

INTRODUCTION

There is growing national and international interest in the ways that research might influence policy and practice (Nutley, Morton et al. 2010; Morton and Nutley 2011)). Quantitative research evidence is often preferred as the basis upon which to make policy decisions – ‘killer stats’, in Stevens’ terms (Stevens 2011). However, qualitative evidence plays a complementary and arguably equally valuable role. QL - qualitative longitudinal - research has both substantive and methodological value for policy and practice. It can produce distinctive and detailed knowledge about the trajectories of individuals or groups within particular policy contexts. Understanding the lived experience of individuals and groups is particularly important when policy direction emphasises behaviour change or adaptation to changing circumstances (Corden and Millar 2007). QL research also has potential as an evaluation tool to run alongside policy interventions, since it is flexible and based on real-time developments. In this guide, we draw on the literature on research utilisation to explore the kinds of impact that QL research might make on different constituencies of research users, and the strategies and methods used to encourage research uptake and impact. We go on to consider how QL research can make a difference in the real world, both substantively and methodologically, drawing on a case study developed from the Young Lives and Timescapes project within Timescapes.

KEY POINTS

- The case study data generated through QL research has value for policy in creating detailed evidence on the changing lives of individuals and groups in relation to policy interventions and initiatives. It provides a valuable complement to statistical evidence.
- Methodologically, combining QL research with a knowledge-to-action approach can increase the usefulness of research and the take up of research evidence in local settings
- QL approaches can create the conditions for impact to occur as an integral part of the research process.
- Research influences policy and practice in complex and unpredictable ways: QL research can be utilised alongside other research strategies to help realise its impact

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CREATING IMPACT THROUGH QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH

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BACKGROUND

There is growing national and international interest in the ways that research might influence policy and practice (Nutley, Walter et al. 2007; Nutley, Morton et al. 2010). Many researchers take a value-committed approach to social research, with the fundamental aim of ‘making a difference’ in the real world (Scharf 2011): ‘we hold out the hope... that we do whatever we do with passion, and a belief that our scholarship can make a difference: that is, move people to action’ (Holstein and Minkler 2003: 26).

It is worth considering at this point what kind of impacts research might make on research users – ranging from research participants and academic users, through to policy makers, practitioners and the general public - before going on to consider what mechanisms are best used to create impact.

Research impact can be considered along a spectrum from conceptual to instrumental impacts (Nutley et al 2007). At the conceptual end of the spectrum research might contribute to producing new and distinctive forms of knowledge, changing perceptions or attitudes on issues and re-framing debates. These kinds of impact are crucial: they allow people to ‘see’ things in a different way, as a necessary precursor to implementing changes in practice or policy. At the Instrumental end of the spectrum, research impact takes the form of tangible changes in policy, practice or behaviour. In addition, research can make an impact on training and building skills and expertise across professional and academic practice. This capacity building enables the lessons from research to be applied more widely and embedded in professional standards and cultures.

APPROACHES TO INCREASING THE UPTAKE, USE AND IMPACT OF RESEARCH

There is a growing literature that documents effective measures to increase the impact of social research and ensure it is timely and relevant (Walter, Nutley et al. 2003; Mitton, Adair et al. 2007). Having a clear understanding of the context for research use and translating research evidence for specific audiences are important mechanisms. Likewise, research is more likely to be used if research users have been incorporated into

the research process, for example, through partnership working or advisory group membership. This investment in the research and anticipation of the findings will deepen users’ understanding of research, improve their ability to make use of the findings, and create a fruitful context for research uptake across their networks.

Finally, thinking beyond the two communities of policy-makers on one hand, and practitioners on the other, it may be very useful to identify champions of research who use effective mechanism for channelling evidence into policy processes – e.g. pressure groups, government analysts, the press, documentary film makers, voluntary sector organisations, and professional bodies (Nutley et al. 2007). Working with research brokers may be more fruitful for researchers than direct contact with policy-makers.

Weiss’s seminal work on the use of research in policy settings has acknowledged that research can be mis-used for political or tactical reasons, and that social research in particular takes a long time to percolate into the thinking and action of policy-makers and practitioners – an ‘enlightenment’ model of research utilisation (Weiss 1979). However, Weiss also pioneered the notion of an ‘interactive’ model of research utilisation – whereby networks of researchers and research users discuss, use and re-use research as it becomes incorporated within existing paradigms or begins to shift current ways of thinking. In this model it is not just involvement in the findings of research that are important, but involving research users in the design and focus of research agendas and research questions.

As understandings of policy-making and practice learning have moved towards more complex models (Kingdon 1995; Baumgartner and Jones 2009), there is a growing appreciation that a rational process of evaluation, reflection and learning is inadequate in explaining research use processes. Taking up this point, Best and Holmes (2010) have promoted a knowledge-to-action approach to creating impact and research uptake. They trace the development of three generations of strategies, from the 1970s to the present day, each embedded within the previous generation. In the first model, evidence based policy and practice rests on *knowledge transfer*, seen as a one way, linear process. Research is seen as transferable to a number of settings, and translation is key to its utilisation. The second model is founded on *knowledge exchange*: a more interactive model across the research and policy/practice interface.

The focus is on relationships, linkages and exchange. The translation of research is still important, but it is embedded in networks of researchers and research users. Even so, under both these models, research and practice tend to occur in separate and rarely overlapping domains.

The third model, *knowledge-to-action*, is a systems approach that promotes greater integration of research and practice, with the potential to develop practitioner-informed research and research-based practice. The appeal of the approach is that it encourages local ownership of the research and research-based programs, which leads to research uptake (Nutley, Morton et al 2010).

The challenge thrown down by Best and Holmes is how to move networking thinking into the complex systems of real world issues and problems where researchers and a range of research-users from policy and practice are grappling with these issues. An understanding of the specific context for research use, the barriers and enablers of change, and the role of specific actors comes to the fore in this model. This model has attracted great interest but is relatively untested in the field.

KNOWLEDGE-TO-ACTION IN QL RESEARCH: THE FOLLOWING FATHERS BASELINE STUDY

A knowledge-to-action model has been tested out recently in the Young Lives and Times project within Timescapes, in the process of researching the lives of a sub-sample of young fathers. Young Lives and Times has tracked an age cohort of young people from the age of 13, to explore the dynamic intersection of family, school and friendship networks through their teenage years. The methods of fieldwork included in depth interviews, focus groups and the use of timelines to uncover life course dynamics (documented in Timescapes Methods guide no. 5.) We had aimed to recruit a new sample of teenage parents (both mothers and fathers) into the study, in order to enrich the overall sample and gauge the very different life trajectories of young people in varied circumstances. However, in the summer of 2010 a meeting with the regional teenage pregnancy co-ordinators group revealed a particular gap in knowledge concerning young fathers, and a desire among professionals to find ways to reach and more effectively support these young men. A lack of research evidence on this 'hard to reach' group was also evident. As a result, the new base line study was reframed

around young fatherhood. Refining our research focus and questions in consultation with a group of service providers proved to be highly valuable. Thereafter a close and active collaboration was established with one of the local authority teams in the regional network, which employs a specialist learning mentor to support young fathers and fathers-to-be.

The impact from Following Fathers has been both substantive and methodological. The intensive tracking of the young men meant that detailed and useful information about their family backgrounds and journeys into adulthood was available, including how they thought about their past and future lives and orientations to life planning; current family and personal relationships; their educational and employment trajectories, their values and practices surrounding fatherhood, relationships, family life, sexual relationships, pregnancy and abortion; the contingencies of their day to day lives and their many support needs.

The case studies from the research and the narratives from the young men have created compelling evidence on their life chances. The emergent findings were distilled in a bespoke policy briefing paper (Neale and Lau 2011), which has been widely circulated. This has fed into the development of a new service delivery plan within the local Teenage Pregnancy Team. It has also led to the setting up of a Following Fathers network, comprising researchers, policy makers and a range of practitioners across the statutory and third sectors.

Further work is planned with project partners to extend the scope and impact of the project, including the joint production of practitioner guides, a training seminar and training materials to increase professional knowledge of the lives, values and support needs of young fathers and to build professional skills in engaging effectively with this group and delivering appropriate support services.

The tangible take up of findings from this study among local practitioners over a relatively short space of time was made possible because of the distinctive mechanisms used to create impact, in this case arising from the methodology employed. A Qualitative Longitudinal research design is ideally suited to a knowledge-to-action approach. The research was conducted flexibly in three waves of fieldwork over an 18 month period. The research process itself is flexible, grounded in real time developments, and conducted in a participatory and interactive manner. In this it shares important features with action research, which is concerned with processes

of innovation and change (Reason and Bradbury-Huang 2005). The longitudinal design opened up the space for the active involvement of a key practitioner in the conduct of the study, and led to a productive synergy between research and practice as the study progressed. Undertaking this research with a 'hard to reach' sample would have been impossible without the local practitioner, and his knowledge of the young men and his mediating role helped to quickly build relationships of trust with the young men. The local practitioner in turn quickly became engaged in and committed to the research process, actively facilitating fieldwork, bringing the participants to be interviewed, attending focus groups and using the interviews as a spring board to open up particular issues with the young men. His involvement has led him to adopt life history methods and timeline techniques in his own work with the young fathers, to help them come to terms with past experiences and find new aspirations for the future. Through these joint mechanisms, the research has been a positive experience for the young men, with some discernible influences on their practices, aspirations and self esteem. As well as practitioner involvement in ongoing data generation, the sustained knowledge-to-

action research design has involved joint researcher/practitioner conference presentations and the collaborative production of outputs (Lau Clayton and May 2011). In the process, the local practitioner has become an 'internal champion' for the research in his practitioner networks, taking up research insights and recommendations and promoting their incorporation into new service delivery plans. The research has contributed to changing perceptions of young fathers among local service providers and a reframing of debates about service interventions – in short enabling people to see and respond to the issue of young fatherhood in a different way. The findings from the study have also begun to percolate 'upwards' from local and regional networks of professionals to national policy levels.

Overall, combining QL methods with a knowledge-to-action approach has proved fruitful in this research. Further testing of this approach is needed but early indications are that the combination of these designs can create distinctive forms of impact that are embedded in real time developments and that work iteratively at the research/practice interface.

CONCLUSION

The case study presented above indicates the rich potential for creating impact by combining QL designs with a knowledge-to-action framework. Working from a grounded perspective and in tune with changes as they occur, such an approach may have particular value in working with hard to reach samples and/or where targeted policy interventions or strategies are in place or under development. More broadly, QL research has the facility to track, monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives and interventions designed to bring beneficial changes to local communities or targeted populations. Indeed, when combined with a knowledge-to-action approach, QL research has potential as a navigational device, running alongside new initiatives in real time and bringing people together at key moments to take stock, review developments and agree on next steps.

The case study presented here builds on exiting work that suggests partnership approaches can help in creating impact (Morton 2012): there is value in choosing a research design that facilitates the active involvement of practitioners and other stakeholders in the conduct of a study and in the dissemination of the substantive findings. The depth and longitudinal nature of QL research can reflect participant

experiences in a much richer way than statistical evidence, creating a fruitful starting point for research utilisation. The elongated timeframes for QL research are of particular value, facilitating the growth of collaborative working relationships at local level, and the building of shared knowledge and influence as a study unfolds. As a powerful mechanism for tracking, navigating and gauging the effectiveness of change processes, QL research has the potential to create the conditions for local impact as an integral part of the research process.

More broadly, QL research may play a unique role in influencing the thinking of policy makers. Whilst statistical approaches are often used in setting out a policy problem and its potential solutions, personal experiences of social issues and the personal accounts that politicians hear from their constituents can play a significant part in framing debates and policy responses. Here QL research can be used alongside statistical evidence to generate valuable case study data. These illuminate the lived experience of social issues and give a unique perspective on the way that lives unfold over time in relation to policy interventions and changing policy landscapes.

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