

Assessing research impact: A case study of participatory research



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Authors and acknowledgements

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Assessing research impact: A case study of participatory research

There is much current interest in how impacts of research on the wider economy and society can be analysed and documented, despite many methodological and practical challenges. This briefing reports on findings from a JISC/NCCPE funded project which tried to get to grips with some of these challenges. The projects used a framework developed by Sarah Morton – a knowledge exchange professional and impact analyst at The University of Edinburgh, to assess the impact of particular social action research developed by the Centre for Social Action (CSA) at De Montfort University, led by Jennie Fleming. The project focused on two case-studies; one of which looked at the de-institutionalisation of childcare in the Ukraine and is the focus of in this briefing.

Background

The CSA had been working closely with non-academic research-users for almost 20 years and thought that there would be significant impacts from their work, but had not investigated these. The impact analyst had developed a Research Contribution Framework (RCF), based on contribution analysis, to assess research impact and this project provided a further key testing ground of this method. Contribution analysis is an evaluation approach usually used to evaluate public sector change programmes where there are complex factors influencing behaviour (e.g. interventions to address the causes of heart disease (Mayne2008)). Morton had already used the framework to assess the impact of a partnership research project through an ESRC-funded project. Feedback had been gained on the process from colleagues in the UK and Canada.

Method

The Research Contribution Analysis Process

The Research Contribution Framework (RCF) aims to address the key challenges of impact:

- Timing: when is the best time to assess impact? If done too quickly impact may not have been realised, if too late then recall of key actors may be less reliable.
- Attribution: how can change be attributed to research when there are many factors influencing the actions of non-academic actors, and when research impact is not linear?
- Additionality: what did the research add to the process? What would have been different without it?

Key points

- Participatory research with social workers contributed to the de-institutionalisation of childcare in the Ukraine.
- The ideas of research uptake, research use, and research impact were key to understanding the way research had come to have an impact.
- Understanding how research contributes to outcomes rather than being the direct cause of change was useful in helping participants and researchers to understand the processes of research impact.
- Despite issues of timing and language it was possible to make clear links between activities carried out by the researchers and wider impacts.
- Using a participatory research method created direct channels for research utilisation and impact by increasing participants' knowledge about how changes in their practices could benefit the wider issue of de-institutionalisation of childcare.
- Understanding the contextual factors, such as political agendas or the involvement of other people and agencies, is essential to a full understanding of the contribution of research and its limitations.

The RCF approach starts with mapping a pathway from activities to engage research users to intermediate and longer-term outcomes, using the concepts of research uptake, use and impact.

The impact process

Research uptake: people are interested in research, read it, talk about it, come to a presentation, etc.

Research use: people do something with the research, change their view, pass it on to someone else, apply it to practice or policy.

Research impact: a contribution to change as a result of research use.

Morton (2012)

The impact of participatory research on de-institutionalisation in the Ukraine

Inputs: the research team had been funded by DFID and UNicef to investigate and create action on the de-institutionalisation of childcare in Ukraine. The research built on a body of participatory research undertaken by the CSA including work with a number of UK-based children and foster care organisations and experts from children and young people's services.

Activities/outputs: The researchers carried out: training courses, lectures, production and translation of training materials, conference presentations, 3 study visits to the UK, round table discussions, and seminars with ministers & policy makers to improve care and establish foster care.

Engagement/involvement: Over 150 people from relevant Ukrainian policy, practice and public audiences were engaged in activities and took part in training and seminars, including social work managers; family and youth practitioners; social work educators; government ministers and officials.

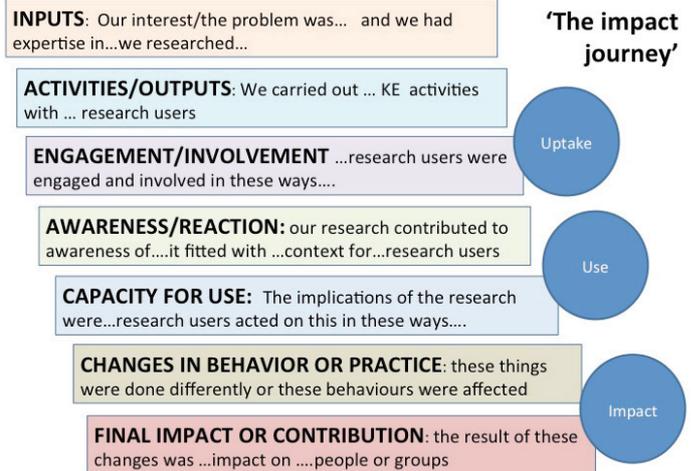
Awareness/Reaction: Examination of the documentary evidence and interviews indicated that participants changed their awareness about the care needs of children and young people. The concept of foster care as an alternative to institutionalisation was introduced. Participants understood the importance of listening to children and young people, and became aware of ways the service could be improved.

Changes in capacity, knowledge and understanding: Social workers gained skills and understanding to take work forward. There was an understanding and acceptance of multi-agency approaches to family support work and of respective roles and responsibilities between different organisations. Formal and informal networks between workers developed and individuals were equipped to train others.

Changes in behaviours and practices: A number of new processes and services were formed to drive change:

- State Centre of Social Services for Youth established to disseminate a new model of family support.
- Association of Foster Families of Ukraine was formed.
- A new co-ordinating council to review care plans was established. Care planning pro-forma was developed. Ukraine's Service for Minors became a co-ordinating body for child protection.
- Multi-agency policy and development groups and central area action plans were created, along with a manual for care leavers.
- The training programme carried out by CSA was replicated in other areas

Final contribution: Fewer children and young people were living in institutional settings in the Ukraine when the impact assessment was undertaken than at the start of the project. Foster care legislation was passed and carers had been recruited. The quality of residential care was improved.



Morton (2012)

This approach allows for the identification of relevant potential users of research, how they would be or have been reached, and what other factors are influencing their behaviours and practices. It creates clear links between inputs, outputs and outcomes which are logical and tenable.

The Research Contribution Framework Process:

- Map a pathway to impact linking activities to increase research uptake to outcomes
- Identify assumptions and assess risks for each stage of the pathway
- Identify indicators for research uptake, use and impact
- Collect evidence
- Review pathway, identify gaps in evidence and try to fill
- Write a contribution story

Having developed a pathway for CSAs work in Ukraine the impact analyst collected evidence to illustrate the impact of the research. There were particular challenges around translation, timing and distance.

Documenting analysis and interviews with key individuals formed the basis of evidence.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this impact assessment case study, which affected the nature and the quality of evidence that the impact analysts were able to obtain. Many of these stemmed from the fact that the original work had been undertaken in Ukraine 10-14 years prior to the impact assessment. This combination of a) work conducted abroad, in a non-English speaking country, and b) a significant time lapse between when the work was undertaken and then subsequently assessed for impact, meant that some potential respondents were not contactable. Record keeping was patchy with many records in

paper copy, reflecting the changes in technology over the last ten years.

However, it was possible to assemble a coherent case for the impact of CSA's work.

Whilst CSA's work has impacted upon the professional practice of possibly hundreds of social care professionals, the programme was not able to achieve impact in terms of reducing the number of children in care, although there was a change in the range of care meaning that fewer were living in large childcare institutions, and there were improvements in quality. The overwhelming impression painted by respondents is of a corrupt and bureaucratic public service system, resistant to organisational and administrative reform.

CSA's work had impact at the level of professional discourse, and in the introduction of new models of home-centred childcare provision, but developments have been introduced alongside pre-existing forms of service provision rather than contributing to a more fundamental overhaul of childcare services:

"It [the childcare system] is predominantly remaining the same old, institutionally-oriented system. The progressive forms of childcare were added to it, but did not replace it."

"...whole informational context was influenced: every professional, activist, policymaker etc nowadays is talking about deinstitutionalization and family care. ... The task is to implement the discourse into administrative practice."

The respondents were in broad agreement that strong leadership and clear strategic action from central government in terms of policy and funding are necessary for lasting change. Lack of political will and the absence of sufficient political pressure upon successive governments were believed to have hindered progress in the de-institutionalisation of childcare. This does not detract from the significant impacts achieved from this project, but rather illustrates the complex contextual factors that can inhibit change.

Discussion

Conducting this impact analysis focused thinking on the difference between research geared towards changing the way people think about issues and that which attempts to influence the way they do things. Are these different sorts of impact or different points on a continuum? Equally, should researchers be judged on the basis of attempting to change specific matters, or in terms of their contribution to changing the culture within which those specific matters are grounded? Influencing people's knowledge and understanding may be more easy to monitor, but changing practice will be more significant, although often not possible without influencing attitudes which underpin change. What this suggests is that we need a sophisticated and multi-faceted approach to both seeking to achieve 'impact' and 'assessing' it after the event.

Social research impact cannot be linear, and invariably there are many other things going on at the same time in the research arena, hence so much impact assessment is subjective. It is necessary to document in some way, not only what researchers and knowledge exchange professionals are doing but others

as well (e.g. other research, organisations working in the area, base line data etc). There is a need to understand the context in which research might impact. In the case study presented above, the social and political factors had significant effects on the extent to which change was possible.

Using the language of contribution

For the social sciences, the language of contribution is helpful in research impact analysis. Unlike technological or scientific developments, social science findings cannot drive change on their own. They can contribute to change through dialogue and interaction with relevant members of the public, practitioners, community organisations, policy-makers and the press. Using the idea of research contribution, rather than research impact, allows an acknowledgement of the complex ways in which research is taken up and used.

There are pros and cons of historic or contemporary collection of information. If done too soon impact may not have been realised, if too late then recall of key people may be less reliable, or they may have moved on. Whilst this assessment sometimes had problems identifying key people, the longer time-frame (over 14 years) allowed for impacts to occur which might have not been obvious in an earlier study, especially in terms of the implementation of policies and their subsequent impact. Maintaining contact with key actors and their willingness to provide information about impact can be seen as evidence of impact itself – the very fact they are still connected is significant. When young people have been involved there are particular issues as they move on with their lives, but in all cases maintaining good records will greatly facilitate impact assessment.

The cost of properly assessing impact could be considerable and it is unclear who will pay for the time to collect and categorise impact after research projects end.

Taking impact forward

The CSA's researchers' knowledge and understanding about impact assessment has grown enormously from working in partnership with the impact analyst. As a result of this project the CSA intend, with selected pieces of work, to:

- Set an impact agenda (who, what, when etc...) with time frames (immediate, short term, etc)
- Identify intended and possible impacts, and differentiate between them and be prepared for 'unintended impacts'
- Clarify both 'specific' (e.g. changing the law) and 'general' impacts (e.g. refocusing debate)
- Identify engagement strategies for 'type' of impact (e.g. evidence-based practice or policy-influencing)
- Prepare an audit trail (record-keeping, citations, public use), identifying key informants, develop a proforma for data sources and track as you go along
- Identify distinctive project-specific 'key words' for tracking purposes
- Build in costs of 'impact plan'