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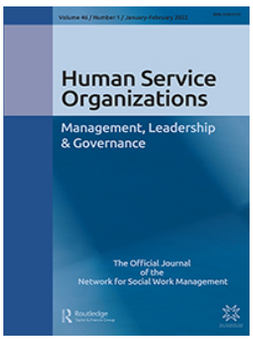

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Using Theory in Practice – An Intervention Supporting Research Dissemination in Social Work

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ABSTRACT

This guest editorial explores how theory-informed and evidence-informed practice can be strengthened in human service organizations. This exploration involves the description of a Practice and Theory group intervention model. Based on a three-case study of pilot intervention groups provided to social workers, the short-term and intermediate outcomes as well as the expected intermediate and long-term outcomes are presented and illustrated by a logic model. The shared conversations help overcome the difficulties practitioners and managers may have in understanding the role of theory or research in practice. Discussing theories in the context of everyday practice can provide practitioners with concrete tools for decision-making. Applying and experimenting with theories opens new perspectives for the problem-solving process where the practitioner is experimenting, reflecting and seeking to improve practice. Thus, shared reflections of theories and research can promote adaptive and developmental workplace learning and enhance an individual sense of epistemic agency.

KEYWORDS

Dissemination; evidence-informed practice; intervention; pragmatism; reflection; theory-informed practice

Introduction

Practitioners often lack the access and time to read research publications and many lack the critical thinking skills needed to interpret research. They also often need to overcome the organizationally hostile attitudes toward research, inadequate supervision and/or the lack of autonomy to implement research (Gray, Joy, & Plath, 2013; Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007). All of these factors are taking on increased importance within the current context of implementation science and the introduction of evidence-informed practices (Bunger & Lengnick-Hall, 2019).

The goal of this editorial is to explore the process of translating research knowledge in order to apply it to contemporary practice. This exploration involves the description of a group intervention model for disseminating research and supporting the problem-solving process that underlies evidence-informed practice. In addition to noting the outcomes of the group model, recommendations are provided for strengthening theory-informed practice in human service organizations.

Specifically, we emphasize the importance of organizational supportive structures for evidence-informed and theory-informed practice. Based on the findings of the Practice and Theory group, the editorial proposes providing professionals hands-on guidance on how to integrate research into practice and decision-making as part of their practice. We also propose that reflecting on the relevance of theories and research with colleagues, and deliberately experimenting in practice, supports adaptive and developmental learning. This can encourage professionals to develop personal and organizational practices and even to conduct practice research. Finally, we contend that obtaining new perspectives from research and contributing in shared knowledge creation can improve work-related sense of well-being.

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Our discussion begins with a description of the context that impacted the authors, followed by an introduction of the three pilot interventions. Next, we discuss the role that research plays in the Practice and Theory group and how the research was selected. We then present the short-term and intermediate outcomes our research indicates as well as the expected intermediate and long-term outcomes illustrated by a logic model (Gugiua & Rodríguez-Campos, 2007). We conclude with a set of recommendations.

The immediate context

Both authors have been involved with social work practice research at the Heikki Waris Institute funded by the Helsinki Metropolitan municipalities and University of Helsinki, Finland (Muurinen & Satka, 2020). Both authors worked at the Institute, Aino Kääriäinen as a university lecturer and Heidi Muurinen as a researcher social worker and frequently recognized the challenges of disseminating results beyond the active practice communities. Both authors have been inspired by John Dewey's (1920/1950, p. 121) writings about the relationship between theory and practice where concepts, theories and systems of thought are seen as tools to inform practice. Dewey's ideas are used to support social workers in their efforts to utilize research in practice and underlie the design of our exploratory study of theory-informed group intervention (Kääriäinen & Muurinen, 2019).

During 2015–2017, we conducted three pilot studies of the intervention groups to research how participating social workers reflected upon and utilized theories when reviewing qualitative research (Muurinen & Kääriäinen, 2020). The first group was in a social work agency serving adults where Heidi Muurinen worked as a team manager. The next two groups were with social workers in child protection agencies. Of the three groups, two were jointly facilitated by the authors and the third was facilitated by Aino Kääriäinen and a development planner at the City of Helsinki. The three groups had a total of 16 participants who were all master's-level social workers (M.Sc.Sc.). Participation was voluntary and the social workers were recruited from the organizations by e-mail.

The Practice and Theory group meets five to six times. In each session, the group chooses a research summary prepared by the group facilitator. For two weeks in-between the group meetings, each participant applies the chosen piece of research to their practice by analyzing their practice using theoretical concepts that are described in the research summary. The observations of the participants were then discussed in the group meetings. More detailed information about the group facilitation process is available in a guidebook (see Kääriäinen & Muurinen, 2019).

Selecting the research

Before the pilot groups began and without specifically knowing which social workers would participate and the questions they might find interesting, the group facilitators chose the research to be discussed within the group. Given the pilot nature of the group intervention model, the process and criteria for selecting the research topics were not very systematic. However, the criteria for selecting theories and research findings included: 1) could the selected theory support decision-making or provide substantial explanation of various client situations (Forte, 2014, p. 109), and 2) how might the selection process take into account some topical questions in the participants' field of practice (e.g. child welfare services, adult and aging services, mental health services, etc.). Based on the notion that theories could be useful in analyzing a client or organizational situation (Dewey, 1920/1950, p. 128), the purpose of the theory and research selection process was to strengthen theory-informed practice and evidence-informed practice using qualitative research with less attention to quantitative research (based, in part, on the anticipated limited research skills of the group participants).

In order to select research from a range of possible topics, we used four criteria: 1) relevancy, 2) applicability, 3) width and 4) our familiarity of the research (as illustrated in Figure 1 where the summaries of the chosen studies are available online in the Guidebook for conducting intervention groups, see Kääriäinen & Muurinen, 2019).

CRITERION FOR SELECTING RESEARCH
• All research from peer-reviewed journals or academic books

EXAMPLES OF APPLYING THE CRITERION	RELEVANCY • Concerns or is relevant to • the field the participants work at AND • to welfare state context	APPLICABILITY • Describes client world, phenomena or practice (e.g. human interaction) OR • Concerns how to do social work or includes recommendations or guidelines	WIDTH OF SCOPE • One article or one to few key concepts of a wider research AND • Can be summarized to A4	FAMILIARITY • Not compulsory, but • Saves time in making the summaries AND • helps facilitating the discussions
EXAMPLE 1: Juvonen, Tarja (2014) Culturally defined having-to. • Qualitative social work article that analyses the construction of adolescents' agency from the viewpoint of cultural expectations, particularly the concept of having-to.	• Bureaucratic control and activation policy in social work are relevant and topical in Finnish social work • The research on young clients is relevant to adult social work and to child protection	• Describes the interaction between professionals and young adults • Conceptualizes the agency of young adults	• Published in a peer-reviewed article • Contains one key concept which is simple to summarize in the A4	• The second author had supervised the doctoral research the article is part of
EXAMPLE 2: Lonne B, Harries M & Featherstone B (2016) Working Ethically in Child Protection. • An analysis of ethics and the complex, critical dilemmas and decision-making processes in child protection.	• Social workers find themselves in their day-to-day practice in confusing ethical quandaries, trying to balance the numerous competing interests of protecting children from harm and abuse. • Concerns child protection (used only in groups for child protection) • The presented model is not country specific	• Presents a clear guideline applicable to decision-making	• Published as a book chapter • The six-stage model of ethical decision making in child protection can be summarized to A4	• n/a

Figure 1. Criteria for selecting research with two example studies.

Lessons learned in research selection

Based on the use of research in three different pilot intervention groups, it became apparent that more effort needed to be made to capture the range of participant research interests, despite our experience in receiving limited responses from the participants related to either proposing research questions or identifying relevant theories. In contrast, the participants really appreciated the preselected topics because, according to them, they did not feel confident in identifying interesting research or answerable questions in the group sessions. This issue could have been more adequately addressed if we had surveyed each participant in advance of each group session and guaranteeing anonymity.

Another approach to selecting research would be conducting a systematic literature review based on the preferences of the group participants. As part of the pilot project, we simply searched and selected publications that were familiar to us and we thought to be inspiring and relevant. However, instead of making a summary of one research article or theory description, a more comprehensive summary could have been written based on a number of relevant publications. It is not clear if the time needed for more wide-ranging preparations take would complicate the implementation of the group model.

Given the limited time available in the group for busy practitioners, only a few concepts or research findings can be covered, suggesting that only one set of research findings or a theory is most feasible. In contrast, larger research studies or theories would need to be spread out into more than one session. For example, in one of our groups, it was proposed that one theme per group session could focus on the implementation of the Finnish Systemic Practice Model (Isokuortti & Aaltio, 2020).

In the next section, we provide two examples to demonstrate how social workers applied research in practice. Then, we collected brief versions of both short-term and intermediate outcomes envisioned by the group participants.

Supporting theory-informed and evidence-informed practice

We named the group 'Practice and Theory' because we wanted to emphasize the bridging of the perceived gap between practice and theory where theory is often viewed as speculation separate from practice (Payne, 2014, p. 4). The discussion of theory in the pilot groups was always linked to selected publications of qualitative research in order to promote evidence-informed or evidence-based practice with theory-informed practice (Austin, 2020, p. 26).

Malcom Payne (2014) defines theory as "a generalized set of ideas that describes and explains our knowledge of the world around us in an organized way" (p. 5). Social work theories help to understand the nature of social work practice along with the perspectives of clients being served (ibid., 6). In the group, theory discussions included explanatory generalizations and conceptualizations based on research about the client world or research resulting in implications for social work practice.

The group discussed various social work practice theories (e.g., narrative practice), social science theories of facework and specifically the concept of "face" which describes how positive self-image is created, maintained and guarded in interaction with others (Goffman, 1955/2016), and philosophical theories related to I-Thou relationship which propose how in human relationships dialogical interaction can take place when the other person is acknowledged and respected as another "I", not objectified and treated as "it" (Buber, 1923/2008). Theories about the client world included the conceptualization of having-to which describes the construction of adolescents' agency from the viewpoint of cultural expectations in discussions with professionals (Juvonen, 2014) and Actor-Network Theory which is a theoretical and methodological approach in analyzing symmetrically how human actors and non-human entities participate and influence the construction of social situations or systems (Latour, 2005). In the group sessions, the focus was mostly on empirical generalizations or single concepts for easy grasp within one session as a way of encompassing wider theories or frameworks that need to be understood one concept at a time.

In the intervention groups, theories or conceptualizations were used to analyze situations, social problems or practice phenomena within the problem-solving process where knowledge is acquired, created, tested and evaluated. The evidence-informed decision-making process begins with defining an answerable question to which best available evidence is located and critically appraised, clients are informed, and the intervention is evaluated (Gambrill, 2001).

Many different types of explanatory and interventive theories are intertwined in social work practice. For example, explanatory feminist perspective and systems theory framework can be applied to such interventive theories related to task-centered casework or motivational interviewing or cognitive-behavioral therapy (Payne, 2014, p. 5). If relevant evidence-based models are lacking, the explanatory theory perspective can still provide practitioners with frameworks to guide interventions.

Along with practice theories, research on client populations (e.g., children, the elderly, domestic violence survivors) can inform social worker regarding the needs, behaviors and relevant experiences of service users. If a practitioner reads a qualitative study about a client population and reflects upon how this research relates to one's own practice, the application and analysis can lead to something surprising or contradictory. This form of abductive reasoning (making a probable conclusion from what you know) can lead to preliminary hypotheses as well as answerable questions leading to a search for the best available evidence on a variety of interventions (Peirce, 1903/1934, p. 117). The research on client populations can also include the identification of evidence-informed practices or the need for such practices. Finally, the search for qualitative research might also lead to practice recommendations and guidelines that can be applied in decision-making as will be noted in two examples later on in this discussion.

A distinction between an independent practitioner-focused understanding of evidence-informed practice and the group approach to reflecting upon the research findings and their applications is that the group enables participants to allocate time to considering research as well as find courage to publicly share in a safe space their understandings of the application of research to their own practice.

Also, previous research has emphasized the importance of interactive group processes and supportive organizational structures for promoting evidence-informed practice (Austin & Carnochan, 2020; Austin, Dal Santo, & Lee, 2012; Carnochan, McBeath, & Austin, 2017).

The experiences of group participants

To demonstrate how the participants applied research to their practice and to decision-making, we present two case examples related to child protection in Figure 2. The Practice and Theory group discussed the application of a six-stage interventive theory model of ethical decision-making in child protection (Lonne, Harries, & Featherstone, 2016). The model refers to decision-making in child protection as including the following components: 1) define the problem, 2) identify relevant ethical principles, 3) name the principles and duties of various stakeholders and consider the options, 4) consider the likely outcomes for each listed option, 5) decide on actions and 6) evaluate the results. In both cases (SW1 and SW2) the group participants noted that the model supported their decision-making. In the case of SW2, applying the model led one of the group participants to develop a plan for pursuing further practice research.

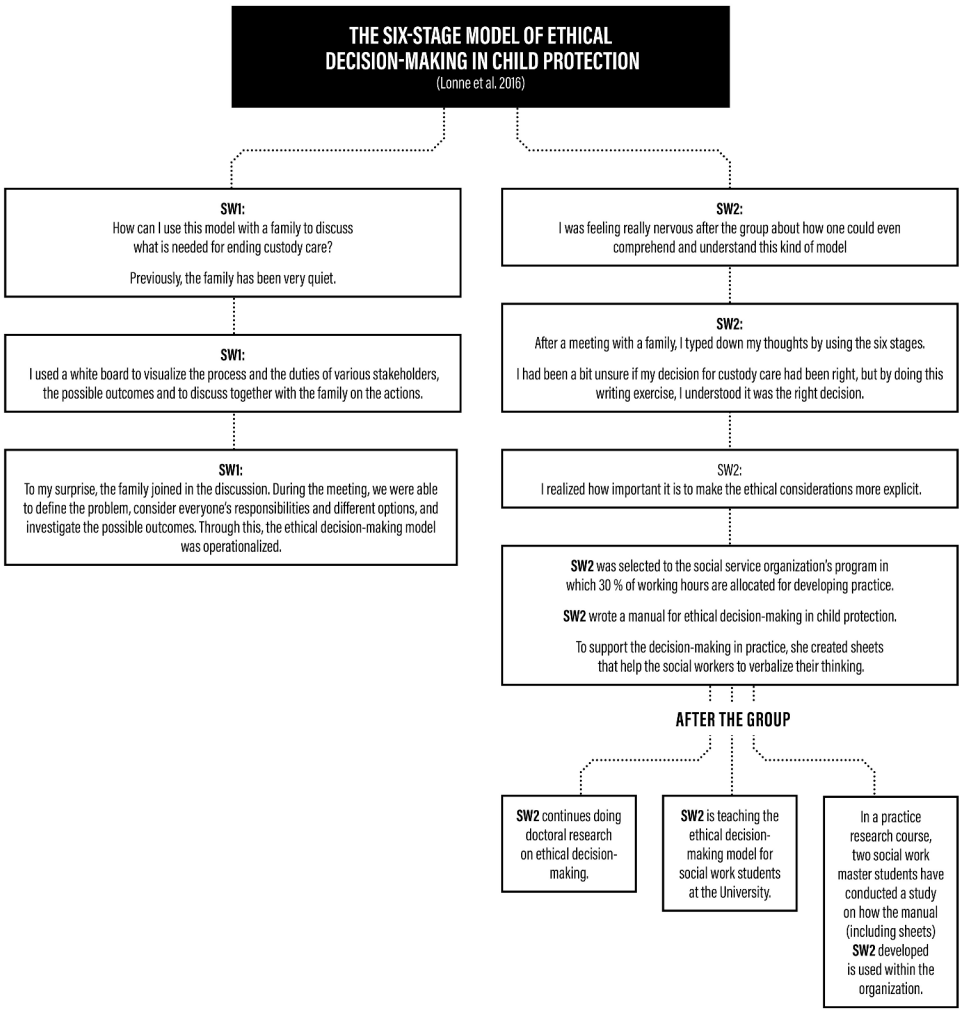

Figure 2. Two examples of the consequences of applying research to practice.

Findings from group participants

The results of the experiences of group participants are based on a thematic analysis of reflective discussions during the last group sessions and follow-up group interviews of the three pilot intervention groups in 2015–2017 (Muurinen & Kääriäinen, 2020). The results to short-term and intermediate outcomes are identified by the participants.

It was significant that the group activities could be fitted into the busy schedules and practice of the participants. The group experiences provided the participants with an opportunity to see *how research knowledge could be connected to practice* given their limited experience with understanding this connection. Perhaps the most significant consequence of participating in the Practice and Theory group was that it *lowered the perceived barriers to applying research as a way to reflect upon their own practice*. By engaging in group discussions about theory and research, participants gained a *new perspective to social work* practice and by reflecting upon their professional experiences they were able to make *new interpretations of their actions and their practice*. According to the participants, the discussions of research knowledge and theoretical frameworks gave them a perspective to step back from daily practice as a way of helping them examine their decision-making and the actions taken.

Through personal and shared reflection, the practitioners *became more aware of their own reasoning*. They were able to use the research knowledge to *recognize, improve, and appreciate their argumentation skills in decision-making*. Participating in the discussion groups was *professionally empowering* for them as a way of developing *new ways of operating* that enhanced their *ability to develop their practice skills related to increased productivity and effectiveness*. With all these new perspectives and understandings, participants reported that they *felt inspired and excited about their work* and noted that the group experience of engaging with theory and research would *improve their work-related sense of well-being*.

Identifying the outcomes of the group intervention model

Up to this point, we have described the group model and presented examples of its activities and short-term or intermediate outcomes reported in previous research (Muurinen & Kääriäinen, 2020). In order to specify the group's inputs, activities and the outcomes as viewed by the practitioners, a logic model is presented in Figure 3 (Gugiua & Rodríguez-Campos, 2007). The table includes some expected intermediate or long-term outcomes that call for further research.

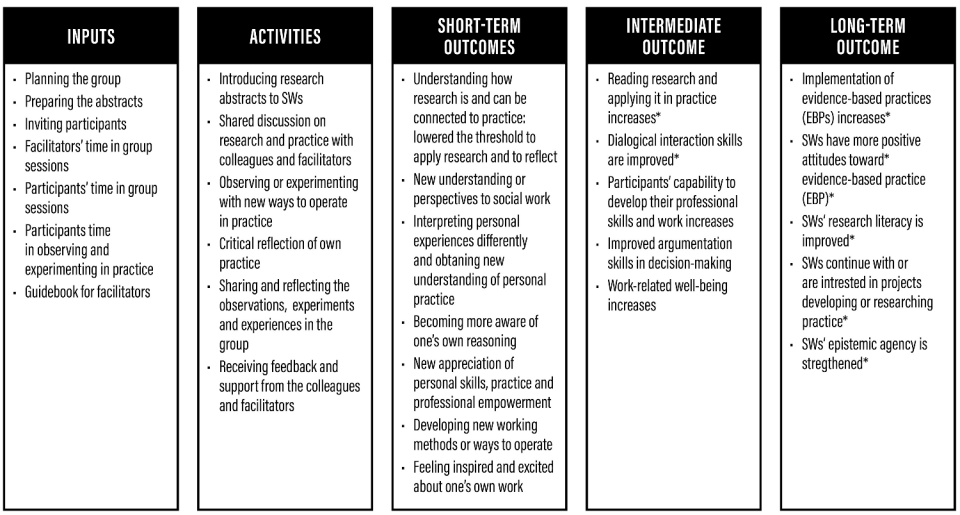

Figure 3. Logic model for practice and theory pilot group intervention (based on Gugiua & Rodríguez-Campos, 2007).

Even though the logic model helps to illustrate expected outcomes, learning is a complex process that does not always proceed in a linear and rational manner. The relational aspects of learning were evident when group members analyzed the theories together. Listening to each other provided new perspectives for interpreting practice situations as well as seeing themselves as professionals engaging with research and theory. For example, the theory-based conversations not only provided participants with new understanding about theories but also increased their sense of agency in making deliberate and conscious decisions along with the explication of the reasons for taking actions. Group members not only saw how the use of theories could become tools for practice but also how the shared experience of learning together could lead to shared reflections and knowledge creation.

The learning challenges inherent in the process of engaging in evidence-informed practice call for both adaptive and developmental learning (Nilsen, Neher, Ellström, & Gardner, 2020). Adaptive learning involves transforming explicit knowledge found in research and theories into implicit or tacit knowledge that links explanatory theory with the interventive theories of practice as well as research findings that inform practice and related knowledge about client populations. Developmental learning builds upon prior knowledge and practice experience that involves transforming implicit knowledge acquired over years of practice into explicit knowledge that takes into account personal thoughts or habits and deliberate actions based upon articulated decision-making processes.

Developmental learning can be well supported through reflective discussions based on research. For example, Nilsen, Nordström, and Ellström (2012) provided managers with opportunities to engage in reflection groups to discuss research in Sweden in order to support the use of research as part of the developmental learning experienced by managers. Participating enhanced the managers' self-efficacy concerning their role as leaders, supported handling different dilemmas and increased their understanding of their work (Nilsen et al., 2012).

In the Practice and Theory group, adaptive and developmental learning were also present. Adaptive learning took place, for example, when the participants gained new understanding in how research is connected to practice. Another example of adoptive learning is how the social workers in the above case integrated the ethical decision-making model to their practice. The participants also received new understanding of phenomena related to clients' lives which, as one participant describes, increased understanding of where the clients "*are coming from, what their experience is of everything, and in a good way this [theory] brings the background*".

Meanwhile, developmental learning was present when the participants used the theories or research to step back from their professional practice to reflect upon their assumptions or to deliberately explore new ways of operating. For example, the SW2 in the above case was able to make the reasons for a custody care decision more explicit by considering the six-stages of ethical decision-making. This also increased SW2's understanding of the importance of making the tacit knowledge more explicit. Thus, the Practice and Theory group model allowed for the combining of both adaptive and developmental learning. It also provided hands-on-guidance integrating knowledge about explanatory and interventive theories that could enhance their professional practice, one of the most challenging aspects of evidence-informed practice (Nilsen et al., 2020, p. 413).

Implications for human service organizations

We conclude this editorial with the identification of implications for human service organizations and further research. Organizational strategies are needed to overcome the well-known barriers (e.g., lack of time, access and skills or negative attitudes) such as the Practice and Theory Group Model that provides staff (Muurinen & Kääriäinen, 2020) or managers with the use of reflective groups (Nilsen et al., 2012) that can enhance theory-based practice and evidence-based practice in human service organizations.

To address the persistent lack of staff time and access to research, the group sessions can be easily incorporated into the busy schedules of practitioners. When research and theory are shared with practitioners, there are opportunities for immediate application in the form of small experiments

carried out within the context of everyday practice. However, organizations need to support the efforts of the group facilitators beyond the actual sessions with staff to account for the time needed for preparation. In addition, group facilitators need to be able to understand the core idea of group learning as well as the concepts of theory-based and evidence-based practice. A facilitator's Guidebook includes key references for this type of staff facilitation (see Kääriäinen & Muurinen, 2019).

One of the significant outcomes for participants in the Practice and Theory group was an increased sense of work-related well-being. Some of the short-term outcomes reported by the participants included: 1) a new appreciation of one's personal skills, 2) feeling inspired about one's own work and 3) being professionally empowered. Supporting work-related well-being is especially significant among social workers who have higher probability for staff burn-out (Rantonen et al., 2019).

How can theory-based and evidence-based practice be strengthened in human service organizations? The shared conversations in everyday practice help overcoming the difficulties practitioners and managers may have in understanding the role of theory or research in practice. Discussing theories in the context of everyday practice can provide practitioners with concrete tools for decision-making. This means acknowledging and utilizing theories, perspectives, frameworks and conceptualizations when: a) analyzing situations b) forming answerable questions, c) searching for and selecting relevant research, and d) utilizing theories to inform interventions especially when evidence-based practice findings are not available. Applying and experimenting with theories opens new perspectives for problem-solving process where the practitioner is experimenting, reflecting, experimenting and seeking to improve practice.

In addition to incorporating theories into decision-making, the reflective process itself can support a sense of agency among staff and managers. When practitioners have the opportunity to reflect upon the use and relevance of theories and thereby deliberately engage in experimentation, they become contributors to knowledge creation (Dewey, 1920/1950, p. 89). A sense of epistemic agency is derived from what one knows or does not know (Reed, 2001, p. 522) when seeking to increase one's ability to set a goal, motivate oneself, make a long-term plan and evaluate ones' own actions (Scardamalia, 2002). Gaining a stronger sense of epistemic agency also strengthens the capacity of practitioners to make their reasoning more explicit beyond their experiential knowledge, legislation or organizations' protocols by actively using research on client populations as well as theories about human behavior and the social environment.

Conclusions for future research

Facilitating the Practice and Theory groups has demonstrated to us how short intervention can enhance theory-informed and evidence-informed practice. Also, creating a safe space for discussing, sharing personal experiences, and exploring ideas supports organizational learning (also Austin, 2020; Carnochan et al., 2017). However, evaluation research is still needed on the outcomes of this group model as well as implementation research on how the model could be used in different environments.

The pilot intervention can also lead to qualitative research or to theory development. First, the shared reflection around the existing research can lead to new research questions and to conducting practice research, as in our example of SW2 above. Second, the group discussions generate interesting qualitative data that could be used by practice researchers as a less-traditional method of collecting qualitative data that could be used for developing practice-related concepts or theories based on recorded practical reflections. Third, the group model could also be expanded to promote shared practice research projects with the group participants as co-researchers so that the data could be analyzed together within the group.

A group model as we have described can be used in human service organizations to enhance implementation science by acknowledging the role of theory-based practice and evidence-informed practice. Through shared critical thinking and reflection, theories and research findings can enhance the understanding and the promotion of different perspectives in both clinical and managerial work in organizational settings. Shared reflections of theories and research can promote both adaptive and developmental workplace learning as a way of enhancing an individual sense of agency.

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