The kinds and quality of social work research in UK universities

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The kinds and quality of social work research in UK universities

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First published in Great Britain in May 2007
by the Social Care Institute for Excellence

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ISBN 978-1-904812-17-3

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The research underpinning this report was funded by the
Social Care Institute for Excellence, the Scottish Institute for Excellence
in Social Work Education, and the Economic and Social Research Council.

This report is available in print and online
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Acknowledgements

We have been fortunate in encountering unreserved collaboration, openness and willingness to give time to make each stage of the research happen. This has been true of the early national workshop, the key informants, and perhaps especially the local participants and lead contacts in the case study interviews and focus groups. Thank you to all involved.

We hope that participants will not completely fail to recognise their contributions to the evidence within the report. Reading and talking about research with an unusual set of questions opened up new thinking and understanding for the team, and we trust also for our participant collaborators.

We gained much from the collaborative contributions of Audrey Mullender (Ruskin College, Oxford), Joan Orme (Glasgow University), Ian Sinclair (University of York) and Baljit Soroya (Ruskin College, Oxford). We also wish to acknowledge the Economic and Social Research Council's funding, and their original expression of interest in providing support for such a project. We appreciate the financial contribution and constant interest in the project, by the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (through Bryan Williams), the Social Care Institute for Excellence (through Mike Fisher) and the Research Committee of the Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee.

Summary

A study was carried out in 2005 and 2006 on the nature and quality of social work research in UK universities. The lead researchers were Ian Shaw and Matthew Norton, of York University[1]. Funding was provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (SIESWE), and the Joint Universities Council Social Work Education Committee (JUC SWEC).

The aims of the research were to develop a framework for criteria and standards to appraise the nature and quality of social work research in universities in the UK, and complete exploratory tests and refinements of this framework.

The outputs from the research are:

- a basis on which the social work and social science communities can profile the nature and quality of social work research
- a quality framework that includes and integrates applied and practice-based social work research and evaluation
- a frame of reference for the social work community and the ESRC, which will function as a resource and potential information base on which to build research capacity in social work
- a resource that will facilitate the further development and implementation of a national social work research strategy in higher education.

The fieldwork comprised an initial phase of electronic consultations, key informant interviews, a UK workshop of all stakeholder groups, and a literature review. A classification of kinds of research was developed through a sample of social work research outputs from the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) followed by a series of inter-rater reliability exercises linked to development of the scheme. The report's conclusions regarding the quality of social work research were developed through an illuminative review of the literature, an analysis of the rhetoric of quality as evident in the text of social work returns to the 2001 RAE, and in particular four case studies of universities in Scotland, England and Wales. The case studies were based on interviews exploring examples of respondents' reflections on their own good research, and focus groups of all stakeholder groups.

We developed the classification of kinds of research according to two different dimensions: What is the primary substantive focus of the research? What is the primary problem focus of the research? The subsequent development of the classification scheme was carried out through a series of ratings and inter-rater reliability exercises on a sample of 40 papers published in selected issues of the *British Journal of Social Work*.

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[1] It was carried out with Audrey Mullender (Ruskin College, Oxford), Joan Orme (Glasgow University), Ian Sinclair (University of York) and Baljit Soroya (Ruskin College, Oxford).

First dimension: primary research focus

On whom is the primary research focus?		
Actual or potential service user or carer groupings	1.	Children, families, parents, foster carers
	2.	Young people (not offenders)
	3.	Young offenders/victims
	4.	Adult offenders/victims
	5.	People with mental health problems
	6.	Older people
	7.	People with health/disability problems (including learning disabilities)
	8.	Drug/substance users
Citizen, user and community populations	9.	People as members of communities
	10.	Service user, citizen or carer populations
	11.	Women/men
Professional and policy communities	12.	Social work practitioners /managers
	13.	Social work students/practice teachers/ university social work staff
	14.	Policy, regulatory or inspection community
	15.	Members or students of other occupations
Not applicable	16.	For example, theorising that crosses categories; methodology

Second dimension: primary issue/problem

What is the primary issue or problem focus of the research?	
1.	Understand/explain issues related to risk, vulnerability, abuse, resilience, challenging behaviour, separation, attachment, loss, disability or trauma.
2.	Understand/explain issues related to equality, diversity, poverty and social exclusion.
3.	Understand/assess/strengthen user/carer/citizen/community involvement in social work; partnership; empowerment.
4.	Understand/promote the nature and quality of informal care, carer activity, volunteering, and their relationship to formal care.
5.	Describe, understand, explain, or develop good practice in relation to social work beliefs, values, political positions, faith or ethics.
6.	Understand/develop/assess/evaluate social work practices, methods or interventions.
7.	Understand/evaluate/strengthen social work/social care services, including voluntary/independent sector.
8.	Understand/explain/promote good practice in social work/social care organisations and management.
9.	Understand/address issues of ethnicity, racism and management.

10. Understand/address issues of gender, sexism, the role of women, the role of men.
11. Demonstrate/assess the value of inter-disciplinary approaches to social work services.
12. Demonstrate/assess the value of comparative, cross-national research.
13. Develop theorising.

We recommend:

- identification of kinds of social work research in terms of these two dimensions
- a minimum information base for raters comprising information about authors and affiliation, an abstract or equivalent, and key words
- basic familiarisation with and induction to the classification scheme
- use of the scheme only with full guidance notes to hand, provided in the main report
- trial adoption by different stakeholder groups in the social work community of the scheme, and its use as part of the implementation for the JUC SWEC 'strategy' and of the development of a practice research database by SCIE
- further trialing and testing by the social work community and other interested colleagues, including inter-rater measures between different stakeholder groups.

Quality of research

The case studies suggest that claims of quality are of two general kinds. First, there are *intrinsic* signifiers of quality that form around methodological and epistemological criteria. These signifiers occur in a variety of forms but all refer to inherent qualities of research. Second, quality judgements are made that draw on criteria that are *extrinsic* to the research, eg its use value or its direct value to people who participate in the research.

There was a consensus among the focus groups and interviews that there are certain intrinsic epistemological and methodological criteria that characterise and promote good-quality social work research. These were not different from criteria shared across the social sciences, and are implicit, for example, in the generic research methodology requirements of the ESRC postgraduate training guidelines. The data suggested there are five elements of epistemically soundly based research:

- a well-considered and argued epistemological and theoretical position
- well-informed research that draws on the existing knowledge base
- choice of methods related to the question and justifiable in the context of the aims and objectives
- appropriate analytical techniques that are used and justified
- conclusions that are valid, in the sense of being carefully founded and plausible.

While social work researchers acknowledged the need to ensure research is conducted to the best possible standards, there was also a resistance to adopting purist stances on methodology.

Extrinsic quality criteria principles were often referred to, and usually in connection with fundamental social work values. This was one of the areas where the more deep-seated debates emerged within the study, ranging from those who would probably place 'value-for-people' and 'value-for-use' above strictly epistemological and knowledge-building standards to those who believe that extrinsic, outer-science quality criteria may not always be appropriate for a particular piece of research, especially studies that focus on less applied aspects of social work. For example, the involvement of users as partners and co-producers in the research process was often seen as the litmus test of distinctively social work research. However, the standing of this as a fundamental mark of quality is not agreed within the social work community.

Application of research to practice was an area where a range of positions could be readily traced. Some believed that a direct contribution to practice is of greatest importance, and what matters in social work is providing research that focuses on improving practice and pushing a social justice agenda. Others thought contribution to theory more important. The most frequent position was one that can best be hyphenated as 'rigour-with-relevance'.

We recommend that the framework developed by Furlong and Oancea (2005) will serve with some modification for other applied social sciences, including social work, but we recommend that when elaborating the 'value-for-people' dimension, it is augmented to include 'receptiveness to service users' and carers' viewpoints, and to a wider distribution of individual and social justice'.

We recommend exploring the feasibility for cross-discipline collaboration on assessing and developing the quality of research.

We also recommend that assessment of the quality and value of research use should take into account:

- different ways in which members of the social work community use research and other knowledge and develop best practice models of knowledge use
- the extent to which research aims to be useful, rather than actually achieves use and impact
- longer-term, and not only shorter-term, impacts, for example through the use-potential of research.

1 Kinds and quality of social work research

The social work community in the UK has addressed, during the opening years of this decade, a cluster of related concerns about knowledge development and research utilisation (ESRC, 2001; Pawson et al, 2003; Walter et al, 2004), research and knowledge standards (Fisher and Marsh, 2003; Pawson et al, 2003; Taylor et al, 2007), the development of doctoral research – through writing and a series of ESRC-funded workshops for social work doctoral students (2002 onwards) – and research investment and priorities (Shaw et al, 2004; Marsh and Fisher, 2006). Much of this work has been consolidated and focused in a national strategy for social work research in higher education (led by Paul Bywaters on behalf of JUC/SWEC, 2006).

The research in this report follows from a review of social work and social care research in relation to ESRC programme research (Shaw et al, 2004), but also finds its context in several developments outside the social work community. For example, there has been an increasing acceptance of the need to conceptualise the nature and quality of social research in ways that integrate in a robust fashion applied and practice-based research. The Roberts consultation (Scottish Funding Council, 2003) recommended that applied and practice-based research be assessed 'according to criteria which reflect the characteristics of excellence in those types of research where these may differ from the characteristics of excellence in basic or mainstream scholarship'. 'Knowledge transfer' and a broadened interpretation of 'technology transfer' are currently on universities' agenda. The guidance for the 2008 RAE also asks that applied research be 'assessed fairly against appropriate criteria' (RAE, 2004).

The ESRC has voiced a need to develop research capacity in a number of smaller disciplines, including social work, in ways that underline a need for clear information regarding existing research volume, nature and quality in those fields. The need for this initiative stems from concern regarding 'discipline health', in an ageing social science academic community, and especially in 'practice-oriented' disciplines (Mills et al, 2006). In addition to the present report, the ESRC has funded significant work on the applied and practice-based research in education (Furlong and Oancea, 2005). We have also liaised with colleagues in the Social Policy Association who have completed a contemporaneous report on the quality of social policy research (Becker et al, 2006).

From a different direction, the gradual integration of qualitative methods in government-funded research and evaluation – in both the UK and the USA – has fostered a consolidation and development of generic quality standards for qualitative inquiry (National Institutes of Health, 2001; Spencer et al, 2003). These and similar developments augment the more familiar aspirational statements regarding research standards found within the research methodology literature, and shift the balance slightly away from non-regulatory quality standards towards regulatory ones.

The review of social work and social care research within ESRC programmes (Shaw, et al, 2004) pointed up a number of issues. For the social work community, the review explored the extent to which the 'workings' of research council programmes and investments are understood and engaged with. For the wider social science community and the research council, the review queried the extent to which some

ESRC structures and mechanisms allowed for the distinctive nature of research in social work and cognate disciplines, where applied and practice-based research is at their core. The review questioned and prioritised some mainstream ideas, for example, of research utilisation and the research user, and made the case for a conception of research that seeks to be socially as well as scientifically robust. Intentions to promote discipline health will, it was suggested, need to take into account this wider conception.

This range of developments in the policy and research domains has occurred at a time when there are shifting conceptualisations of the nature of the relationship between science and society. New models of research are forming. In social work, for example, these include research-informed practice, evidence-based practice, knowledge-based practice, action research, intervention research, practitioner research, practitioner engagement with research, and (service) user-led research. There are consequential diversifying concepts of research quality. A central question, helpfully crystallised by Furlong and Oancea, is whether it is possible to conceptualise social work research (and research in other practice-oriented fields) in such a way that 'pure' and 'applied' are not in conflict and so that contributions to basic knowledge and contributions to practice can be seen as compatible and potentially in synergy. If so, this would lead to a multidimensional conception of research quality.

1.1 Aims and outputs of kinds and quality study

The aims of the research were to:

- develop a framework for criteria and standards to appraise the nature and quality of social work research in universities in the UK
- complete exploratory tests and refinements of this framework.

The outputs from the research are:

- a basis for the social work and social science communities to profile the nature and quality of social work research
- a quality framework that includes and integrates applied and practice-based social work research and evaluation
- a frame of reference for the social work community and the ESRC, which will function as a resource and potential information base on which to build research capacity in social work
- a resource that will facilitate the further development and implementation of a national social work research strategy in higher education.

The research was funded by the ESRC with matched monies from SCIE, SIESWE, and the JUC SWEC.

1.2 Study methodology

Our approach to illuminating the nature and quality of social work research has the following characteristics:

- It focuses on shared common concerns, regarding theoretical and methodological quality, of those who may hold incommensurable philosophical presuppositions, without prejudging the extent to which it is possible to agree a coherent single framework. We have aimed to recognise and respect diversity of positions in the social work community.
- We wish where possible to foster the potential for developing shared quality frameworks between disciplines where applied- and practice-based research is central to their identity.
- Social work research has developed a strong profile of democratised, participatory and user-led research. The development and form of the recommendations reflects these distinctive characteristics of social work research.
- The main focus is on developing more general standards and dimensions of quality that, while usable, do not over-specify detailed criteria or over-prescribe how such criteria should be used in a given context.
- The recommendations are sensitive to the distinctive nature and contexts of applied research.
- We have not conducted a quality audit. Our approach to standards is development- and process-oriented, rather than outcome-oriented. Within this, we are not necessarily claiming that self-regulation is the best way, but that it is the appropriate strategy for the social work community.
- We have been influenced by arguments for appreciative evaluation, over against more conventional 'accountability' approaches to evaluation (Bogdan and Taylor, 1994; Preskill and Coghlan, 2003). This has influenced the case studies, where we have explored research that participants perceive to be of good quality.

The development of a quality framework will, we foresee, raise a number of central and not immediately tractable questions. These include:

- What *is* social work research?
- Is it possible to devise a single set of criteria that encompass what some regard as incommensurable categories of inquiry?
- How should we judge both relevance and importance? What is socially robust research in a social work context?
- How should quality judgements weigh the relative contribution of volume and quality, and of individual excellence and institutional excellence? How does this relate to judgements of discipline health?

We do not prejudge these questions, nor assume that we have been able to achieve answers to them all. We have, however, aimed to unpack the issues and believe that the project design provided a basis for developing provisional resolutions. We return to them in the final chapter.

There were several important **ethical considerations** for this project. The possible risks associated with the project included:

- breach of confidentiality regarding data on research grants and assessments of individual publications
- incomplete informed consent by the diverse and dispersed social work research community. Consent will be necessary at different stages throughout the project

- the imposition of a narrow prescriptivity that neglects sensitivity to the diversity of social work research/ers
- requiring a model of quality that is premised exclusively on a conventional view of science
- through a focus on higher education, becoming insufficiently sensitive to the expertise held by carers and users in judging the quality and value of social work research.

We have responded in the following ways to these legitimate concerns:

Confidentiality

- In developing a framework for assessing kinds of research, we drew only on research in the public domain and returned to the 2001 RAE.
- We have departed from conventional referencing norms when citing published outputs from interviewed participants in the study, in order to protect their identities. We have not identified sample universities.

Consent

- This has been addressed primarily through full briefings at all stages of the project, and by disclosing interview schedules and focus group materials to all participants in advance of the fieldwork. The general consent processes were handled through a series of project discussions within the national committees of the JUC SWEC.

Prescriptivity and diversity

- We have set out in some detail our approach to the study in the opening points of this section.

Users and carers

- We agreed with the social work co-funders at SCIE and SIESWE mechanisms for ensuring service user interests were fully included in the project.
- We ran an initial national workshop to which all stakeholders were invited, and where service user and carer researchers were well represented.
- We undertook an early 'key informant' interview with a leading service user researcher.
- We asked case study universities to open the focus groups to all stakeholders, and stressed our wish to hear the voices of user and carer researchers. This occurred in three of the four groups.

1.3 Fieldwork

The fieldwork fell into three phases:

Phase 1

- national open workshop of academic, practitioner and user researchers
- key informant interviews with four academic, policy and user researchers
- illuminative review of literature on quality and standards of social work and applied social science research.

The aims of this opening phase were to:

- raise awareness of the project within all elements of the social work community; consult on the scope and approach of the project; negotiate a constituency-wide informed consent, and complete an initial consultation on the nature and quality of social work research
- provide a profile of the kinds of social work research in UK higher education, and to further develop the preliminary dimensions of the quality framework.

Phase 2

Review of social work research submitted to the 2001 RAE:

- a ten per cent sample of all 'social work' outputs submitted to the 2001 panel (RA2 returns) to develop a classification of kinds of research. The inverted commas indicate that we accepted the claim to a social work research identity, albeit we would not ourselves define a significant minority of them as social work. The criterion for sampling an institution was that there had been a substantial volume of research activity in 2001 and also at the time of the fieldwork for this project
- narrative social work RAE submissions from the ten per cent sample of universities, to explore the rhetoric of quality. Information base: RA5 and RA6 returns
- hard copies of a ten per cent subsample of outputs, to complete an initial scan of quality claims in social work research.

The aim of this second phase was to develop a preliminary categorisation of the nature of social work research, and to differentiate the likely main dimensions of quality standards.

Phase 3

Four case studies of two new and two old universities in Wales, England and Scotland were drawn, with one exception, from the ten per cent sample of universities in Phase 2. Each case study consisted of interviews (three per site with academic staff) and a focus group (with researchers, research students, academic staff, practitioner researchers, user researchers and senior social work managers) conducted in March and April 2006. Individual interviews were linked to volunteered examples of their own research outputs supplied in advance, which they rated as of good quality.

The aim of this third phase was to develop and assess the adequacy of the preliminary quality framework.

The sample was chosen purposefully to ensure that a range of institutions was sampled, selecting two 'old' and two 'new' universities. The plan was that the case study universities should be part of the sample of universities for the study of kinds of research based on the 2001 RAE, but for various reasons linked to consent, only two of the case study sites had been included in Phase 2. Universities from Scotland, Wales and England were represented in the case study sample. The individual interviews were with members of the academic staff. The focus groups consisted of as wide a range of social work research interests as feasible for each site, including practitioners, user researchers, doctoral students, academic staff, research funders and senior social work agency staff. The focus groups opened with members giving examples of particular research projects and reports that they regarded as 'good' research.

The main discussion of the group was focused on five vignettes that outlined hypothetical pieces of research crafted to include variations on key dimensions of quality (Appendix 1). Each vignette was intended to represent good-quality research of a different kind. The participants were asked to respond to them and explore their agreement or disagreement about the weight that should be given to the different elements of 'quality'. There was then further discussion on what constitutes quality in social work research.

Unlike the focus groups, where attention was on research by others, the individual interviews were linked to a discussion of a particular example of the participant's own research, which they themselves volunteered in advance. The interviewer read the volunteered research output in anticipation of the interview and drew on a core set of semi-structured questions plus questions and prompts cued by the reading of the research output (Appendix 2). They were questioned about their views on research quality using their own work to provide context and examples. The transcribed data from the case studies was analysed in a somewhat more deductive manner than earlier data from the study, albeit aiming to tease out the details of quality judgements and allow for differences between the participants.

1.4 Social work research

Social work has some of the characteristics of an emerging research discipline, and it will be helpful to offer a preliminary, albeit relatively comprehensive, characterisation of social work research. We believe such a characterisation should consider:

- What are the **purposes** of social work research?
- How should we expect social work research to reflect the different **contexts** in which it is carried out?
- **Who** engages in such research?
- What if any characteristic **methods** of inquiry are used?
- What **domains** does it cover?

We appreciate that it is rarely possible – or perhaps even desirable – to avoid normative positions. Such statements are partly accounts of where something *is* and partly position statements of where it *ought* to be.

1.4.1 Purposes

Social work research is research that has one or more of the following purposes:

- provide objective, impartial evidence for decision making; provide public accountability
- generate or enhance theory and knowledge about social problems, social policy and social work and how best to develop them
- develop or improve social work intervention and practice
- highlight and advance the quality of lived experience, practical wisdom, and personal and organisational learning
- promote social inclusion, justice or social change.

1.4.2 Contexts

Social work research takes place within social, relational, governmental, political, ethical, intellectual and practice contexts. It inhabits most of these contexts in ways that are, by and large, reciprocal with research in other professions, disciplines and fields of study that share to a significant degree a commitment to the purposes of research given above. At any given period there usually will be sufficient common understanding and acceptance of the purposes of social work research to enable the social work community across different nations and cultures to engage in a mutual understanding and practice of research. However, the character, purposeful priorities and uses of social work research will always be shaped – diversely – by the challenges of the places and times in which it occurs.

1.4.3 The agents, practice and methods of social work research

Social work research consists of any disciplined empirical or scholarly inquiry (research, evaluation or analysis), conducted by researchers, practitioners, service users/carers, and others within the social work community, and that is intended, wholly or to a significant degree, to address the purposes of social work. It will also include disciplined empirical or scholarly inquiry intended, wholly or primarily, to address the purposes of social work, carried out by those who would not regard themselves as members of the social work community. The word 'research' is used with both broader and narrower meanings in this context. Because we are not attempting a precise definition of social work research, but rather a more detailed characterisation, we think it sufficient to allow the context to convey sufficiently – though not exhaustively – these different senses of the term 'research'.

Social work research generally does not draw on methods original or distinctive to social work, but on the range of social science fieldwork choices in (but not limited to) sociology, policy analysis, education, health and psychology. It is the core purposes and contexts of social work that give its research methodology a distinctive 'shape'. Social work research is therefore likely to draw more extensively on some

research methods than on others. The contexts and purposes of social work research have contributed to a distinctive 'set' of methodological interests. We do not think it advisable to be prescriptive about this distinctiveness. It will have some fluidity, in the light, for example, of the shaping influences of place and time referred to previously. Within the UK the social work-specific doctoral training requirements in the 2005 Economic and Social Research Council guidelines represent a statement about the distinctiveness of social work research that we recommend as a working position to the social work community (ESRC, 2005; cf Shaw, forthcoming).

We believe there should be a clear but not exclusive linking of social work research methods with purpose. General distinctions of this kind may be drawn between:

- methods for providing evidence of effectiveness and improving social work intervention
- methods for enhancing theory and knowledge about problems, policies and practice
- methods for highlighting and advancing the quality of lived experience, practical wisdom, and personal and organisational learning
- methods for facilitating social inclusion, social change and justice.

The phrase 'clear but not exclusive linking' is significant. For example, we do not want to foster restrictive visions of qualitative methods as fit only for the purpose of highlighting and advancing the quality of lived experience, or of randomised control trials as fit only for the purpose of providing objective, impartial evidence for decision making. We believe that pragmatic matching of this kind has a stultifying effect on the development of research, and presumes a premature resolution of debates about qualitative and quantitative methods, and research paradigms. It runs directly counter to the approach we have adopted in this study. We will discuss later in the report how the task of assessing the quality of social work research always should be judged by whether it is 'fit for purpose' in this more open sense.

1.4.4 The domains of social work research

The nature and boundaries of social work are perhaps the areas where there is the greatest degree of diversity between and even within countries. The risk of ethnocentrism is pervasive. Our reason for using the term 'domain' rather than, for example, 'services' is to recognise and allow for diversity of service and agency contexts. We use 'domain' as a more context-free category than 'services'. 'Health', for example, includes both health *problems* and health *services*. Social work research will take place in the domains of communities, developing nations, health and disability, mental health, ageing, children and young people, and criminal justice. These terms and their boundaries should be explicit although they are even less 'given' than the other dimensions of social work research.

The report follows a straightforward structure. In Chapter 2 we present the results of an illuminative review of recent thinking and developments on the nature and quality of social research, giving particular attention to work on the quality and standards of applied research. We report the results of parts of Phase 2 of the project in Chapter 3. We have divided the data on research quality into two chapters. In Chapter 4 we

reflect on the key informant interviews and opening workshop, and in particular the rhetorical cases for the quality of research made by social work outlets to the 2001 RAE. Chapter 4 reports the main themes that emerged from the case study fieldwork. We conclude the report in Chapter 5 with a summary of key findings, conclusions and recommendations.

2 Framing kinds and quality of social work research

Making sense of *quality* feels fraught with difficult value judgements, whereas ordering different *kinds* seems on the face of it much more straightforward. We became gradually less comfortable with this way of assuming things. Part of this discomfort stems from realising we easily fall into an old trap – the 'fact'/'value' trap of assuming 'things' – and from our estimation that things can be distinguished neatly most of the time. Of course, 'within the description are clues to quality. A good description cannot but tell of quality' (Stake and Schwandt, 2006). There is some redundancy in the title of this report in that 'quality' is both attribute and excellence – both kind and worth.

In this chapter we review recent thinking and developments on the nature and quality of social research, giving particular attention to work on the quality and standards of applied research. We briefly discuss ways of understanding the characteristics of applied research, before sketching current rethinking about how to approach judgements of the quality of research. We summarise a small number of quality-dimension frameworks that are currently on the table, and extract ideas on best practice in developing such frameworks. We conclude the chapter with a brief overview of what was previously known about the kinds and quality of social work research in UK universities. The literature search criteria were intended to be illuminative rather than exhaustive. Akin to grounded theory approaches, we aimed to sample the literature until we achieved a 'theoretical saturation' of approaches, themes and diversity. Because this chapter has been written illuminatively rather than exhaustively, the sources successively reviewed are representative of different positions rather than a comprehensive review.

2.1 Kinds of social research

The diversity within the social work research community, sketched in the opening chapter, illustrates well the fuzzy distinction between kinds and quality. However successful we are in standing on shared ground, there will be unresolved and perhaps irresolvable tensions – between explanation and meaning, expertise and democratising science, theory and data, and basic and applied research purposes.

The characterisation of social work research as 'applied' rather than 'basic' or 'pure' is perhaps the most durable of all these tensions. It has been reinforced recently by the grouping of social work alongside several other disciplines and fields of social science study as 'practice-oriented' rather than 'research-oriented' (Mills et al, 2006);, 'quality' judgements, in both senses of attribute and merit or excellence, follow on closely. Hence, in a consultation for the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise, Sir Gareth Roberts concluded that applied and practice-based research should be assessed 'according to criteria which reflect the characteristics of excellence in those types of research where these may differ from the characteristics of excellence in basic or mainstream scholarship' (SHEFC, 2003).

Approaches to unequivocally applied and practice-based research cover diverse conceptualisations of the links between research, policy and practice. Within social work these include research-informed practice, evidence-based practice, knowledge-

based practice, practice-based research, intervention research, practitioner research, and practitioner engagement with research.

The familiar distinction between applied research and basic/pure research has a purpose distinction at root. Furlong and Oancea have developed this in their discussion of applied research in education (Furlong and Oancea, 2005). They draw on the work of Stokes and echo his reservations about the applied/basic distinction as being too one-dimensional. It may help assessment of this argument if we follow them in distinguishing two questions we should address:

- Is research inspired by considerations of use?
- Does research seek fundamental knowledge?

Once distinguished, the answers to these questions are not dependent on each other. For example, we can have 'use-inspired basic research'. This illustrates the idea of a synergy between theory and practice. The distinction is of value for social work by pointing to the need to conceptualise social work research in such a way that 'pure' and 'applied' are not in conflict, but so that contributions to basic knowledge and contributions to practice can be seen as compatible and potentially synergistic dimensions. It also opens up ways of viewing the relationship between knowledge and use as a two-way one, in which practice may challenge knowledge just as much as knowledge may inform and challenge practice (Shaw, 2005). On this view it is plausible to include forms of research animated by both considerations of use and the quest for theoretical contributions (Furlong and Oancea, 2005). Understood in this way,

> 'Applied and practice-based research are not methodologically depleted forms of research; rather they can be innovatory modes of research that cater for a different set of needs and define quality in terms of wider social robustness'. (Furlong and Oancea, 2005).

2.2 Quality of social research

2.2.1 Inner and outer science

A series of nine workshops of researchers across the UK, aimed to stimulate thinking about the definition of quality research, concluded that 'the concept of defining the research agenda, by framing new research questions and advancing a field into new areas was seen as the most important characteristic of high quality research'. Methodological rigour, international impact, originality of findings and methodology, and recognition by academic peers all came out at or near the top of the rankings (Wooding and Grant, 2003).

A generation ago such a list would have been accepted without either questioning or puzzlement. However, there have been almost seismic shifts in how the various stakeholders in the research community as a whole view research quality, such that it is widely accepted that:

> 'changes in the relationship between research and society and the changing role of research in knowledge production and use mean that there is a need to rethink and adapt the concept of quality as it is employed in current research evaluation procedures'. (Furlong and Oancea, 2005).

Even such an establishment organisation as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has commissioned papers that are premised on the assumption that 'quality in statistics, years ago, might have been synonymous with accuracy, but today a consensus is emerging that quality is a much wider, multi-dimensional concept' (Carson, 2001). Goodness standards in science have been based on criteria as diverse as the logic of justification, the logic of discovery, the honesty and integrity of scientists, self-reflection and perspective-taking, human ethics, practical relevance, external science evaluation and the politics of representation (Breuer and Reichertz, 2002).

Breuer and Reichertz suggest that from the 1980s disillusion and scepticism arose regarding traditional 'inner-science' criteria such as objectivity, reliability, validity and truth, and practical or relevance criteria became more important. 'External other-directedness increasingly replaces internal or self-control in science' (Breuer and Reichertz, 2002). In their view these discourses have lost a common reference point, though they would not have us return to a lost world, and accept that adopting criteria of quality always implies a value decision.

Much of this challenge to traditional frameworks has been associated with the rise of qualitative methodology in social work and social science research. This is commonly seen as a problem arising from 'positivist' beliefs about the nature of knowledge and inquiry. 'The issues of reliability, validity and objectivity raise constant problems for qualitative researchers, as they are concepts which arise from a positivist frame of reference' (Fook, 2001: 117). There is a broad span of positions for how we understand the relationship between different methodologies, but the position that is likely to prove most creative for social work research is that described by Greene and Caracelli as *dialectical*. This position accepts that philosophical differences are real and cannot be ignored or easily reconciled. We should work for a principled synthesis where feasible, but should not assume that a synthesis will be possible in any given instance. This represents:

> 'a balanced, reciprocal relationship between the philosophy and methodology, between paradigms and practice. This ... honours both the integrity of the paradigm construct and the legitimacy of contextual demands, and seeks a respectful, dialogical interaction between the two in guiding and shaping evaluation decisions in the field'. (Greene and Caracelli, 1997)

We find this a helpful mediating position, and it has influenced our subsequent conclusions and recommendations about how to set the level of quality dimensions and judgements in assessing social work research. It offers a position that, in principle at least, provides scope for both a limited paradigm position and also for less philosophically grounded epistemologies. Hammersley (2005), a stern critic in the past of paradigm positions, observes that if 'there are some very deep differences in orientation to be found not just between quantitative and qualitative researchers

but also among qualitative researchers – then it is not surprising that there has been little agreement about quality'. He concedes that:

> 'if we can see how educational research could be characterised by competing paradigms (in a non Kuhnian sense) ... and therefore necessarily divided by allegiances to discrepant world-views, then we perhaps should resist any inclination to dismiss paradigm differentiation as entirely the product of bias, theoretical or methodological fashion, career building, etc. as some of us (myself included) sometimes do'. (Hammersley, 2005)

Lincoln and Guba, in earlier work, suggested a series of influential analogues between conventional versions of research rigour and qualitative or 'naturalistic' versions (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). In tune with this analysis, we would not be comfortable with a strategy that sees the solution in extending the traditional criteria developed for quantitative studies to all research. The idea of analogical relations between different methods is helpful in that it saves forcing members of the social work research community into a shotgun marriage on how best to judge quality of research in social work and social care. It postulates more general levels of potential agreement and allows continued exchange and conversation.

A helpful instance of such exchange and conversation is provided by Stake and Schwandt in their discussion of discerning quality in evaluation (Stake and Schwandt, 2006). They are discussing judgements of the quality of an evaluand rather than the evaluation per se, but their argument will stand. They distinguish between 'quality-as-measured' and 'quality-as-experienced'. In the first case quality is regarded as measurable and judging quality takes on the characteristic of 'thinking criterially', through explicit comparison of the research in question to a set of standards for it. The UK's RAE – either in its current version based primarily on a variety of peer review or on its likely future format, based on a greater degree of metrics – is an example of criterial thinking, as is the work of organisations such as the Campbell Collaboration. Judging quality criterially is more or less an 'experience-distant' undertaking. 'Quality-as-experienced' starts from the view that quality is a phenomenon that we personally experience and only later make technical, if need be:

> 'This view emphasises grasping quality in experience-near understandings, that is, in the language and embodied action of those who actually are undergoing the experience of a program or policy. Criterial thinking is important but it is rooted in interpretation of personal experience'. (Stake and Schwandt, 2006)

The value of their argument for our purposes is that they are not setting up confrontational positions on quality, but suggesting that 'The relative suitability of quality-as-experienced and quality-as-measured depends, in part, on whether or not the evaluand can be intellectually and practically embraced by a single evaluator (or a small evaluation team)'. Where it can, quality-as-experienced will predominate, but where it cannot, quality-as-measured will be most prominent.

2.2.2 Characteristics of quality frameworks

Stake and Schwandt's efforts to bring diverse ways of judging quality into conjunction without premature synthesis is reflected in what we regard as the more helpful current work on quality. Carson (2001), for example, writing for the IMF, suggests that a quality assessment tool that has structure and a common language would need to have the following characteristics:

- comprehensive in coverage of the dimensions of quality
- balance between the rigour desired by an expert and the bird's-eye view desired by the general data user
- structured but flexible enough to be applicable across a broad range of stages of statistical development
- structured but flexible enough to be applied to the main different kinds of datasets
- lead to transparent results.

Oancea and Furlong (2004), in an earlier more detailed development paper, say that, to avoid 'narrow prescriptivity', their quality dimensions were developed with the following guiding principles:

- sensitive to differences between types and contexts of applied research
- openness and flexibility, not wanting to over-prescribe how criteria are used in each context
- transparency: the selected dimensions 'attempt to cover as many as possible of the least contentious points that were raised in the consultation process and from the literature review'
- fairly general: 'leaving the development of detailed criteria for much more localised and contextualised enterprises'
- a degree of currency
- focused on educational research but also with a view to other research fields.

Oancea and Furlong distinguish different general formats of quality standard statements, which may be either *prescriptive* (expressing requirements), *interrogative* (asking whether or to what extent certain attributes exist) or *assertive* (statements about what good research is. Normative statements backed up by descriptive ones). Their own framework is written in an assertive format – it is aspirational.

Implicit in these lists are various assumptions about what makes for good quality judgement. It should have a certain balance of what we call above inner- and outer-science criteria, it should be pitched at a level of generality that enables the development of detailed criteria in local contexts. It should be flexible in how it can be applied to different kinds of research. We return to the literature on these and other 'good practice' principles for quality in a moment. But what quality dimensions might these guidelines produce? Without any claim to exhaustiveness, we sketch in outline four quality frameworks, chosen because we find them thought provoking for applied research in general and social work research in particular.

2.3 Dimensions of research quality

In tune with our purpose of providing an illuminative rather than exhaustive review, we focus on four contributions that between them reflect the span of debates and stances in the wider literature.

2.3.1 Gordon Brackstone

Brackstone, in work accepted as normative by Canada Statistics, has identified the quality dimensions of relevance, accuracy, timeliness, accessibility, interpretability and coherence (Brackstone, 1999,; 2001), thus illustrating how the recognition that the quality of data involves more than just accuracy has entered the quantitative research literature. Graham Kalton's paper to the 2001 Statistics Canada Symposium is equally useful in this regard.

Once a multidimensional concept of quality is adopted, it immediately poses the question of the relationships between the different dimensions, and whether one dimension is more or less important than another.

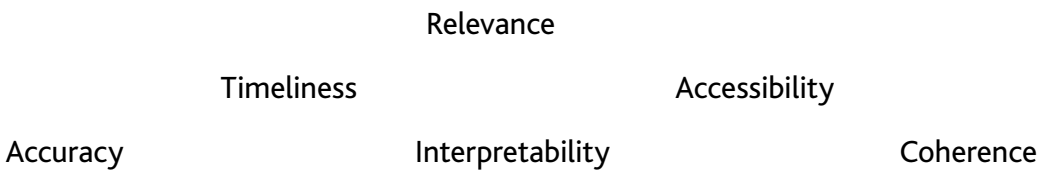
'Implicit in the multi-dimensional definition of quality is that failure in any one dimension can cause … the data not to be useful. The dimensions are in series, not in parallel. In that sense, all dimensions appear equally important' (2001). Any single dimension is a necessary but not sufficient requirement for quality (as value) to be ascribed. The position that we develop later in this report has some similarity to this. However, Brackstone adopts a hierarchical view of the dimensions of quality, where relevance is given priority. His argument has three aspects:

- Without relevance, the other dimensions are unimportant – perfect information on the wrong topics is not useful.
- Given relevance, without timeliness and accessibility the data are not available when they are needed.

and so

- Only when relevance, timeliness and accessibility are satisfied do accuracy, interpretability and coherence become important.

Figure 1: Hierarchy of quality dimensions



Source: Brackstone (2001)

His stance echoes the pungent position developed by Lee Cronbach and colleagues – equally astute statisticians – some years ago, when they argued that information that is correct and comprehensive is no use if it is not credible and comprehensible (Cronbach et al, 1980). A limitation of this line of argument is that it assumes all research is at the least use-inspired. 'Relevance' is less tangible in cases of research where this does not apply. Brackstone continues in the later paper to articulate the relationship between judgements of quality and the stage the research programme has reached, thus helpfully embedding quality issues at each stage of any disciplined inquiry.

2.3.2 Carol Carson

Carson's approach is somewhat different. She argues for a generic framework set alongside dataset-specific quality assessment frameworks. She also distinguishes 'pointers, or observable features' for each dimension. These pointers are further broken down into more detailed and concrete indicators. Her five general dimensions are:

- integrity: 'firm adherence to the principle of objectivity in the collection, compilation and dissemination of statistics', including a wide understanding of objectivity to include professionalism, transparency and ethical standards
- methodological soundness: necessarily dataset-specific as soon as it is applied
- accuracy and reliability: the data 'sufficiently portray reality'
- serviceability: data are actually useful, and hence timely and relevant
- accessibility: easily available, and assistance to users of data is adequate.

Carson (2001: 9) makes the additional point that:

> 'the quality of an individual dataset is intrinsically bound together with that of the institution producing it. In other words, quality encompasses quality of the institution or system behind the production of the data as well as the quality of the individual data product'.

This raises an important question: what are the prerequisites of research quality? This question is not part of the brief for this project, although it will surface at various points.

2.3.3 Ray Pawson and colleagues

While Brackstone and Carson yield valuable ways of thinking about quality, their frameworks have been developed with the workings of statistics agencies in mind and for large datasets. One of the few social work- and social care-specific frameworks of quality has been developed by Ray Pawson and colleagues as part of the SCIE knowledge development programme (Pawson et al, 2003). The crucial difference between this initiative and others in the field is that the authors have in mind the range of different kinds of knowledge in social work and social care, and have developed their quality framework with the aim that it can be applied to each kind of knowledge.

They distinguish five kinds of knowledge, viz organisational knowledge, practitioner knowledge, user knowledge, research knowledge and policy community knowledge, and provide a quality framework that entails seven quality dimensions:

- transparency: is it open to scrutiny?
- accuracy: is it well grounded?
- purposivity: is it fit for purpose?
- utility: is it fit for use?
- propriety: is it legal and ethical?
- accessibility: is it intelligible?
- specificity: does it meet source-specific standards?

The contribution this work makes is not so much to the development of quality criteria – these seven dimensions are similar to criteria elsewhere in the literature – but in the argument that it may be feasible to think of developing a set of criteria that is generic to very different kinds of knowledge. In a subsequent study, Long and colleagues test out the usability and value of this framework (Long et al, 2006).

2.3.4 John Furlong and Alis Oancea

Carson distinguished different levels of generality and specificity in her analysis. Furlong and Oancea (2005) suggest six levels from abstract to specific, but focus their attention on the general dimensions and the associated broad criteria (sub-dimensions). We find the argument that quality must be judged at different levels entirely plausible. For example, it is possible to have a general dimension: eg 'methodological and theoretical robustness', followed by a series of sub-dimensions of such a standard, eg 'trustworthiness', and subsequently indicators of such dimensions, eg for trustworthiness this could include an 'inter-rater reliability' score, and/or 'member validation' data.

There are opposite risks: undue specificity and over-generalisation. The first risks the hazard of forcing a superficial consensus on the social work community, while the second risks covering up sloppy thinking and reinforcing the status quo. We are not sure which hazard is greater. Furlong and Oancea suggest four basic dimensions, which have been the subject of interest beyond the education research community:

- epistemic dimension – methodological and theoretical robustness
- technological dimension – value for use
- capacity development and value for people
- economic dimension.

Their elaborations of the first three dimensions are of interest. They expand the epistemic dimension to 'illustrate attributes of research that seem to be reiterated, though in different interpretations, across a wide range of models of research' (p 11), thus hoping to connect the qualitative/quantitative territories without collapsing the differences into pragmatic anonymity. Their suggested sub-dimensions are:

- trustworthiness (plausible, reliable, grounded, etc.) – 'The strength of the warrants for the relation between the research process and its representation of the world' (Furlong and Oancea, 2005)
- contribution to knowledge (theoretical coverage, conceptual clarity, originality and the like)
- explicitness in design and reporting (transparent, reflexive, peer-reviewable)
- propriety (ethics, legal compliance, governance)
- paradigm-dependent criteria (research dependent on a particular epistemic community may carry paradigm-specific quality criteria).

In discussing 'value for use' they say that we should not assume *actual* impact, as that is not within the gift of the researcher, but rather potential or perhaps *intended* impact. The sub-dimensions suggest we should ask if research is:

- timely – eg does it strike the right balance between aiming for long- and short-term benefits?
- fit for purpose?
- is there a concern to enable/facilitate impact?

Capacity development and value-for-people dimensions find their roots in ethical concerns and tacit, situated knowledge and hence are difficult to capture in the research appraisal process. They do not appear sanguine regarding the chances of success in achieving this capture. 'The best we can hope for is probably to identify some features that might in some way be connected with these aspirations, and try to take them into consideration whilst evaluating it' (Furlong and Oancea, 2005: 14). As with the previous standard, we should not assume actual value for people as this again is often beyond the researchers' gift. The sub-dimensions they suggest are:

- partnership, collaboration and engagement, in and with the research and in the knowledge production
- plausibility from a practitioner's perspective
- reflection and criticism – research that permits self-reflection and expansion of control over acting opportunities
- enhanced receptiveness to the practitioner's viewpoint; also receptiveness to research among practitioners, policy makers and the larger public sphere
- stimulating personal growth.

Efforts to elaborate 'value for people' are helpful and take us further than broad aims of justice or empowerment.

This framework aims to maximise agreement without imposing any single orthodoxy. It is not assuming any one way of 'measuring' performance. Tensions within paradigm debates are recognised, and the intention is to seek language that can be signed up to by the majority of researchers. In this respect it is of value to the social work community. We do not think Furlong and Oancea's approach leads to strong 'criterial thinking' – eg there is no assumption about how each 'item' might be 'weighted' or 'scored'.

A limitation of Furlong and Oancea's work is their tendency to be suspicious of emancipatory research, and to leave the student and parent (for social work, service user and carer) relatively invisible. However, we do not see that this hiatus is at all necessary to their ordering categories and can be filled without affecting their basic stance. The criticism applies in particular to their sub-dimensions of 'plausibility from a practitioner's perspective' and 'receptiveness' and we would want to add an additional sub-dimension:

- receptiveness to service users' and carers' viewpoints, and to a wider distribution of individual and social justice.

In contrast to Brackstone's work, Furlong and Oancea (2005) distance themselves from a hierarchical framework for dimensions of quality, and prefer requiring an agreed level of quality on all dimensions:

> 'The idea that any one research project is likely to favour some aspects of the framework over others ... In short, the ways in which each evaluating agency adapts our framework needs to be based on a clear description of the situation and on an awareness of the multiplicity of dimensions ... However, we would suggest that the criteria they develop for assessing the quality of applied and practice-based research in their particular contexts should still touch in one way or the other the dimensions that we have identified'. (Furlong and Oancea, 2005)

How far they would plead for different criteria for more and less applied disciplines, we are not sure. The answer is by no means self-evident. Braithwaite (2004), for instance, argues vigorously that 'ultimately the decision about excellence in research that impacts on public policy has to be a decision that has academic merit at its base'.

2.4 Reflections on quality

Loosely tying together some of the ends in this part of the chapter, we recap some of the recurring themes, underscoring them where it seems appropriate.

Viewing quality at different levels of generality and specificity is almost universally accepted as wise and useful. This is, more than anything, a point about how debates and differences are handled within any given research community. It provides a perspective from which we can press for as much specificity as is feasible without losing the collective enterprise. We would couple with this a determination to eschew hierarchies of quality dimensions. Taken together, these positions provide a backcloth against which issues of debate and difference can be played out.

For example, what weight should be given to rigour and accuracy, compared with relevance, usefulness and the like? Quality dimensions are not 'all or none' categories. There are often trade-offs to be made between them. It may, for example, be better to put gains in timeliness of results or clear 'value for people' against greater accuracy while adhering to the position that at least a minimum degree of quality needs to be achieved on all main dimensions. As Kalton expresses it from his perspective, 'Accuracy ... cannot be treated in the abstract. It is closely interrelated with other factors, such as the available budget, the need for timely results, the need

for relevant estimates, and the need to control the response burden' (Kalton, 2001). The issues are rarely discussed in a comprehensive way in the social work literature, although William Reid appeared to hold a clear position adhering to the need for principled 'trade-offs' on quality standards (Shaw, 2004).

In this sense, quality is always a matter of negotiation:

> 'Quality is multi-faceted, contested and never fully representable.... We construct, craft and hammer out an argument ... we never establish quality once and for all.... The contingent, interpretive character of our judgement is something we must live with rather than regard as lamentable and eliminable'. (Stake and Schwandt, 2006)

What counts as a minimum degree of quality on all dimensions is, of course, a matter for debate. It connects to the oft-cited general standard for research quality, that it should be 'fit for purpose'. It seems to us that it will be acceptable for different stakeholders – practitioners, policy managers, users and carers, academic researchers – to draw on different quality judgements. This is not to say that judgements are relative or that they can be treated as a pick and mix, but that quality judgements need to be specific to the relevance requirements of the evaluator. Elaborating practice guidelines for this would, of course, be a taxing exercise.

Flexible application of quality frameworks poses a further thorny question. Should there be room for flexibility according to the kind of expertise and knowledge of the assessor? Carson poses this issue as a question of whether there should be a 'lite' version of a quality framework (2001). We would not want to express it in this way because it assumes that expertise rests with research experts and that for other interest groups the standards are somehow lighter. Arguing for different *kinds* of expertise does not equal a belief in different *levels* of expertise. The key question is how should quality judgements be related to the kind of knowledge and expertise that the user, practitioner, policy maker and so on, bring? Duncan and Harrop (2006) set the challenge by insisting that policy users of research are essentially pragmatic, and want research that is 'clear, useful, timely and usable':

> Policy makers and practitioners are usually untrained in research methods and so often cannot assess the quality of the evidence from a methodological perspective. Indeed, they are not particularly interested in doing so.

Furthermore, 'those responsible for policy and practice will never depend on research evidence alone. (R)esearch always competes with "common-sense" views of the world' (Duncan and Harrop, 2006). Yet they conclude both sides need to understand the different perspectives of researchers and practitioners. 'Unless we understand the different natures of these two worlds, we risk forever misunderstanding each other and failing to draw on joint strengths'. A corresponding case can readily be made regarding the expertise of service user and carer researchers (eg Hanley, 2005).

2.5 What do we know about the kinds and quality of social work research?

It is not easy to obtain barometric readings of the strength of social work research. One of the more rounded assessments, based on a relatively wide database, is in the overview report on social work submissions to the 2001 RAE in British universities (RAE, 2002; cf Fisher and Marsh, 2003). The panel concluded that:

> 'Research in Social Work has matured intellectually and includes both theoretical and empirical work. More attention is being paid to user involvement. Qualitative research is a growing strength and includes, for example, use of case studies, ethnological work, document analysis and participant observation as well as thematic analysis of free-flowing interviews. These methods are used in a number of new and emerging bodies of work – especially with regard to issues of sexuality, abuse and violence'. (RAE, 2002)

The panel concluded that 'there is some evidence of strength in those institutions which have specialised and have grown over time. Particularly marked improvements have taken place in some institutions which have specialised in sub-areas of the discipline or particular methodological approaches'. This may have been part of what the panel had in mind when commenting that social work research 'is changing its shape and looking less like traditional social work. There appears to be less research being carried out on what used to be seen as core topics'.

We can get some clue to panel members' thinking by noting what they believed to be the weaknesses of social work research:

> There was less attention paid to social work in the field of mental health than might have been expected. There was a paucity of quantitative analysis, particularly that combined with qualitative approaches. Quantitative work, while sometimes of a high quality, is rare and not always good when found. Exciting practice developments are not always well described and are often written up with too little regard for method.

Interesting as it is, the RAE panel report should not be taken as a gold standard for judging the quality of social work research. It represents an academic panel view on the 30 submissions received, covering just over 400 staff. Universities that rolled up social work staff as part of submissions to other panels are not represented, and the report has a slightly bitty feel to it. This is not a comment on the work of the panel per se, and the volume of social work research that had risen since the previous RAE, but the report of the panel did have limitations as an indicator of research quality. However, the social work RAE report is probably a safe guide on methodology. It covers what social work academics and their academic managers believed to be their best research undertaken in the years from 1996 to 2001, and for that reason is unlikely to understate the strengths of the generality of social work research. Partly in response to this sense that there are skill and capability limitations in social work research, and that we know relatively little about what goes on, the research committee of the JUC SWEC developed a wide ranging research strategy for social work research in UK universities for the period 2006-2020 (JUC SWEC, 2006).

Drawing on the same database, the 2001 RAE (2002) report listed eight 'themes' of social work research in general order of their prevalence:

- children, youth and families
- social work practice
- health and social care
- theory and methodology
- race and diversity
- criminal justice
- social justice
- organisation studies.

The panel report does not advance this scheme as an instrument for classifying research outputs. We used this classification as a starting point in our own study, and report this stage of the project in the next chapter. We soon came to discard it as unworkable.

2.6 Conclusions

We have given an illuminative review of selected literature on the nature and quality of social research in general and social work research in particular. Our own inclinations favour an approach to assessing social work research that is marked by the following provisional conclusions.

Social work research should be conceptualised in such a way that:

- 'pure' and 'applied' research are not in conflict
- applied research is not seen in deficit terms as a methodologically lesser form of research.

Quality judgements in social work research should be marked by commitments to:

- a dialectical relationship between different methodologies
- incorporating both quality-as-measured and quality-as-experienced
- seeking agreement on quality dimensions at a middle range of generality, with the purpose of maximising agreement between diverse epistemological positions but not requiring a unitary consensus on quality criteria
- quality as multidimensional, including dimensions both intrinsic and extrinsic to the research act
- a provisional position, open to review, that requires a relatively demanding minimum demonstration of quality on all dimensions. This is different from either a hierarchical model of quality, or an overly contextualised model that leaves choice of criteria to the local occasion. We believe this logic is commensurate to both Furlong and Oancea (2005) and Pawson et al (2003)
- quality as reflecting both process and goal.

The ambition to develop quality standards that will 'work' for all kinds of social work and social care knowledge is hugely ambitious. However, we believe there are grounds for supporting this stance on the bases that there is considerable diversity

of knowledge *within* social work research, and that the boundaries between research knowledge and other forms of knowledge are by no means watertight.

Application of quality judgements should be marked by avoiding an overly prescriptive framework for how quality criteria should be applied in a given context.

The standard of 'fit for purpose' in social work research should include working to develop guidance on how different stakeholder communities should apply quality judgements selectively but not self-servingly.

It is possible that an adapted version of Furlong and Oancea's framework may prove appropriate for social work research, and broadly congruent with the more general framework offered by Pawson and colleagues. In the next chapter we review the analysis of kinds of social work research and develop dimensions for configuring social work research.

3 Distributing kinds of social work research

Relatively little work has been carried out on the kinds of social work research. We came across occasional rough categorisations in the social work literature. More substantially, work on the Department of Health's Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care included a baseline assessment exercise and case studies, conducted to inform its implementation. Both of these studies aimed to reach an understanding of the quantity and nature of social care research, although they did not directly address questions of quality (Pahl, 2002; Boddy and Warman, 2003).

We noted at the close of the previous chapter the rank ordering of frequencies of kinds of research submitted to the 2001 RAE Social Work panel. Our early work on this part of the study was guided by two working assumptions. First, that assessing 'kinds' would prove relatively easy compared with assessing quality. Second, that we needed to produce a scheme that would – and probably could – work with the minimum of information. While we have not completely abandoned these assumptions, they have both been modified through hard experience. 'Kinds' *are* easier to assess than 'quality' but they are not easy. Information about kinds is probably contained fully in published outputs, unlike evidence about quality, but it cannot be routinely read off from basic information about authors, title and so on.

3.1 Development and testing the distribution of kinds of social work research

A synopsis of the process we have been through may be the best shortcut through a winding and long path.

3.1.1 2001 RAE report

We sampled social work returns to the 2001 RAE with the aim of listing about 25 per cent of outputs returned by social work staff. An early application of the eight panel categories to this data threw up so many puzzles that we immediately moved to a modification and expansion of the category list.

This yielded a rough estimate of the (mainly substantive) themes of social work research. We tried to classify the social work RAE outputs (including social work output within social policy submissions) from a sample of 14 pre- and post-1992 universities (De Montfort (24), Bristol (20), Royal Holloway (1), Staffordshire (8), Ulster (17), Luton (12), Huddersfield (16), Manchester Metropolitan (11), UEL (14), Lincoln (1), Durham (10), Lancaster (1), Middlesex (1), Coventry (5)). The sources used here have long been in the public domain. Although we name them here, we anonymise references to them in subsequent parts of the report. The outputs were selected by taking, where available, the first two social work articles by each author from the 14 universities' RA1 and RA2 submissions. In total 289 titles were analysed to determine whether they would fit into one of the 10 categories (see Table 1).

Table 1: Kinds of social work research (2001 RAE)

Modified 2001 RAE categories	Number	%
Children, young people and families	52	24.3
Health and social care, including mental health	36	16.8
Social work practice	35	16.4
Pedagogic research in social work, including practice learning	20	9.3
Criminal justice	16	7.5
Race and diversity	14	6.5
Theory and methodology	12	5.6
Social justice, equality, inclusion	12	5.6
Organisation/management studies	12	5.6
Comparative and cross-national research	5	2.3
Unclassifiable	75	
Total	289	

The problems with this rudimentary scheme were as follows:

- Although mainly substantive, the scheme confuses different levels of analysis such that the categories are not mutually exclusive.
- It highlights the problems of defining the boundaries of what is and what is not social work research.
- It implicitly brings into focus the question of the purpose of such a categorisation.

There was inevitably a high proportion of unclassifiable outputs – 26 per cent. The reasons for these difficulties sprang to some degree from the fact that RAE submissions are knowingly contrived, and research carried out by social work-submitted staff may not be recognisably 'social work'. Other problems were more fundamental:

- Twenty-nine articles had a psychological or counselling focus and did not fit easily into any of the categories.
- Four articles had an educational focus and could not fit into any of the social work categories.
- Twenty articles did not have a distinctively social work reference in the information base.
- Five articles had a housing or transport focus.
- Some categories (eg 'health and social care') were too 'catch-all' and insufficiently differentiated.
- Outputs on gender/feminism/women's issues tended to be invisible in the scheme.
- Older people did not easily fit.
- The levels of analysis led to a number of outputs that fitted more than one category.
- Outputs that prioritised research ethics tended to be invisible in the scheme.
- Similar points could be made about outputs dealing with abuse, and with volunteer and community work.

3.1.2 Two dimensions

This led to a radical abandonment of the single dimension scheme and a shift to distinguish classifying according to two different levels: What is the primary substantive focus of the research? What is the primary problem focus of the research? What is the primary orientation of the researcher to the problem? Roughly, how is the issue being approached?

Thinking about kinds of research in this way focused our minds on the purpose of the classification scheme. We regard it as a tool to learn what research is being done so that:

- Gaps/concentrations can be identified and hence become a partial basis for strategic planning at national, local or regional levels.
- Taken along with information about what is happening in different universities etc, the classification scheme is a basis for finding out about patterns of research activity, and who is doing what.
- The second dimension becomes a basis for thinking about the purposes of social work research and assessing whether we are thinking about research problems in the most interesting/helpful ways.

We had quickly modified our commitment to a scheme that could be used routinely based on the level of information in the RAE returns, to one that required fuller operational information. The subsequent development of the modified scheme was carried out through a series of ratings and inter-rater reliability exercises on a sample of papers published in selected issues of the *British Journal of Social Work*. The scheme has been developed through a series of inter-rater reliability exercises on 40 articles in the *British Journal of Social Work*, Volume 33, issues 2 and 7; Volume 34, issues 6 and 8, and Volume 35, issue 7 (Appendix 3). The requirement for inclusion was that the outputs should fall in the current RAE period; meet the definition of research used in this study; and include both key words and an abstract. A small number were excluded on one or other ground.

The rating test was more demanding than would normally be the case, due to having two raters who were from very different disciplinary backgrounds (Norton and Shaw). We found agreement (and indeed attribution) difficult in five cases for the first dimension (87.5 per cent agreement) and four cases for the second dimension (90 per cent agreement). The details are given subsequently. Subsequent development of the scheme should assess rating agreement levels between different stakeholder groups within the social work community, and any subsequent use of the scheme to compare social work research between cultures and countries would also need to include tests for inter-cultural rating reliability.

We have sufficient confidence in the scheme to recommend its trial adoption by different stakeholder groups in the social work community, and its utilisation as part of the implementation programme for the JUC SWEC 'Strategy'. We also recommend that it is used as part of the development of a practice research database by SCIE. We anticipate we will be asked if a slimmed-down, 'lite' version of the scheme can be used. We confess to serious reservations. However, it will be seen that we have

suggested a two-tier grouping of the first dimension, and that may provide a basis for summary estimates.

3.2 The classification scheme

We advise that the minimum information base necessary for carrying out this classification scheme is as follows:

For journal articles

- author/s names
- affiliation/s
- abstract/summary
- key words.

For reports, chapters, conference papers, web-based papers and books

- author/s names
- affiliation/s
- summary or, if not provided, the full text.

We strongly recommend that the classifications are not used unless the minimum information base is available for all items and also that:

- there has been a trial dummy run for familiarisation and learning
- at least two people operate the classification
- an inter-rater exercise is carried out prior to commencing the main exercise
- the scheme is used with the full guidance notes. These notes may need expanding and writing in versions that are usable by researchers and research users who work outside higher education.

Figure 2: First dimension: primary research focus

On whom is the primary research focus?		
Actual or potential service user or carer groupings	1.	Children, families, parents, foster carers
	2.	Young people (not offenders)
	3.	Young offenders/victims
	4.	Adult offenders/victims
	5.	People with mental health problems
	6.	Older people
	7.	People with health/disability problems (including learning disabilities)
	8.	Drug/substance users
Citizen, user and community populations	9.	People as members of communities
	10.	Service user, citizen or carer populations
	11.	Women/men
Professional and policy communities	12.	Social work practitioners/managers
	13.	Social work students/practice teachers/ university social work staff
	14.	Policy, regulatory or inspection community
	15.	Members or students of other occupations
Not applicable	16.	For example, theorising that crosses categories; methodology

3.3 First dimension: guidelines for using categories

3.3.1 General

'Primary research focus' refers to people, not problems (Category 16 refers to those research outputs that cannot be assessed primarily on this dimension). Hence the judgement will refer mainly to the 'subjects' of the research/scholarship. Usually this will mean the people from whom data was obtained, but if it is clear that these are simply being used as 'proxies' for another set of people (eg practitioners being interviewed to learn about children, rather than to learn about practice with children) then it should in that case be classed as 1, not 12. The research output must not be classified according to the intended *readers* of the output, and not more generally according to the intended *users* of the research. In cases where the abstract does not resolve the category, we have sometimes found the key words valuable in identifying the writer/s' primary focus.

This first classification is still at a development stage. There are a number of areas where further refinement would be desirable:

- the continued existence of instances where equally plausible cases can be made for allocating to more than one category

- developing precedents for boundary decisions (although we do not recommend the removal of all discretion and judgement)
- reviewing whether the scheme has any unintended consequences, in terms of which areas of focus are given more or less prominence in the use of the scheme.

We found five articles where boundary issues were difficult to resolve. These involved the boundaries between categories 1 and 2 (two articles); categories 12 and 1 (2 cases) and categories 4 and 5 (one article).

Categories

1. Children, families, parents and foster parents
2. Young people

The most common areas for discretion and judgement for the first two categories will be:

- applying the principle in the general guidance about whether others (most probably practitioners) are being used as 'proxies' for understanding younger children
- deciding boundaries between the two categories in relation to young people. As general advice, in developing the classification we have usually allocated research that refers to 'children and young people' to 'young people' unless there is some commonsense reason for doing otherwise. Young fathers or mothers have typically been classed under category 1.

4. Adult offenders/victims

Young people viewed as offenders should be classed under category 3 and not 2. There will usually be legal age boundaries to decide whether someone is a young person or an adult. If not then those 18 and older should be classified as adult. Those who are the victims of offending behaviour have been grouped in the same categories. This reflects our concern to balance trade-offs between precision and usability/usefulness. Children who are victims of physical or sexual abuse will usually be classed in category 1. Once again, we have deliberately not sought to remove all discretion in the application of the categories.

5. People with mental health problems

6. Older people

7. People with health/disability problems

8. Drug/substance users

There will be some instances where the boundary between categories 7 and 8 is a matter of judgement, and possibly between 5 and other categories such as 6 or 8.

9. People as members of communities

While most people are part of communities of some kind, this category only refers to research where the focus is on people in terms of their community identities. It includes various definitions of 'community', and not only neighbourhoods and spatial communities. It also includes asylum seekers and refugees, and members of black and minority ethnic communities.

10. Service user, citizen or informal carer populations

This is to cover cases where – although specific groupings may be in view – the focus is on them in terms of their membership/identity as citizens, carers, or users in general, rather than in relation to a specific group. However, if the focus of interest is on them in terms of their community relationships/membership, the output should be classed in category 9.

11. Women/men

This refers to women or men where gender is the main organising focus of the research, e.g. they are not seen solely in their relation to a family or children. It includes ways in which men or women are dealt with as service users. The boundary between categories 11 and 9 will sometimes be a matter of judgement.

12. Social work practitioners/managers

This is reserved for those who deliver or manage direct services. This defines the boundary between categories 12 and 14. One area for discretion and judgement will lie in applying the principle in the general guidance about whether practitioners are being used as 'proxies' for understanding others, eg younger children or possibly people with serious communication difficulties. In that case the output should be classified under the primary category.

13. Social work students/practice teachers/university social work staff

This refers to research where the focus is on people as active players in a social work learning and teaching setting, whether that is in an agency or a higher education institution.

14. Policy, regulatory or inspection community

This is entirely distinct from category 10. This is a distinct category to cover cases where the primary focus is on people who are not directly employed by the practice agency (this should be a straightforward operational criterion).

15. Members or students of other occupations

This category has been included to cover cases where other occupations are believed to shed light on social work, and should include studies where social work is included as one of two or more occupational groups. Studies of social workers from different agencies belong in category 12.

16. Not applicable

The definition of research used in this study includes some work where there is no empirical data, or where the focus is on issues that are better classified as primarily about methodology of inquiry or theoretical work. There will be cases where judgement is necessary, eg where theoretical work arises from empirical research.

Figure 3: Second dimension: primary issue/problem

What is the primary issue or problem focus of the research?	
1.	Understand/explain issues related to risk, vulnerability, abuse, resilience, challenging behaviour, separation, attachment, loss, disability or trauma.
2.	Understand/explain issues related to equality, diversity, poverty and social exclusion.
3.	Understand/assess/strengthen user/carer/citizen/community involvement in social work; partnership; empowerment.
4.	Understand/promote the nature and quality of informal care, carer activity, volunteering, and their relationship to formal care.
5.	Describe, understand, explain, or develop good practice in relation to social work beliefs, values, political positions, faith, or ethics.
6.	Understand/develop/assess/evaluate social work practices, methods or interventions.
7.	Understand/evaluate/strengthen social work/social care services, including voluntary/independent sector.
8.	Understand/explain/promote good practice in social work/social care organisations and management.
9.	Understand/address issues of ethnicity, racism.
10.	Understand/address issues of gender, sexism, the role of women, the role of men.
11.	Demonstrate/assess the value of inter-disciplinary approaches to social work services.
12.	Demonstrate/assess the value of comparative, cross-national research.
13.	Develop theorising.
14.	Understand/appraise/develop the practice and quality of social work research (including user/carer involvement in research; feminist research; anti-racist research methods).
15.	Understand/promote learning and teaching about social work or related professions.

3.4 Second dimension: guidelines for using categories

3.4.1 Categories

1. Risk, vulnerability, etc.

This is a large category but trial applications suggest it is not unmanageably so, and there is coherence to it. Note that this does not include any research where

the primary focus is on responding to or resolving the issues. However, 'explain' will sometimes include research where the explanation includes analysis of ways in which services/professionals contribute to 'problems'.

2 and 3. Equality, diversity, etc and involvement, empowerment, etc

Categories 1 and 2 are most readily distinguished in terms of the presence of, at least implicitly, structural analyses in category 2. There are obvious connections between categories 2 and 3. Category 2 refers to examples of research that overlap some aspects of social policy and social work, whereas category 3 prioritises considerations about social work/user/carer/citizen responses. There will be occasional boundary judgements between categories 3 and 6. See also the note on category 14.

4. Informal care

5. Social work beliefs

6. Practices, methods and interventions

The focal depth of field in this category is considerable. In addition to, for example, research and development initiatives to develop models of social work intervention, it also includes research where the focus is around issues of reflective practice, professional judgement and so on. However, the category is not big in numbers terms. As with some other categories, it is a trade-off between precision and usability. Note that 'care management' is treated as a service and not an intervention and so should be placed in category 8.

7. Social work/social care services

The difference between categories 6 and 7 lies in a distinction between direct practice (6) and *services* as a whole (eg adoption, care management) (7). The terminology of 'social care' is included in categories where there is a service or organisational level of research. Note that 'care management' is treated as a service and not an intervention and so should be placed in this category, not category 6.

8. Good practice in organisations and management

The boundaries between categories 6 through 8 are on a dimension of specificity to generality. Category 7 refers to services at a more direct service delivery level, whereas category 8 refers to more general management issues, learning organisations etc. It also includes instances where research on regulatory practice has an intention fitting this category.

9. Ethnicity, racism

This category is restricted to such research in its relevance to social work.

10. Gender, sexism, the role of women, the role of men

This category is restricted to such research in its relevance to social work. There will be occasions where judgements of boundary between categories 10 and 1 will be required.

11. Inter-disciplinary approaches

The phrase 'inter-disciplinary' is used here to include two distinct categories. Research that crosses different occupations/professions (eg housing and social work), and research that crosses different higher education disciplines. Once again, there is a trade-off between precision and usability. In the UK at least the phrase is often used indiscriminately to cover both meanings. Most examples will be of the first kind.

12. Comparative, cross-national social work research

13. Theorising

See note on category 16 (Figure 2). Theory in the sense of practice frameworks where the intention may be to develop models/methods of social work intervention should be placed in category 6. Theories of the client's world will usually be placed in categories 1 or 2. 'Theory' in this case refers to attempts to describe, understand and interpret society and people's relationships to it; theories of the nature of social work; and 'frameworks' in the sense of orientations or perspectives that act as approaches to framing, understanding or solving problems.

14. Practice and quality of social work research

Although the term 'methodology' has not been used (because it may be interpreted in too narrow a way) it is of course included here. The category also includes research ethics and governance; research capacity; research utilisation; and research training. Note that there are similar issues addressed in categories 3 and 14, where the distinction is between social work *practice* and social work *research*.

15. Learning and teaching about social work

This is wider than pedagogic research – for example, outputs on selection would go here. Research training is included with the practice and quality of social work research (category 14). Research that includes evidence about learning and teaching for other professions in their relation to social work should also be placed here.

In the rating exercise we found four research outputs especially difficult to classify. These involved the boundaries between categories 1 and 10 (one case); 6, 8 and 10 (one case); 1 and 6 (one case) and 3 and 6 (one case).

The development of the scheme presented in this chapter proved to be a much larger part of our effort than originally anticipated. We look forward to testing and feedback from the social work community and other interested colleagues. We believe we have made significant progress and that the scheme may prove a step beyond previous work in this area.

4 Claiming and judging research quality

Running through this report is the recognition that judgements about the *nature* and *quality* of forms of disciplined inquiry are not entirely discontinuous.

Throughout the project – whether in the national workshop, the key informant interviews or, to a lesser degree, the final stage case studies – different manifestations of explicit or underlying disquiet were evident. These concerns were not given as a settled or coherent position, but we have taken up the opening part of this chapter to briefly abstract the dominant motifs of these concerns, and so situate the core discussions of quality later in this chapter. In the main part of the chapter we report and reflect on the results of four case studies in social work outlets in pre- and post-1992 universities in Scotland, Wales and England. The final paragraphs of the chapter refer briefly to the kinds of argument that the academic social work community advances to persuade its peers that social work research of high quality is taking place at their university.

4.1 Hopes and fears

The early phase of the project focused on opening out the issues and understanding the agenda as seen by different members of the social work community. Themes recurred and overlapped. Concerns were expressed often elliptically and perhaps with a sense of shared tacit knowledge. However, four general emphases could be detected:

- aversion to notions of a hierarchy of kinds of social work research
- a desire that social work research – and hence judgements about its quality – should be 'relevant' and 'fit for purpose'
- a preoccupation with the centrality of social work values
- a preoccupation with what could be called the 'politics of quality'.

4.1.1 Hierarchies

A concern that assessments of social work research should eschew hierarchies was among the most frequently expressed concerns. It was not always clear exactly what was intended, and often it appeared to be a more general concern that an 'academic' view of the world should not dominate. This was sometimes expressed as a belief that broad standards of quality should apply. When expressed moderately this was linked to the perceived difficulty of applying standard (medical) hierarchy criteria of quality to social work research, such as using randomised control trials (with dummy groups who do not receive a particular service). This anxiety about an epistemological hierarchy was a widely articulated unease. It overlaps with 'fitness for purpose' and the desire to do justice to social work values.

4.1.2 Relevant and fit for purpose

The resistance to hierarchies of knowledge did not seem absolute. Alongside this was an emphasis on contextualising research judgements. For example, participatory research, it was reasoned, needs to identify questions that are of value and interest

to the participants. Evaluation research must be answered according to the context of the question. More generally, methodology/method should be fit for purpose and be used to best answer the research questions. Innovatory methods are significant but should be justified in that context. Hence, methodological quality should be judged according to the type of research being carried out. Not every type of research will fulfil all quality criteria, but research should be primarily fit for purpose and then as robust and transparent as possible.

These concerns took place in connection with disquiet about how well some social work research had met the broad standard of rigour and transparency within a contextualised framework of quality standards. For example, there was an occasional concern about a movement towards 'marketisation' of social work research marked by research funding becoming increasingly focused on applied research, while largely ignoring the need for continuing contribution to theoretical knowledge. More generally, while it was widely believed that an abstract hierarchy of methods was neither possible nor desirable, it *was* thought appropriate to attempt a hierarchy of quality within a particular methodological field. The method should be fit for purpose and adhere to conventions of robustness, rigour and transparency. Conclusions should only be drawn if they are appropriate to method. The view was expressed that there may be too much social work research which reaches conclusions that are too ambitious or not appropriate to the study design.

4.1.3 Social work values

Accomplishing such a contextualised rigour requires the contribution of the wider community beyond the universities. Otherwise a quality framework could be in danger of alienating practitioners and other non-academics who are unaware of, or do not fully own, a technical, academic-focused agenda.

The most commonly articulated position was that epistemic criteria of quality are shared (or at least sharable) between social work and other social science disciplines, but that these are layered with more or less distinctive requirements stemming from social work values. For some, this went little further than recognising the common ground between social work and other 'applied' social science disciplines. For others, it entailed a social justice agenda on which social work research has played a lead role. The predominant position was that user involvement is very important, but that it does not replace more traditional criteria of rigour.

This was perhaps the area where most disagreement exists. Workshop members and several senior figures in the social work community advanced a stronger position, to the effect that some degree of user engagement is essential in *all* distinctively social work research, and that this is a fundamental quality criterion. One workshop participant encapsulated this as the need for a social justice agenda to underlie social work research and a clear statement in any quality criteria that good-quality social work research will not exploit or disempower people.

4.1.4 Politics of quality

The centrality of values also occurred in the view that 'quality' can readily be used as a form of value judgement. 'X research design has been implemented well and is an indicator of quality', may slide into 'X design is a high-quality design and therefore this research is good research'. The pleas for a contextualised quality framework were made in this environment. The consequent questions – who will make quality judgements and when – surfaced from time to time. However, the distinction between quality and value was sometimes used to support an argument against over-valuing 'quality'. Hence, a line of reasoning that appealed to some was to suggest that values and quality are not the same. Hence, a piece of work may be of low (methodological) quality but still have value.

We have briefly rehearsed these emerging themes from the early phases of the project in order to indicate that debates, positions and creative tensions will permeate discussions of research quality, and will not easily be resolved. Our later recommendations regarding the level at which judgements about research quality should be made, are offered in the context of wishing to recognise unresolved differences, while refusing to hide them either in vacuous generalities or regulate them through a false consensus of quality standards.

4.2 Judging research quality

The hub of this chapter is an enquiry into the criteria used by the social work community to evaluate the quality of social work research. We draw on the case studies, in which the quality of actual research was under review, whether this was the research of others (focus groups) or their own research (individual interviews). We present an analysis of how social work academics assess quality in social work research. There were some differences of emphasis between the focus groups, where the stress lay on judgements of others' research, and the individual interviews. We draw attention to these distinctions as and when they occur.

The case studies suggest that claims of quality are of two general kinds. First, there are *intrinsic* signifiers of quality that form around methodological and epistemological criteria. These signifiers occur in a variety of forms but all refer to inherent qualities of research. Second, quality judgements are made that draw on criteria that are *extrinsic* to the research. This distinction is close in nature to that between inner and outer science, made in Chapter 2, and includes responses of the wider social work community in the form of impact, peer reviews or the community's receptiveness to a piece of work. We elaborate this distinction and structure the following pages in terms of methodological quality, knowledge development, the use value of social work research, and the value of research directly for users and carers. We close the chapter with a discussion of the independence and connectedness of different quality judgements.

4.3 Epistemic quality

There was a consensus among the focus groups and interviews that there are certain intrinsic epistemological and methodological criteria that characterise and promote

good-quality social work research. These were not different from criteria shared across the social sciences, and are implicit, for example, in the generic research methodology requirements of the ESRC postgraduate training guidelines (ESRC, 2005). Epistemic quality – in its reference to methodology – is the cornerstone of academic research because, to borrow the words of one of our respondents, it separates academia from journalism or other less rigorous methods of enquiry:

> 'they [epistemic considerations] are preconditions, I think, otherwise you know, what are you talking about? How do you explain what you're doing? And you know, why does this mean anything other than any other sort of piece of work or people talking or … journalism?'. (Institution B, Focus Group)

The case studies data suggested five elements of epistemically sound research. The tendency of respondents to refer to multiple criteria suggests that these are viewed as conjoint criteria, although we cannot be dogmatic.

- A well-considered and -argued epistemological and theoretical position leads to a tailored and rigorous methodology and implicit quality. For some, the platform in this process is a theoretical basis:

  'The other major part is the theoretical framework which develops those sets of ideas that you are looking at' (Participant A, Institution B)

- Research should be well informed and draw on the existing knowledge base when designing research:

  'We did a lot of things in the research … looking at historical documentation, looking at the impact of original studies … we did a lot before establishing what this study was going to be about'. (Participant B, Institution C)

- Choice of methods should be related to the question and justifiable in the context of the aims and objectives set out. Methods should be fit for purpose. Innovation and originality of method is desirable and ultimately will confer quality if the methods are justified and well thought out:

  'In other words you're almost philosophising when you come to any research project … why should I approach it in this particular way? Why should I use this methodology?'. (Participant A, Institution B)

- Appropriate analytical techniques need to be used and justified. Whatever form these take, the author(s) must be explicit about how these techniques are used. Citing himself as an example, one participant said:

  in order to carry out this study I had to do reliability and validity tests, develop, design and develop (an) … instrument in order to carry it out. (Participant A, Institution B)

- Conclusions should be valid, in the sense of being carefully founded and plausible. Researchers should not attempt to extrapolate more from the data than can

be justified and conclusions should not be exaggerated, eg generalising from inappropriate samples.

The idea of triangulation was appealed to on several occasions, usually referring to methodological triangulation and often in association with a plea for mixed methods. A number of participants also believed it important for researchers to be prepared to admit when they find negative or neutral results. To acknowledge 'failed' research is often difficult, both academically as 'Journals don't [want to publish negative results] because people don't want to read them' (Institution B, Focus Group), and economically as funders 'don't want to say that [the programme] is not working' (Institution B, Focus Group).

4.3.1 Purism and pragmatism in social work research

There was a consensus among all of the participants that epistemology and methodology have to be significant factors in any judgement of quality, but several referred to the tension that exists when considering methodology as a signifier of quality in social work research. While social work researchers acknowledged the need to ensure research is conducted to the best possible standards, there was also a resistance to adopting purist stances on methodology. This was sometimes seen as risking methodological inflexibility:

> 'you start to find that things like childcare arrangements or whatever else get in the way of that so that being pragmatic might mean that … the methodology that you intend to use and design isn't going to work so you have to be pragmatic and sort that out'. (Focus Group, Institution A)

Weighing the relative importance of different 'goods' also applies when considering user involvement or ethical approval:

> 'you want to involve service users but the way that you have set it up and the methodology you intend to use and the design isn't going to work so you have to be pragmatic'. (Participant D, Focus Group, Institution A).

> '[The need to obtain] ethical approval actually would push you towards saying well it would be a better piece of research if we included this but you can't do it because we don't have time' (Participant A, Focus Group, Institution A).

The constraints of circumstance might mean that in striving for one aspect of research quality, other areas may have to be sacrificed. In the light of this participants often took the view that a considered appraisal must take into account the type of research and judge the piece of work in relation to its purpose:

> 'if I see it as something as a purely scientific function then I might rate this in a different kind of way from whether I take a much more applied kind of notion of the value of research in which case I might look at some of these other factors.' (Participant D, Focus Group, Institution A).

4.3.2 Fit for purpose

These pragmatic concerns draw people towards a flexible view of methodological quality. Expressed in a more principled way, there was much emphasis on the plea that research methods be fit for purpose. An interesting argument, referred to by several participants, was expressed as follows:

> 'I suppose ... as measured against established benchmarks of quality it might be something that doesn't reach the sort of standards you would want, but because you're trying to push at the boundaries you accept a lower level of quality because you're able to open up to new areas of enquiry.' (Participant C, Institution C)

A similar point was made in a focus group discussion (Institution D) about the relationship between different quality dimensions. A comment was made on what was described by one member as the 'Goffman syndrome', by which group members were referring to research that was influential, important but where the methodology was opaque.

A more commonly made connection between purpose and quality was an emphasis on the context of research. For example, if researchers make grand claims that cannot be sustained then it is obviously of deficient quality:

> 'I find it absolutely maddening when you read a small-scale study and somebody is claiming that all men think this or all women think that ... I try to place my work in the context that it comes from.' (Participant A, Institution A)

4.4 Knowledge development

As we have just seen, work that can introduce new ways of thinking or practising, even if the methodological quality was not first-rate, was viewed as paramount. Everyone who participated in the individual interviews cited a contribution to the development of social work knowledge as one of their reasons for choosing that particular piece of research to discuss. Correspondingly each of the focus groups emphasised that good quality research should lead to an enhancement of knowledge:

> '[The work is of good quality because it is] ... actually going to add to the debate in any way which is going to construct a better understanding.' (Focus Group, Institution C)

> 'These issues are the centre of all research and they are highlighted by this research and it was something new that was said and I still feel proud of it now.' (Participant A, Institution A).

Knowledge development manifests itself in three areas – theory, policy and practice. These were often seen as operating together in the better research:

> 'to sort of think about practical action as well as policy and theoretical concept, if they put those three things together in some way ... multiple actions that I think bring something specific about social work.' (Participant B, Institution A)

However, when participants were asked to comment on the specific qualities of research, either their own for the individual interviewees, or the vignettes in the focus groups[1], the quality requirement that was flagged time and again was the need for a sophisticated theoretical basis:

> 'I didn't include partly more descriptive writings ... that doesn't in my mind have the same level as something which is more finely honed and possibly has more theoretical elements within it.' (Participant B, Institution A)

Theorising is, however, a dimension that is especially at risk when pragmatic concerns shape and truncate research. Furthermore, we have seen from the discussion of the rhetoric of quality that it is esteemed to varying degrees in the social work community.

4.4.1 Innovation and originality

When considering the progression of knowledge, participants alluded to 'independence of mind' and innovation of thinking as a mark of quality in research. To produce research of the highest-quality data from the case studies suggests there is a necessity for innovation and originality in at least one aspect of the methodological or knowledge-building aspects of research. Research should exhibit a 'creative spark ... open up fields [that are] taboo and make people take notice of you'. The messages research is conveying should be 'new and innovative', based on a novel central idea, or at the very least adopt an original angle on a subject area:

> 'what's much more important is that you have some central idea that informs the research which is not simply framed in terms of whatever the current orthodoxy is.' (Participant B, Institution B)

However, there were different degrees of emphasis placed on originality and innovation and different interpretations of how this should manifest in social work research. Some saw social work research as having a responsibility to 'challenge the mainstream ... and shift the political agenda' (Participant B, Institution B), while others were less subversive and instead talked of generating ground-breaking knowledge and using methods in a way no one else has.

The following example referred to innovation in the sense of research that extended the boundaries of social work research, referring to a series of projects on social work issues with end-of-life care and palliative care:

> 'She's looked at why social work isn't more involved in end-of-life care sometimes ... and the lenses of the different disciplines on end of life care ... and how typically a lot of these psychosocial issues are defined as something to do with pastoral care. And then sometimes if those issues don't really fit in to what ... say the clergy person's view is of ... a person's particular faith ... then those kind of spiritual issues

[1] The purpose and scope of these were described in the Fieldwork section of Chapter 1 and are listed in Appendix 1).

> ... don't have a home to be dealt with. And she talks about how ... social work could be doing a better job there or be more involved.... So she's looking at the particular social work take on that area.' (Focus Group, Institution B)

The question of boundaries of social work as a research discipline came up from time to time, often through illustrations of how flexibility and creative work at the boundaries can enhance the quality of research. A focus group member referred to a study that was:

> 'connected to social work but it's kind of allied in terms of ... the fields of parental substance abuse in children.... But I always come back to it as kind of groundbreaking because although ... the methodology could be more explicit in terms of how she developed the instruments in working with children there is something about the kind of development and knowledge ... in an area where children don't disclose or won't disclose ... for a very good reason .... She got to issues of denial and disclosure in the way that she used her methods in a way that I don't think anybody else has and what she ... comes up with I think in terms of knowledge is quite groundbreaking.' (Focus Group, Institution B)

4.4.2 Cumulative knowledge

Contributing to knowledge in a cumulative way was central to the individual interviews, although less evident in the focus groups. Whether this was expressed modestly or more assertively, it was prominent:

> 'I don't think we've completely filled the gap and I think other people will come along and do research in this area which may supersede what we've done.' (Participant A, Institution C)

> 'with a different methodology we were replicating those studies and I guess that was quite novel ... it built on previous work quite directly.' (Participant B, Institution C)

> 'I think there is a growing body of work and as a consequence of that I would say that the quality is better than a piece of research, an article or two, then onto the next topic.' (Participant B, Institution A)

A 'continuity of application' (Focus Group, institution C), and 'developing a theme through well-constructed, inter-related studies' (Focus Group, Institution B) are seen as particular signs of quality because focusing on a consistent theme and addressing different dimensions to exhaust and fully understand a field is viewed as preferential to moving between subject areas.

Individual interviewees were more likely than focus group members to make arguments about the cumulative nature of their work. Possibly researchers esteem cumulative aspects of their own work, whereas it is less easy to detect when reading specific instances of someone else's work. We have seen in the discussion of quality rhetoric that in-house claims to cumulative knowledge are a feature of some institutions within the RAE process.

4.4.3 Complexity

A further illuminating contextualisation of quality occurred in the various instances where participants in different institutions referred to the merits of research that recognised and did not downplay the complexity of issues. It was nicely expressed by the person who mentioned:

> 'some work on ... joint work in child protection. It didn't try to oversimplify what was a very complex problem. I think sometimes ... there's a tendency to, sort of, say well, yes, a very difficult thing to do, but just go and talk about it.... This paper didn't do that. It actually ... demonstrated and understood the complexity of joint working in child protection and also said essentially there are no simple answers to this.' (Focus Group, Institution B)

4.5 Extrinsic quality

The view was frequently expressed to the effect that while intrinsic quality within the research is important, without a strong emphasis on value, user-engagement or impact the resultant framework of research quality would undermine the practice-led, social justice principles of social work. This was one of the areas where the more deep-seated debates emerged within the study, ranging from those who would probably place 'value for people' and 'value for use' above strictly epistemological and knowledge-building standards to those who believe that extrinsic, outer-science quality criteria may not always be appropriate criteria for a particular piece of research, especially studies which focus on less applied aspects of social work.

A pointed illustration of this occurred in Institution D's focus group. We intentionally set the vignettes on 'Action Research' and 'Theorising Professional Judgement' (Appendix A) in conjunction with each other. First reactions to the latter vignette included 'So what?' and 'Is it money well spent?', and there was laughter.

This opening set up a tension the group did not find easy to resolve. One member said that researchers 'shouldn't be paid just to think beautiful thoughts', but (nicely exemplifying that for which he was making a plea) added it is 'important to think – it is part of our cultural capital'. But for a user researcher member of the group the vignette illustrated unhelpful research – 'it's only theory'. This was countered with 'Theory enhancement *is* important'. Much discussion followed, with the group moving to a consensus around the position that it is the purpose of the research that is important in deciding how to judge its quality. However, this did not fully resolve the tension. One member would only go as far as saying that it 'has the potential to be good research', thus apparently implying that knowledge and theory are not sufficient.

The centrality of 'purpose' was a point made many times in this group. Earlier in this report we outlined a framework of research purposes, and the weight of evidence from the research makes us very cautious indeed about opting for a quality standards framework that does not place purpose in the foreground. To avoid any possible misunderstanding, this argument is not equivalent to taking a 'perspectivist' position.

'Purpose' is not the sole relevance. We reject that stance in our discussion in the final chapter of whether or not a hierarchy of quality criteria exists.

We have noted one kind of solution to the inner/outer science tension in Furlong and Oancea's (2005) work where they argue, in discussing value for use, that we should not assume *actual* impact, as that is not within the gift of the researcher, but rather *potential* or perhaps intention. We should then ask questions such as, is there a concern to enable or facilitate impact? We will subsequently see that some empirical support was present for this kind of mediating position.

We will also see that participants in this study sometimes appeared to be operating with a distinction between the *quality* of research and the *value* of research, reserving the term 'quality' for epistemic and knowledge criteria and speaking of extrinsic research standards as covering research value. The assumption seemed to be that quality and value were qualitatively distinct from one another and should not be set in a counter-balancing relationship.

However, neither of these reasoning pathways won complete consensus among the participants. This remains an area where diversity, vigorous debate and exchange will be inevitable and helpful, and where orthodoxies may lead to factions within the social work community.

Application of research to practice was an area where a range of positions could be readily traced. One focus group participant claimed that 'contribution to the field' is important in either guise (theory or practice), and can indeed encompass both:

> 'It's down to what the purpose of the research is really … advice and knowledge is a reasonable objective of social research.' (Focus Group, Institution C)

Perhaps the majority of those to whom we spoke took a more committed position on one or the other side of the fence. Some believed that a direct contribution to practice was of greatest importance, and what matters in social work is providing research that focuses on improving practice and pushing a social justice agenda forward:

> 'to inspire practitioners to take a few risks and step out of the box a bit … challenging the norm.' (Participant B, Institution B)

> 'I do think the responsibility of academics is to try and expose assumptions, expose and challenge ideas that may not be popular.' (Participant B, Institution A)

Others thought contribution to theory more important. One participant, reflecting on her reasons for focusing on a piece of research, said:

> 'because I think that has marked some new development in thinking which began in this paper which had an empirical basis … really thinking about the whole theoretical ideas behind classification.' (Participant B, Institution A)

It should be emphasised that no one wished to exclude practice criteria, although there were some participants who would perhaps be willing to bracket strictly epistemic criteria. The most frequent position was one that can best be hyphenated as 'rigour-with-relevance'. This was exemplified in an individual interview around a research team project on young people's entitlements.

The participant (the lead researcher for the project) made clear and internally consistent claims of two kinds. The report stresses epistemic values. A data collection instrument was described as 'established … reliable and validated' and the product of 'extensive piloting'. It took a pre-existing scale further through methodological innovation, eg by developing a computer-assisted rather than paper-based version – 'it reads it to you'. This 'stepping stone' as part of work in progress was stressed during the interview.

What most pleased the researcher was that the research had shaped the thinking of the policy funders, whose staff he regarded as 'progressive'. The context for the study was described in the report and the interview as a big, exciting and important policy, and presented the challenge to the researchers of measuring impact – something 'both complex and essential'. There was an implication that good policy initiatives pave the way for good quality research, and so may be one kind of precondition of research quality.

The combination of epistemic and value-for-use thinking was presented as an argument that the researcher appeared to regard as all of a piece. The report had value for use both methodologically and through application of the findings, and the one reinforced the other.

4.5.1 Value for use

Two related points were often put to us. First, that difficulties in measuring actual research impact is endemic to social work research, and second, that impact and quality are linked but loosely so. If a piece of work has impact it may not necessarily mean it is of good quality and similarly a good-quality piece may not create much impact. Research can have value without necessarily fulfilling epistemic quality criteria if it is pushing boundaries or opening up fields of enquiry.

During discussion of impact and how this relates to a judgement of quality, there were contrary perspectives. The divergent positions over the type of impact are demonstrated by the aspirations people have for their work and what they deem to be important external signals of quality. For example, one participant believed that the positive endorsement of peer reviews is not always important – much more important is impact on practitioners. Those who take this position see originality as being an indicator of quality, not just in terms of methodological coherence and robustness but more precisely in terms of imaginative input, claiming research should 'open people's eyes' and have a positive impact on lives in ways that capture the Fabian, reformist tradition in social work:

> 'If I haven't worked out how what I want to say about it relates to something that I would see as a sort of improvement in human well-being then I wouldn't write the article – full stop.' (Participant B, Institution B)

There were differences over the optimum method of creating impact and what type of impact research should aspire to achieve. For some, demonstrable programme outcomes would serve to enhance quality only if the theoretical and methodological underpinning of the research was rigorous:

> 'If it's methodologically poor research that has a large impact then I would judge it as not useful because it's actually influenced moves in the wrong direction, it's added to confusion and misunderstanding and bad policy rather than the reverse.' (Participant A, Institution C)

Others, however, believe the weight and significance of impact to be a sign of quality. If a piece of work generates enough interest and has an effect or influence then this in itself demonstrates quality. The presumption is that research that begins with a central idea or strategy to challenge thinking or practice has intrinsic quality by virtue of its ability to create impact. Referring to the paper he chose to discuss, one participant reflected:

> 'well I mean, ... the fact that there has been all these hits on it [it] has be reckoned to be one of the most sort of influential articles, I suppose must say something.' (Participant B, Institution B)

4.5.2 Dissemination and publication

Views about research dissemination echo positions on research use. Dissemination is manifested in two forms, both of which serve different purposes but are seen as equally important to social work. One of the primary markers of quality for academics is to publish in peer-reviewed journals, because in this way work is subject to rigorous scrutiny and is endorsed by peers. This was mirrored in the fieldwork for this project:

> 'I knew it [this research] was about quality and so I chose a publication that was from a peer reviewed journal.' (Participant C, Institution A)

However, social work research is rooted in practice with an overarching goal to create a wider distribution of social and individual justice. Thus an important role of academic social work research is to advance practice, either through pedagogic means or knowledge development. This is problematic because the consensus within the social work community is that not many practitioners have the time or inkling to read academic journals, but they are more likely to read more accessible, practice-related journals:

> 'I guess for all of the professional groups in this era of knowledge transfer actually the most effective ways of transferring knowledge are often the ones that are frowned on most seriously by people who are setting the scale ..., so I mean how many practitioners actually read BJSW [*British Journal of Social Work*] or

whatever, but a lot of them get *Community Care* and *Care and Health* or whatever.' (Participant B, Focus Group, Institution A)

This position was crystallised in the response of a senior manager with active links to a local university. He found it difficult to answer questions about good research. 'I have a problem thinking about research from any university … I don't know what is taking place'. His focus tends to be on what is happening in his own authority and on what he reads in *Community Care*. While he is more at home with research in his own practice field, if it was in another field he would 'use my own contacts' or 'stumble across', for example, a website mentioned in *Community Care*. He would use the SCIE website, which he finds 'quite helpful in certain things'.

By contrast, 'rigorous methodology … doesn't stimulate lots for me'. 'People like me look out for good ideas'. Usefulness is 'my alternative to methodology'. 'If it works that interests me'. He is more interested in the outcome than the reason for doing the research in the first place. This includes economic value – 'I'm interested in cost-effectiveness and outcomes for customers'.

If research has reached conclusions that can be used to directly inform social work professionals then the majority of participants in both the focus groups and interviews felt that efforts should be made to disseminate information through channels that allow work to be assimilated by as wide an audience as possible. This was sometimes expressed in ways that have elements of stereotyping:

'What is the point of doing research that is stuck in a dusty journal on a library shelf and nobody ever sees it … and this has the potential to do a lot of other positive things.' (Focus Group, Institution, C)

Social work researchers sometimes express a tension between, on the one hand, the desire of academics to further their own career by publishing in peer-reviewed journals, and on the other, the need to disseminate knowledge that will advise and contribute to the development of practice. However, there was no consensus in the case study data on how this tension should be resolved. One participant claimed that it was the responsibility of the pedagogic arm of social work to provide practitioners with the tools and encouragement to engage with academic, peer-reviewed studies. He rejected the idea that it is important for academic social work researchers to tailor their work to be accessible and instead claimed it was the responsibility of training to teach the skills needed to digest relevant research. He accepted that most social workers do not have the time to read 'reams' of research and that the academic community has some responsibility to disseminate knowledge in an acceptable form, but felt that this should not be a factor when assessing quality or value. The development of tools to allow social workers to access research and give them the motivation to want to do so is the function of social work education:

'I mean it's almost like we collude as an academic and practice community in the creation of this idea that these poor darlings can't quite manage these difficult things while we nevertheless don't give them the tools to manage it.' (Participant A, Institution B)

Active dissemination – like research use – is not a criterion against which the quality of research can be directly assessed. Although dissemination is linked to quality it is also intertwined with pedagogic considerations, and should not be used to inflate quality categories.

4.6 Value for people

The involvement of users as partners and co-producers in the research process was often seen as the litmus test of distinctively social work research:

> 'It was the methodology because it wasn't just about writing, it was about actually involving people in what the writing was going to say.' (Participant A, Institution A)

However, the standing of this as a fundamental mark of quality is not agreed within the social work community:

> 'I think we're beginning to make user involvement a kind of a test for quality and I think that is extremely poor methodology. I think what you have to do, just as with anything else, is justify user involvement as part of the methodology.' (Participant A, Institution B)

The majority view may be that user and carer involvement is in most instances preferable; that it is a necessary mark of good research in some cases; that it should not be viewed as necessary in all situations; that it may be counter-productive if not critically considered and justified during the research design process. This argument could be expressed as saying that standards of quality in user-engaged research should not be different from those in mainstream social research, but that such research can be defended on the grounds that it yields good-quality research highlighting issues that are less frequently addressed by academic-led research.

The tension between valuing participatory research as an end in itself, yet wishing to sustain claims based on rigour, occurred at this stage of the research, just as it had proved one of the most deep-seated differences in the early workshops and key informant interviews. Participants in Institution D at one point took a position akin to this, when they concurred that participatory research should not be 'wishy-washy', nor should it be set in tension with theorising – 'we need both'. Hence, on questions of 'voice' in research, if young people talk 'it doesn't *have* to be good'. Yet later in the same group, in discussion of the 'social inclusion' vignette, the deliberate tension in the vignette around unresolved apparent conflicts between rigour ('no clear evidence … of promoting social inclusion') and value for people ('giving them voice and confidence') yielded a collective commitment to the latter. 'What is the effect on people being researched?' If they feel excluded by the research then it is 'bad research'.

Value for people does not always sit comfortably with use-values of research. In discussing one of the vignettes a group concluded that a project regarded as distant from practice might allow practitioners to be reflexive about what they are doing, even if the work does not offer immediate practical solutions. This tension may need greater recognition. Value for use pushes research towards end user, value-for-money

and instrumental application, whereas value for people sets the value of research within the research process itself. Expressed more generally, commitment to outer-science, extrinsic, social criteria for research does not resolve major debates regarding the political and/or personal value of research.

4.7 Discussion

4.7.1 'The establishment'

A rider may be worth adding at this point. We detected a recurring ambiguity regarding what may be regarded as 'establishment' or 'big brother' powers within social work and social policy. For example, participants expressed mixed views on the role of funders in facilitating quality in research. Financial sponsorship can be a correlate of quality if the money is provided by an independent research body such as the ESRC, or – some suggested – it can be a rod for researchers' backs, constraining aims and methods, if provided by a funding body with specific interests:

> 'I would much rather be funded by an independent body than by the government ... I do think too much research is done for the government, it's not open ... you're forced to accept the paradigm and the intellectual constraints before you ever start.' (Participant B, Institution B).

Financial sponsorship has implications for use value. To submit a successful funding application a researcher has to present ideas on how the research might be used:

> 'I think increasingly if you seek funding you need to have an idea about how it might be used.' (Focus Group, Institution C)

Funding bodies have their own aims and aspirations for the research they commission, which can mean they want results presented in certain forms or certain aspects of the results highlighted that might conflict with a reasoned argument from the data. The view was sometimes expressed that these political considerations lead to tension and tarnish academic independence and consequently quality:

> 'I didn't look forward so much to some of the meetings at the Home Office 'cos they were deeply frustrating because they had their own, it seemed not very well thought out ideas about what we should be doing.' (Participant A, Institution C)

> 'whilst you might think that what you've done is a good piece of work the politics of the situation really are what dictates future funding.' (Focus Group, Institution C)

Although some forms of sponsorship were seen as a burden, or at the least a necessary evil required to facilitate a study, the ESRC seemed to be viewed as a 'gold standard' in funding. It was viewed as both non-interfering and, more importantly, a 'badge' that the research had achieved a high level of quality in its design and aspirations. As one academic claimed when talking about the research she chose to discuss:

> 'It was ESRC-funded research so you could say it had quality from that perspective.' (Participant B, Institution C)

Nonetheless, one participant grumbled – albeit in a logically implausible way – that ESRC funding does not guarantee value because a lot of valuable ESRC applications are not given funding (see Shaw et al, 2004 for a discussion of the empirical evidence for this belief). Similar ambiguities could be seen regarding transfer of knowledge into social work, for example from the USA (in discussion of the 'Resilience' vignette), and in comments that just because research is funded by the Department for Education and Skills or the Wales Assembly Government does not make something good research.

4.7.2 Conjoining quality dimensions

We have presented the data in a way that may mislead, insofar as it may suggest that quality criteria were described in discrete ways. In reality quality claims about research – whether one's own or that of others – were typically made by conjoining dimensions of quality. A focus group member (Institution D) referred to an example of research that he explained as good quality because it was 'multi-method', the voice of young people was heard, and there was practitioner feedback about the research. He added that the research was 'successful both with regard to the outcomes of the research and the process of the research'. An example can also be drawn from the individual interviews (Figure 4, Participant A, Institution C).

Figure 4: Black and Asian offenders

A multi-authored published report drew on a survey of almost 500 black and Asian probationers. It was carried out by an ethnically diverse research team. It reported lower scores on crime-prone attitudes and self-reported problems than the white comparison group, and questions some views of what respecting diversity will mean.
The interviewed researcher ascribed any quality it possessed to a range of factors. In this case, the peer-review response had been positive; the findings were seen as important; and the methodology had been well crafted.
More unusually – but by no means uniquely so – the output had been chosen by the interviewee because it raised interesting questions about where social work as a field of research stops and starts.
The methodological quality was contextualised in an interesting way. In summary, the researcher described 'the sheer difficulty of bringing it to conclusion'. This sense of triumph over adversity is present in the report as well. Records did not accurately reflect ethnicity; there were difficulties in setting up interviews; and some probation staff had negative views about the research. In all, progress was 'slower and more fraught than had been envisaged'. Thus the epistemic (methodological) value of the research gained plausibility partly because it yielded well-founded data that challenged expectations, and partly because an impressive final sample had been achieved despite the problems encountered.
The researcher also claimed quality as reflected in the way team members acquired methodology skills. What seems a straightforward epistemic criterion is in fact presented as team learning – a species of value for people.

Challenging received wisdom about black and Asian offenders and also about respecting diversity figured strongly in the last abstract. This runs somewhat counter to the argument that quality should not be tied to actual use or emancipation, as they are not within the gift of the researcher. Furthermore, 'it is often the case that both accountability and knowledge evaluations are undertaken 'without any hope of use'. Expected non-use is characteristic of some of the best evaluations, including 'those that question widespread popular beliefs in a time of ideology, or threaten powerful, entrenched interests at any time' (Chelimsky, 1997). Thus, 'there are some very good reasons why evaluations may be expert, and also unused'. Chelimsky's comments are both sane and plausible:

> To justify all evaluations by any single kind of use is a constraining rather than an enabling idea because it pushes evaluators towards excessive preoccupation with the acceptability of their findings to users, and risks turning evaluations into banal reiterations of the status quo. (Chelimsky, 1997)

Yet for all this, we believe it will be almost impossible to persuade researchers and research consumers to disentangle estimates of valuable research from good research.

4.7.3 Quality rhetoric

Finally, it will bear underlining how the language of quality is always as much a language of rhetoric and persuasion as a language of evidence. In a part of the study given limited account in this report, we explored ways in which the language of quality is put to different rhetorical purposes by the social work community within the universities. We analysed a sample of texts (known as the RA5 and RA6 forms) that were part of eight social work returns to the 2001 RAE. Analysis suggested that there were five kinds of quality claim. To varying degrees all universities drew on criteria extrinsic to the research outputs as part of their quality claim. For example, quality was often claimed on the basis of how others rated the work. There were several differences between universities in the nature and approach to claiming quality. Quality claims were quite often multi-faceted. For example, claims to inter-disciplinary activity may be at one and the same time a claim about the nature of the field (social work is essentially an inter-disciplinary field), a claim to work collaboratively, or an epistemic claim about knowledge-building.

The five kinds of claim were, employing our own terms to capture these:

Mission claims. In order to articulate the lead quality agenda in their research output, some universities included an overarching statement that read rather like a mission statement. For example, one university described its overarching commitment to 'bring together conceptual, methodological and theoretical creativity and innovation but in a way which is empirical and has clear practice implications'.

Epistemic claims, relating to methodological innovation, more general innovation, cumulativeness, and inter-disciplinarity. This was expressed as, for example, 'The collective strength in methodological development within the unit at X is the imaginative use of interpretative methodology, action research and co-operative inquiry....'

Research community claims, for example regarding research capacity. 'Research income has risen; the creation of the new School ... will further increase both critical mass and cross-fertilisation. Awards are from the most prestigious, competitive sources.'

Less highly rated departments made fewer claims about capacity as such, but instead framed claims in terms of 'capacity *development*' – the building of capacity through ongoing improvement programmes. In contrast highly rated outlets used rhetoric that inferred a pre-existing quality infrastructure, and is better described as a claim to 'capacity *excellence*'. Outlets less highly rated:

- made fewer recognition/esteem claims, although they did make some
- tended to talk about capacity development, but made lighter claims about capacity
- tended to talk about development of research, development of infrastructure and expansion of research.

Claims made by more highly rated outlets focused on high volume, esteem, international reputation, and leadership in the field. The more explicit community dimensions of this theme came to the surface in the way universities talked about 'interdisciplinarity', 'collaboration' and the relationship between research and 'pedagogic dimensions' of the outlet.

Esteem and influence claims. Claims to esteem and/or influence were made by all universities and included claims to national and international recognition. Thus one university recorded that 'Members have worked with 29 outside bodies during the RAE period; its research therefore has a direct impact on policy, training and practice developments'.

'Value-for-people' claims. All outlets made claims that social work research in a given university had immediate value for user, carer or practitioner participants, typically in terms of service user involvement in research.

There are three filters through which these final few paragraphs should be read. First, they are not, of course, an assessment of the quality of work of any university or individual. We had no direct acquaintance with the research appealed to in support of these arguments. Second, the rhetorical claims-making takes its trajectory from the particular audience – a national panel of senior academics, working to publicly available criteria about quality. In that respect the overall definition of research and rhetorical devices may be different from those aspired to among service user, practitioner or policy researchers. Third, we do not think that a simple distinction between rhetoric and evidence is worth attempting. Rhetoric – and probably sufficiently plausible evidence claims – can be found at almost any point in the data.

5 Reflections and recommendations

Disciplines within universities are not fixed and abiding realities. The recognition of social work is a dynamic, socially negotiated process, shaped by the construction and ordering of knowledge claims within social work and social science communities, and reflecting power differentials that are mediated through structural mechanisms that tend to exclude new 'claimants' such as social work. An underlying problem in much of this is how disciplines come to be recognised and accepted within the academic community. We sensed that in some key regards disciplines, once they become formally recognised, have a taken-for-granted status.

This raises a wider consideration. There is probably an open question of whether the social work community is or wishes to be seen as a social science discipline in quite the same way as, for example, geography or sociology. This is probably as much unresolved within the social work community as within the ESRC. The claim was often made to us from various 'sides' in a previous project that 'There's something distinct about social work from other disciplines'. For senior colleagues in the ESRC, social work may be seen as 'quite different from some disciplines which are more bounded.... They have a more defined boundary'. On this view of things, the strategies for discipline development may be less complex in disciplines where 'the tool kit ... is clearer' (Shaw et al, 2004). Because disciplines are not fixed entities but negotiated communities, then as such they are sites for claims-making.

In this final chapter we consider three issues. First, what tensions and debates remain unresolved within the social work research community? Second, what stance is likely to influence research quality assessment? Third, what recommendations can be drawn from the project?

5.1 Creative tensions

In Chapter 1 we said we foresee that the development of a quality framework will raise a number of central and not immediately tractable questions:

- What is social work research?
- Is it possible to devise a single set of criteria that encompasses what some regard as incommensurable categories of inquiry?
- How should we judge both relevance and importance? What is socially robust research in a social work context?
- How should quality judgements weigh the relative contribution of volume and quality, and of individual excellence and institutional excellence? How does this relate to judgements of discipline health?

These tensions came to the surface during the project in slightly varying ways. The social work research community in the UK is relatively small. Fisher and Marsh have estimated, perhaps somewhat conservatively, that there were approximately 400 research-active social work staff returned to the 2001 RAE (Fisher and Marsh, 2003). Within this community there are considered debates and differences. Several of these debates and differences surface when the nature and especially the quality of research are under the spotlight. It is hard to overestimate the pervasiveness of

quality rhetoric. In the context of RAE submissions it is part and parcel of healthy peer competition within the academic community. The main tensions are fourfold.

First, are some dimensions of quality judgements more important than others? We have noted the frequent disavowal by project participants of any hierarchy of quality standards. Yet we have also noted that claims about the importance of one or other dimension are indeed implicitly hierarchy claims. We elaborate our conclusions from the data in the next section of the chapter. But we remain ourselves uncertain on this point, beyond emphasising that this is not a merely semantic issue, and wishing to express reservations about a strong hierarchy position that privileges any one dimension in a universal way.

Differences about the weight that should be attached to different dimensions is closely linked to a second pervasive cluster of differences – those between **rigour and relevance, inner-science and outer-science criteria, practice and theory**. Within these three pairings, methodology and knowledge are equally at issue. The debates came to the fore in the case studies (Chapter 4) and again in the analysis of RAE narrative submissions (Chapter 4). This tension emerged, perhaps at a different level, between the desire of academics to further their own careers by publishing in peer-reviewed journals, and the need to disseminate knowledge that will advise and contribute to the development of practice. There was no consensus on how this tension should be resolved.

Third, and perhaps least won of all positions, are differences regarding the response that social work should give to the various arguments for **democratising the research process**. To put the issue candidly, are participatory, user-led, emancipatory and other responsive modes of research generally superior to and/or more in tune with social work values than more traditional modes of research relationship? From the early national workshop, through the key informant interviews, and in the case studies, different positions emerged. Some of these differences were present within the project team, and that is as it should be.

Fourth, the relationship between **perspectives, contexts and standards** was unresolved. The authors were occasionally uncertain whether we read too much into apparent relativist positions expressed by participants about context and perspective. However, it seems clear to us that some members of the social work community would want to see local decisions on which quality criteria apply in a given instance, whereas others would want to press for a stronger standards framework. We have tried to make our position clear on this issue. First, we have made no secret of our view that quality judgements in social work research should be marked, inter alia, by a commitment to seeking agreement on quality dimensions at a middle range of generality, with the purpose of maximising agreement between diverse epistemological positions but not requiring a unitary consensus on measurable quality indicators. This will cause unease both to strong constructivists and postmodernists, and to some who are convinced we can espouse clear measurement standards in research, but we believe it is the best way to keep important debates open while not excommunicating any positions.

5.2 A stance on quality judgements

Before consolidating recommendations from the project, we will outline the stance we have come to take during the project on the practice and process of making judgements about research quality. Research quality is both more complex and more important than we envisaged. Most discussions of quality – even those that give full weight to quality dimensions that are not inherent to the research act – work on the premise that research quality can be decided on the basis of the published research output. The stance we summarise in the following paragraphs emphasises the various standpoints that make it implausible to assume this is a sufficient vantage point. Necessary it will be – sufficient it will not be. This will be so on the basis of six general arguments.

First, quality judgements for a given research output are more likely to be seen as stemming from several different criteria rather than from a single criterion. This was especially apparent in the case study interviews and we underlined the evidence at the close of the previous chapter. It seems reasonable to suggest that quality should usually be assessed against a principle that good research will usually be 'good' on more than one dimension. For example, it will not be good only because it has been useful, or rigorous, or emancipatory.

This relates in an important way to how we develop and respond to the argument as to whether or not there should be a hierarchy of standards for judging the quality of research. However, when the plea for a non-hierarchical position was made to us, it was typically made in a 'thin' way leaving the texture of the plea to be supplied. When we tried to supply this from the data, the most commonly held position of those to whom we spoke is best understood if we keep to the distinction between inner- and outer-science criteria. Viewed in this way, three kinds of linked argument were being made by the majority of participants:

- On the whole, inner-science, epistemic criteria are broadly similar across social work and other social science disciplines.
- However, such epistemic criteria should not prioritise in hierarchical form criteria of reliability, validity, objectivity and the like, above criteria associated with, for example, qualitative research. This was often focused on the debate about whether some inner-science criteria and what are seen as their associated methodologies are 'positivist' (or dehumanising, or over-simplifying of reality).
- Notwithstanding common ground between social work and other social sciences, social work gives (and perhaps for most people, should give) greater relative weight to extrinsic, outer-science criteria. Such criteria should not be subordinate to inner-science criteria. They should be in equal partnership.

But the relationship between different criteria remains slippery. Certainly some in the social work community would plead for a broad hierarchy where greater weight is given to some criteria over others – for some this would be a reassertion of inner-science concerns about rigour, while for others it would be for outer-science criteria of relevance, or justice-based research strategies (value for use and value for people to use Furlong and Oancea's terminology).

It is not a binary question of whether or not some standards and criteria are/are not more important than others. There are, in fact, three possible positions rather than two:

First, **some quality dimensions carry greater weight than others**. This may be argued from a belief that scientific knowledge always takes precedence over, for example, knowledge based on experience (hence rigour, accuracy and 'inner-science' criteria will always be more important than outer-science criteria). It may also be argued from, for example, a strong 'standpoint' position that the knowledge of the oppressed will always carry greater validity than that of the oppressor. If a researcher believes that identifying outcomes of programmes is the most important way to progress social work services then randomised, controlled, clinical trials are likely to be seen as providing the 'gold standard, the Rolls Royce of evaluation approaches' (Chelimsky, 1997). Yet, speaking about the field of evaluation, even Chelimsky concedes that the discipline needs standards of quality and practice that make sense for the entire field, not just one segment of it. 'It will be critical for the standards to be inclusive of all legitimate purposes of evaluation, and not merely serve to sanctify one perspective at the expense of another' (Chelimsky, 1997). We can caution for social work what she warns of evaluation – that it 'is not monolithic, but we have behaved as if it were' (Chelimsky, 1997).

Second, it is possible to hold a viewpoint that **quality criteria will always be contingent on local context** and the perspectives of the stakeholders, and cannot be 'assigned' in advance. This position seemed to be held by some members of the case study focus groups and also by some members of the workshop.

A third position claims **'inner' and 'outer' science criteria of quality are both indispensable**, and that they should be brought to bear on any given research project or output. However, they should not be applied through a framework of 'criteriology' (Stake, 2004), but at a level of generality that does not require us to 'weight' dimensions against one another. We have nailed our colours to this mast in the opening section of this chapter. We find ourselves in sympathy with a position put to us by different people throughout the project – that outer-science norms (eg being useful or emancipatory) are neither more nor less important than inner-science epistemic norms. Understood in this way, criteria developed for assessing the quality of social work research in particular contexts should still touch in one way or the other all of the general dimensions (Furlong and Oancea, 2005), but with a flexibility and level of specificity tailored to the particular project.

Second, quality has a temporal context. We have opted for this way of expressing the point that research work will sometimes (not always) be seen as possessing quality because it builds on previous work. Most references to research as being *cumulative* fall into this. But this is not all we should infer. Quality also has an important '*hindsight*' nature. A research project or output (a significant distinction, see below) may not be viewed as 'good research' at the time of project completion, but will later be seen to possess quality when it leads to good later work. We have noted occasions when:

- A participant picked his output as a piece that 'stood for' a central strand of his work, rather than because it had outstanding merit per se.
- Those we interviewed sometimes talked of the quality of a piece of work in terms of its 'potential'. This criterion was more likely to refer to epistemic quality, either in regard of methodology or basis for subsequent theorising.
- One participant used the phrase 'stepping stone' to capture the quality of his output – an expression that appears to look both backwards *and* forwards.

It is equally possible that time will lead to a judgement of lesser quality as much as enhanced quality, although because we were not focusing on 'poor' quality research this did not gain attention. Future empirical work could profitably look at outputs judged poor.

Third, quality judgements about research connect to how social workers are likely to estimate the quality of their own practice. We do not have enough evidence to say how far the two draw on the same underlying processes of judgement, although we suspect that the act of making evaluative judgement will be directly comparable at various points. Two different examples must suffice. First, in both research and practice the quality of work typically emerges in the light of how others rate one's work. Community judgements count and indeed construct the quality of work, whether it is research or social work intervention. Second, researchers and practitioners both seem to draw on evidence partly grounded in the emotions in deciding whether work has gone well or not (see Shaw and Shaw, 1997 for the case made in relation to practitioners). Thus one university researcher described the tracing of cumulativeness as being 'fun'; the fieldwork also as 'fun'; and the fact that people were 'really interested' as part of her quality judgement. Insofar as this conclusion holds good, it may provide a partial basis for making a case that fruitful comparisons can be drawn between how we evaluate different kinds of knowledge (cf Pawson et al, 2003).

Fourth, judgements of quality are about far more than what is enshrined in the written text. We have produced a surfeit of evidence to this effect. Because of this, judgements based on the quality of a text output will always be incomplete and not fully exhaustive or representative of quality dimensions.

One example not included hitherto is how participants sometimes referred to the quality of the 'project', eg that the team was inter-disciplinary or that the funding came from the research council. This connects with a point we have made slightly differently in Chapter 2 when we noted that we use the word 'quality' in two very different ways – both as a goal and as a means or a process. References to the quality of the *project* rather than the *output* seem to refer to quality as process and to connect to a consideration of the preconditions of research quality.

Fifth, judgements of quality are always 'in-the-making'. This is true in two main senses. First, and connected with the point we have made about the temporal context of quality, judgements will always be contingent on the stage of the research (we include within this the whole natural life of a project, which may extend far beyond the completion of fieldwork and publication). To take a simple

and uncontroversial example, community responses to research tend to be more extensive the more a project moves into the public arena.

There is a second sense in which quality is always in-the-making. It has become almost a mundane commonplace to talk of narrativity in regard to some kinds of research data. But in this case it is central to understanding the quality of social work research. Those to whom we spoke extracted from – indeed, to echo Stake and Schwandt's phrase, crafted and hammered out – accounts and stories, such that the data is replete with them. As people tell stories of the quality of their own and others' research, those to whom they are told are more than neutral hearers. They are the audience and become characters in their stories (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994). Focus group members shared and actively honed estimations of quality in the research of others, including on occasion others present in the group. All this suggests the dynamic character of quality, such that 'we never establish quality once and for all' (Stake and Schwandt, 2006).

Sixth, the focus groups illustrate the obvious – that **there will be diversity in how criteria are utilised** from one project to another. For example, any judgement of quality is inevitably contingent on the home discipline or practice background from which they derive their experience (this point was made with greatest lucidity by participants from Institution D). This does not mean criteria as such will be different. That kind of over-contextualised relativism gained little favour. However, it does suggest that devising a framework of quality in social work research is likely to prove a contentious and disputed exercise. It fits well, once again, our sympathy with Furlong and Oancea's (2005) argument for setting criteria at a 'middle-range' of generality, whereby differences of approach can be acknowledged, without requiring an abandonment of the quest for collective assessment of quality.

5.3 Consolidated recommendations

We have deliberately maintained a running account of our emerging conclusions during the report. For example, as early as the literature review we tentatively opted for an approach to assessing social work research marked by characteristics that included a conceptualisation of social work research that does not set 'pure' and 'applied' in conflict, and in which applied research is not seen in deficit terms as a methodologically lesser form of research. We went for quality judgements in social work research marked by commitments to:

- incorporate both quality-as-measured and quality-as-experienced
- seek agreement on quality dimensions at a middle-range of generality, with the purpose of maximising agreement between diverse epistemological positions but not requiring a unitary consensus on quality criteria
- quality as multidimensional, including dimensions both intrinsic and extrinsic to the research act
- requiring a relatively demanding minimum demonstration of quality on all dimensions
- quality as reflecting both process and goal

- the ambition to develop quality standards that will 'work' for all kinds of social work and social care knowledge on the bases that there is considerable diversity of knowledge within social work research, and that the boundaries between research knowledge and other forms of knowledge are by no means watertight.

We also claimed the merits of an application of quality judgements that avoids an overly prescriptive framework for how quality criteria should be applied in a given context.

We see no reason to row back on these recommendations. We are confirmed in our recommendation that the framework developed by Furlong and Oancea (2005) will serve with some modification for other applied social sciences, including social work. The main dimensions were:

- epistemic – methodological and theoretical robustness
- technological – value for use
- capacity development and value for people
- economic.

The next level of specificity has been summarised in Chapter 2. We have demurred at some points. 'Value for people' is insufficiently developed and we recommend it should include 'Receptiveness to service user and carers' viewpoints, and to a wider distribution of individual and social justice'. Reflection and debate over this sub-dimension has been at the heart of this project. We also find it more helpful to unpack their 'epistemic' dimension so that issues of methodology and knowledge are treated as distinct dimensions, and recommend that this is done. We have barely mentioned the economic dimension, although it has shown its face from time to time. Our efforts to include research funders and the policy community in the focus groups had limited success.

A major difference between the present project and Furlong and Oancea is that we have been persuaded that a stronger, almost discontinuous, line should be drawn between judgements of research *quality* and *value*. The distinction was frequently resorted to by participants, and some of the intellectual tensions are resolved when this distinction is accepted. We recommend that this distinction is developed and embedded in any assessment framework.

Unlike Furlong and Oancea, our project has been based primarily on fresh empirical data, and as such is less speculative and will assist in the further development of quality frameworks in other social sciences, and in exploring the feasibility for cross-discipline collaboration on assessing and developing the quality of research. We recommend that these opportunities are explored.

When characterising social work research in Chapter 1 and developing dimensions for categorising social work research in Chapter 3 (Figure 3), we placed the purpose of research at the heart of quality assessment. We **recommend** that others do so. We are aware that this goes against some recent thinking. Pawson and colleagues concluded that a purpose-based classification of knowledge was difficult to use:

'Lack of detail in the abstracts was an obvious hindrance to decision-making and classification will often require a complete reading or detailed skimming of the full article.... If detailed reading is needed for classification purposes there could be significant resource implications.' (Pawson et al, 2003)

The implication that a scheme for judging quality should be 'fit for purpose' (in the sense of feasible) is, of course, perceptible. However, the drift of our argument has been that while kinds of research may just about be classifiable from abstracts, research quality does require more differentiated and not easily tractable kinds of information. Pawson's more pragmatic argument appears less persuasive in this context – and it may have been overtaken by a more recent trial run of the SCIE scheme (Long et al, 2006).

The distinction just made between quality and value bears on judgements about 'value for use'. The data and literature suggest that there are three kinds of position on quality judgements about the use of research. Assessment of the quality and value of research should take into account:

- different ways in which members of the social work community use research and other knowledge and develop best practice models of knowledge use
- the extent to which research *aims* to be useful, rather than actually *achieves* use and impact
- longer-term, and not only shorter-term impacts, for example through the use-potential of research.

The positions are distinct but not necessarily alternatives. The first position has been reflected in the programme of work sponsored by SCIE, where the focus has been on different sources of knowledge and knowledge use (Pawson et al, 2003; Walter et al, 2004). The second position has been outlined in Chapters 2 and 5 of the report, and relies on making a clear distinction between research quality and research value, and on a fitness-for-purpose criterion. Research quality should be assessed according to whether it has been designed and carried out in ways consistent with the use-purpose of the project. The third position emphasises use-potential. In the development of social science thinking, it has been closely associated with the early work of Carol Weiss on enlightenment models of research use in the USA policy evaluation field, and reflected in the work of social science policy analysts in the UK (eg Finch, 1985, 1986; Weiss, 1987, 1988). This last position distances research use from quality criteria, through its pragmatic portrayal of research use, and its heavy emphasis on the incremental, stakeholder-driven model of information use.

We elaborate and **recommend** the fruitfulness of these distinctions because we believe it would be premature if any single understanding of research use in social work and social care came to hold the floor. We concur with the late Bill Reid, when, with Stuart Kirk, he lamented that 'we know comparatively little about notions of bias, error, mistakes and truth – the actual epistemologies used – in the ordinary practice of social work' (Kirk and Reid, 2002), and when they remarked that 'The bottom line for research utilisation is what happens in the field among practitioners'. Take this on board, and a continuing openness would be facilitated to knowledge utilisation and its associated quality judgements, both in the ESRC and in the social

work community. Also, the more extreme rhetoric of evidence-based policy and practice would be purged of several excesses.

Our recommendations come at different levels. A more mundane, albeit demanding, recommendation picks up from the realisation that there have, for some time, been occasional pleas for a standard key word database that could be used with all journal papers and would be the standard search tool for all research databases. We are minded to support that plea. We have referred to the relevance of this report for SCIE's aspirations to develop a database of practice research, and shared practice on key words for research outputs would be a valued addition to such a database. It would support searching kinds of research and may also contribute in a less direct way to quality assessments.

We have set out our conclusions regarding understanding and assessing kinds of research in social work in Chapter 3. To summarise, we **recommend**:

- Kinds of social work research should be identified in terms of two dimensions, the primary research focus and the primary issue or problem.
- A minimum information base should comprise information about authors and affiliation, an abstract or equivalent, and key words.
- A preliminary familiarisation process and training in the application of the categorisation should take place, with ratings carried out by two people.
- The scheme should only be used with the full guidance notes to hand.
- Different stakeholder groups in the social work community should adopt the scheme on a trial basis, and use it as part of the implementation for the JUC SWEC 'Strategy' and as part of the development of a practice research database by SCIE.
- Further trialing and testing should take place by the social work community and other interested colleagues, including inter-rater measures between different stakeholder groups.

The brief for this project has limited the degree to which we have been able to take into account how this work may be viewed outside universities. We have aimed to stay attuned to the implications of the project for work on different kinds of knowledge in social work and social care, but this is a further area where more work will be needed. This applies, for example, to user and carer knowledge, practitioner knowledge and organisational knowledge. We saw something of research in relation to organisational knowledge in the words of a senior manager with links to a local university. He expressed a view about practitioners. Some want to learn and will proactively look, but most 'rely on *Community Care* and that's about it'. He saw practitioners as being in a key position. 'They are the people who can say whether it's worked'. This leads us to recommend that a version of quality assessment for non-academics merits consideration, but we would not recommend the development of a modified version of the 'Kinds' framework. The standard of 'fit for purpose' in social work research should include working to develop guidance on how different stakeholder communities should apply quality judgements selectively but not self-servingly. This is not the same as saying that such a version will be 'thinner' and involve less expertise than a scheme tailored for universities. Different stakeholders have different knowledge and are expert in ways that challenge universities just as much as universities may challenge others.

We were tasked to advise on research in UK universities, rather than social work research internationally. But it is difficult to talk about standards without also posing the question of whether such standards transfer across cultures and nations. The nature of the question is not one unique to social work. Our aim in this report has been to stay alert to discussions of research standards in other western countries, without claiming more than the data can sustain. We would welcome discussions with colleagues in the social work community in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the USA and Nordic countries, work in all of which has influenced our thinking.

We are aware of the arguments that are likely to be advanced against universalising the conclusions in this report. Cultural and value assumptions in UK social work are not universal; the report targets mainly research practitioners, and gives less attention to the commissioners of research and policymakers; institutional assumptions will vary about how research is used; notwithstanding the engagement of user and carer researchers in the key informant interviews, opening national workshop and focus groups, the orientation of the quality framework has been towards university researchers. We can only respond by acknowledging that we have been aware throughout of these risks, and have endeavoured to mitigate their negative impact.

We do not recommend the development of international frameworks of quality for social work research. We are concerned that this could unintentionally become the vehicle to limit rather than strengthen national and regionally diverse modes of social work research (we are indebted to Elliot Stern for this point made in a different context: Stern, 2006).

... not too much

To end, we should not expect too much from science, theory and research. Taking the golem – the creature of Jewish mythology – as a metaphor for science, Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch, in their captivating book, seek:

> 'to explain the golem that is science. We aim to show that it is not an evil creature but it is a little daft. Golem Science is not to be blamed for its mistakes; they are our mistakes. A golem cannot be blamed if it is doing its best. But we must not expect too much. A golem, powerful though it is, is the creature of our art and our craft.' (Collins and Pinch, 1998)

Furthermore, 'scientists are neither Gods nor charlatans; they are merely experts'. We have argued for the elusive expertise involved in understanding and assessing the kinds and quality of social work research. We should aim to achieve it and become 'merely experts'.

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Appendix 1: Case study focus group vignettes

For each of the following vignettes I will ask you to say what you think are the key elements that are relevant to making a judgement about the quality of the (hypothetical) work, and then comment. Later I will ask if you want to draw any comparisons/contrasts between them. Please try to take the statements as given in good faith – eg when it says that methods were innovative, or that analysis was careful, please assume for the sake of the exercise that these are judgements that are well grounded.

Vignette One: Evidence-based practice for leaving care
The department for Education and Skills (DfES) and Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) have funded a completed study of planning for leaving care, the aim of which has been to provide impartial and objective evidence to aid decision making and improve the accountability of services across England and Wales. It was led by social work staff from one English and one Welsh higher education institute. It used sophisticated and innovative quantitative methods. The project has taken full account of research ethics and governance requirements. The final report to DfES/ WAG has been highly praised by reviewers for its transparent, explicit account of the methodology. It was thought that the strong internal validity qualities make this highly generalisable.

Vignette Two: Intervention to strengthen resilience
The Social Care Institute for Excellence funded a small team of social work academics to evaluate a strengths-based approach to promoting resilience in users of several joint health and social care projects for young cancer sufferers. The aim of the research was to take a research and development approach in developing and evaluating the effectiveness of intervention methods. Following the final report, the researchers are optimistic that an R&D programme will be funded by the Department of Health for a number of years, and have been influenced by R&D approaches to social work intervention research in the USA.

Vignette Three: Action research with black women
A network of health and social work practitioners has carried out an action research project with black women users of an antenatal unit in inner-city Bristol. They are working in their own time without any funding but with some workload relief. The main aim was to highlight and advance what is known about the life experience of these women. It was carried out through alternating periods of action and reflection over a four-month period, influenced by participatory research models associated with writers such as Peter Reason (at nearby Bath University – he has given them some advice) and John Heron. The practitioners and the women participants all think that the project has raised lessons for service improvement and for their own control over their lives, and presented their conclusions in a letter to the key agencies. *Community Care* magazine has asked them to write an article on the project.

Vignette Four: Theorising professional judgement
A research study has been completed about the nature and qualities of professional judgement in relation to risk taking in mental health services. The overall aim was to generate and enhance theory and knowledge about professional practice. It was

carried out by a social work academic jointly with a medical sociologist, and funded through the Economic and Social Research Council. They did not have specific ideas about its potential or actual application to practice, although in broad terms they are persuaded that it will have applied interest over the medium term. The research has been written up in sociology and social work journals, and they have been asked to give a plenary paper at the next British Sociology Association conference.

Vignette Five: Social inclusion for young homeless people
Social policy researchers, in partnership with project staff, were funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to study a project for young homeless people that aimed to promote social inclusion. It used qualitative evaluation methods, with full additional use of quantitative data. The project staff and the users of the project thought that the research was useful in giving them voice and confidence (this came out clearly from the final interviews and a focus group). However, the policy researchers could not find clear evidence that the project has achieved its main aim of promoting social inclusion, despite careful data analysis. There were long, thorough, amicable but inconclusive discussions about how to bring together the differing interpretations of the results of the research.

Note: The wording of the vignettes was altered slightly for the Scotland group to reflect country differences.

Appendix 2: Case study: individual interviews

Introduction

1. The project. Phases; report; link to JUC SWEC Research Strategy meetings; phase III focus is mainly on quality judgements.
2. Confidentiality.
   - The identities of the interviewees not disclosed in publication/report. However, the analysis will almost certainly cite text extract from publications that an assiduous reader could trace to the author/s. We plan to send to each case study site the part of the report that (we will know) refers to that university. You will be able to advise us if we have unwittingly made any comments that could prove damaging to the university and department.
   - No analysis that will make known what site is being discussed, although the four sites as a whole may become known outside the immediate research team.
3. The approach is intended to be 'appreciative' in that we have asked to discuss examples of research judged by writers to be of a good quality. Our intention is not to challenge your estimate of the value of your research, but primarily to understand the way judgements are made; and to identify what seems plausible evidence for such judgements.

Explain general form of the interview. Are you happy for the interview to be taped and transcribed?

Start by identifying interviewee and date and venue.

Do you have any questions or things you would like to say at this stage?

Opening questions

1. In general – we will look at details later – how did you select this example of your research? How did you choose between this and other 'contenders'?
2. How easy was it to take a view about the quality of your work? (Prompt if necessary)

Questions about the volunteered research output

3. What is it within the article/chapter that you consider makes it of good quality? (Encourage as *full* and *specific* an answer as possible)
4. Do you think you are making claims about the quality of the research in the publication? (Prompts – exactly where? Of what kind are they? Explicit/implicit; How explicit and 'readable' by others do you think your claims are?)
5. What personally pleases you about this research?
6. Do you think this is a distinctively *social work* piece of research in any way? (Possible prompts may be if they explain this in terms of the purpose of the research; the values; user involvement; the methods; 'applied' focus)
7. Were there aspects that, notwithstanding quality, you thought were of less good quality?
8. Add any specific question/s that flows from your advance reading of the interviewee's volunteered research output. [Also please let Ian Shaw have a brief memo on the issues that struck you from reading each of the outputs.]

Follow-up questions

Note to interviewer: our experience is that most of these issues came up as prompts to the previous questions. You may not need to cover them with the exception of Q12. Check for comprehensiveness of response and deal with here if not volunteered already.

9. Possible implicit criteria may include that quality of research is the better insofar as:
   - the data tells a clear, consistent, coherent story
   - I think I/we wrote it well
   - judgements made in the social work community are grounds for concluding (post hoc) that it is good. Eg peer review, citation, sponsor feedback, etc (which parts of the community are key?).

Follow up any occasions where these elements are mentioned by the person interviewed, initially by clarifying prompts:

10. Judgement may be about the quality of:
    - the research that is wholly or partly reported in the publication
    - the written research output
    - the researcher showing good judgement about the significance of the data
    - the importance of the 'thing' researched, eg success in getting funding to do it
    - getting positive results, eg that something 'works'.

Follow up any occasions where these elements are mentioned by the person interviewed, initially by clarifying prompts

11. Methodology and theoretical quality (epistemic). What sort of methodology or theory claims are made?
    - Is it cumulative?
    - Is it methodologically innovative/sophisticated?
    - Is it descriptive or analytical?
    - Is quality linked to qualitative/quantitative choices?

Follow up any occasions where these elements are mentioned by the person interviewed, initially by clarifying prompts.

12. In closing I'd like to recap more generally. If we assume that by quality we mean that research has different kinds of *value*, how would you summarise whether your research has value [note: it is fine for the interviewee to say they do not know]:
    - methodologically?
    - theoretically?
    - in its use/application by others?
    - in terms of value for people – eg partnership, self-reflection by users, practitioners etc, greater social inclusion
    - economic value (eg as investment for improving services, or as value for money)?

Thanks for taking part. Any final clarifications, comments or additions you would like to make about what we have covered?

Appendix 3: Kinds of social work research: inter-rater reliability exercise

Drawn from *British Journal of Social Work* issues 33.2; 33.7; 34.6; 34.8; 35.7

1. If you ended up undecided note your alternate choice.
2. Please only use those papers where there is a printed 'Summary' or 'Abstract' and key words, as listed below.
3. Do not read the main text as a way of resolving uncertainty, as we need to test this as a tool that can be used on the basis only of title, authors, abstract and key words.
4. Please use the article numbers as in the list below.

Issue and sample number	First author	Issue and sample number	First author
33.2 1	Benbenishty	21	Pugh
2	Sheppard	**35.7** 22	Banks
3	Humphrey	23	Munro
4	McDonald	24	Cambridge
5	Humphreys	25	Huxley
6	Bream	26	Dwyer
7	Featherstone	27	Wright
33.7 8	Gibson	28	Tyrer
9	Sinclair	29	Dominelli
10	Bradshaw	30	Keene
11	Weinberg	31	Lawler
12	Shardlow	32	Read
13	Nellis	33	Hayes
34.6 14	Furman	**34.8** 34	Munro
15	Heenan	35	Kay
16	Hayden	36	Taylor
17	McKeigue	37	Gallagher
18	Neale	38	Mantle
19	Evans	39	Tong
20	Paylor	40	Glasby

Notes

The kinds and quality of social work research in UK universities

This report is part of a programme of work by SCIE, the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education and the Economic and Social Research Council to develop evidence-based social care by strengthening one of its core disciplines: social work research.

The report proposes a framework for assessing the nature and quality of social work research in universities in the UK, and provides a reference point for building research capacity in social work.

This publication is available in an alternative format upon request.

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Registered charity no. 1092778
Company registration no. 4289790

ISBN 978-1-904812-17-3