places to work' list: see www.the-scientist.com/bptw/) but receive less attention.

The other side of this development is that practitioners have a weak reading culture. This was so at the time of the ground-breaking INISS-project on research information needs in social service departments in the late 1970s. Since then, other research has confirmed the absence of a reading culture in social work agencies (Mullen & Bacon, 2006). While many factors contribute to this weak reading culture, the limited availability of literature is certainly one of them. Protection of knowledge is a limiting factor because with the increased Internet connectivity of practitioners, both at work and at home, and the availability of powerful search engines such as Google, in fact a window of opportunity emerges. Publication of research results through the Internet by way of simple websites from the author or research unit or in more structured form through institution or thematic repositories serves as an increasingly important knowledge base. Open access publishing combines the scrutiny for high quality through blind peer review with optimal availability to researchers, practitioners and the general public.

While the cases reported at the Antwerp conference and in this special issue of the *European Journal of Social Work* provide a strong argument for embracing open access publishing, they also illustrate the importance of other means of communication. Researchers have predominantly been communicating with other researchers, and to a small extent with the public at large through the mass media. An explicit strategy to communicate with professionals, the expected users of their research results, can seldom be found. The case studies reported in the articles of this special issue indicate that verbal communication and the availability of researchers to talk about their results through presentations and discussion meetings are critical

ingredients of such a strategy. While this obviously involves face-to-face meetings, new media could also play a role in this, e.g. through discussion lists linked to research projects or research teams.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that there is a strong need for social work to make use of the results of research to inform its practice. However, the more traditional focus on promoting a research-minded culture within social work organizations needs to be complemented with a focus on promoting a practice-minded culture within research organizations. Just as some characteristics of social work practice make it more or less research oriented, characteristics of research make it more or less outreaching to practice. It is clear that not all research results have the same degree of 'stickiness' to practice, and characteristics of the research influence this degree. The way the research process and results are constructed can contribute to a high degree, but equally to a low degree of stickiness.

Three case studies of urban social work research allowed us to identify some ingredients for such a practice-minded culture. These match the three phases of any research initiative and deal with the identification of the research question, the cooperation during the research, and the dissemination of research results. Just as evidence-based practice found its counterpart in practice-based evidence, the research culture in welfare organizations needs to find its counterpart in a practice-based culture within research organizations. That is essential for the gap between research and practice to be narrowed.

## Note

[1]    Procrustes is also the name of a statistical technique, but that refers to a different relation between this Greek mythological figure and science.

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