Learning in Finnish social work practice and research

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Abstract

Accepting Bartlett's (1958) vision of social work's evolution resulting from action research, the paper argues that in Finland, extensive action research is occurring, and this is resulting in service innovations. However, little of this research is published in academic journals and has only limited dissemination. Drawing on data from new interviews with experienced social workers in the City of Tampere, Finland, the paper details the nature and extent of action research by social workers. A new framework with which to analyse action research from the logic of practice is used to show not only how extensive the action research is, but also how readily situated action research can be analysed from a broader perspective, making dissemination easier.

Key words:
Action research, distributed learning, learning, Tampere

1   Introduction

Our purpose is to argue that action research from social work practice is critical to informing and renewing social work practice. As Torstendahl (1990) noted, professions go through cycles of self-confidence and ability to innovatively respond to change, sometimes interposed with periods of self-doubt. Bartlett's (1958) positive perspective for social work suggested *The results of research should eventually distinguish social work from the other helping professions* (1953:8)*. Yet since 2001, for Mark Lymbery, social work has been at a crossroads, with existential doubts again reappearing in the aftermath of post-2008 austerity and retrenchment of welfare states. Such doubts could reignite in clients with the learned helplessness that Barber (1986) feared; lowering expectations of support from inadequate social work practice.

This paper explores the nature of action research in social work practice and the disjunction between vibrant practice-based learning and its transmission into formalised learning, for example in journals. The paper asks: is action research from a logic-of-practice, systematically occurring in social work, is it systematically theorised and could a clearer framework for action learning increase the level of theorisation? These terms are discussed below, and a new action research framework applied to the Finnish context.

We criticise rational-cognitive models of agency, meaning the presumption of objective, logical thinking without reference to subjective factors including emotions and criticisms echoing those by social theorists including Bernstein (2000). We counterpose an emotional-cognitive model that aligns with learning as socio-cultural activity, based on Engeström (1987).

2   The Framework

2.1   Links with Social Work debates

Bartlett (1958) argued for a vocational profession guided by *practice at its most fully developed points*; with Parton (2000) noting practice complexity characterised by *uncertainty, confusion and doubt*. Additionally, practice is often situated, resulting in

useful lessons, not universally applicable truths. Vocational research - Schön's (1983) *reflection-in-action* - may be quantitative and/or qualitative, as Davies *et al* (2007) note, however, it is always grounded in evidenced practice and while seeking causal relationships, avoids the (supposed) certainties of physics envy i.e. the absence of social interpretation arising from 'objective' facts.

Since 1958, social workers have accrued multiple accountabilities arising from the inclusion of clients in assessments and care planning, media attention and wider democratic accountability (Marthinsen 2012). Worryingly, some social worker practice has shifted away from clients to *office and bureaucratic activities* (Jordan *et al* (2004) or box-ticking (Phillips *et al* 2006). More unqualified staff to interact with clients – deskilling the service, potentially impoverishing the profession (Levenson 2003). Finally, the introduction of new public management (NPM) techniques into social work services mean compliance with strict financial/performance metrics, altering social worker roles and relationships and eroding opportunities to innovate in and learn from practice (Mullender (2000; Sennett 2003).

2.2   Logic-of-practice and action learning

For Bourdieu (1984) *logic-of-practice* means social reproduction of habituses using frameworks, metaphors, and language: ways of seeing the world, social glue constituting trust, and interpretations, including situated occupational cultures (Järvensivu *et al* 2016). Learned patterning over time can become embedded at individual, group and organising levels; feeding and sustaining each other (Nicolini *et al* 2003). Finnish culture displays strong traditions of localised accountability (Laitinen *et al* 2018). Local experimentation too is prominent in Finnish culture (Antikainen *et al* 2019), with its pragmatic pedagogy and participatory approach to research (Kristiansen *et al* 2018), which includes revising informal street-level governances (Lipsky 1980).

Action research (Pedler and Abbott 2013) supports service improvement resulting from problem-centred analysing and reflecting on practice, often, Brereton 1996 suggests, collaboratively with users/clients; using social learning to identify situated solutions, which

can then be distributed and co-designed into new service models (Svihla 2010). Diversity of ideas makes multidisciplinary service teams an ideal action research environment, provided there is mutual trust and shared service commitment. Allen and Dovey (2016) describe this as seeing *self-in-the-other* and *other-in-the-self*. Rowell *et al* (2017) suggest that discourse around consensual new solutions helps bond teams; however, multiple contexts (Schuiling and Vermaak 2017) or disputed priorities (Wenger 1998) create difficulties. Some action researchers, such as McTaggart *et al* (2017) focus on service providers, excluding clients, however, seeking consensual new solutions exposes all values to scrutiny.

We dispute Eikeland's (2018) idea that action research may not prescribe new actions and instead follow Dewey's (1935) idea that pragmatic action research must result in new actions. Kalliola *et al's* (2017) view that action researchers need an academic partner is also contested, though the researcher needs the capability of explaining why and how proposed changes relate to previous research. For part-time students, action research seems especially important (King 2016) - this is the case for many Finnish PhDs. Radical change proposals invariably involve deep unlearning of ways-of-working and emotional re-attachments (Stenvall *et al* 2018); quite different from 'forgetting' old knowledge, this presumes mutual trust. Also, radical change redistributes power, since structures and controls alter (Gustavsen 2017) and invoke wider democratic comment (Laitinen *et al* (2017).

Abbott and Mayes' (2014) Cornwall study illustrates bottom-up change resulting from team action research. Närhi (2004) shows how citizens and city planners can conduct action research on marginalised young people and people with mental illness. Beresford (2001) underscores the importance of active agency, dangers of *othering* or limiting to managerialist agendas. He favours qualitative approaches which Thyer (2014) favourably contrasts with US positivist methodologies. Andersen and Bilfeldt's (2017) study of Swedish nursing homes evidences a radical change agenda resulting from qualitative action research. Holtan *et al* (2014) emphasise the importance of empathy, self-awareness and

emotional attachments in action research. There is then a rich tradition of action research in social work.

Furman (2009) and Grady (2010) emphasise the importance of applied research in social work for research-led teaching, and forums disseminating action research to practitioners. Time, (Davidson's [2016] inquiry into palliative care suggests) is a major barrier facing practitioners. Bellamy *et al* (2006) highlight an innovation gap between academic research and the needs of practitioners, referring to *knowledge barriers*. Uggerhøj (2012) argues that for researchers, research is an end in itself; for practitioners, research is a means to the end of improving services. Hyland (2003) argues for improved teaching of action research skills to encourage work-based learning. Since practitioners may have deep knowledge of relationships, context and culture, Hair and O'Donoghue (2009) suggest that they are ideally placed to conduct action research. Evans believes this is especially true for women social workers. Moore *et al* (2013) suggest workplace journal clubs encourage research. Schön (1983) discussed some of these issues, arguing that research breeds a *defended self*, open to self-criticism and increased self-confidence. Yliruka (2012) found that with an enabling *defined structure*, 40% of Finnish social workers continued applying mirror-method reflective research i.e. challenging one's own practice by answering telling questions.

Abbott *et al* (2013) justify the use of action research in social work, which now features in the English Professional Capabilities' Framework. We explore action research in social work through a different lens - social learning theory - exploring how emotions and social context influence learning from research, offering new insights into how social workers relate to problems, clients, each other and the organising of services.

2.3   Framework development

We develop a new framework, building on Abbott *et al's* (2013) approach, for conducting and reporting action research, synthesising with Vygotsky's (1934) social learning theory.

Our stance follows Weick's (1979) advice that exploring the organising of services is more revealing that organisational analysis (Memon *et al* 2016). Making services-as-a-system the unit of analysis, avoids being trapped in the heritage roles, relationships and responsibilities inherent in organisations. Also, this approach envisages users/clients 'pulling' personalised service packages: users centre-staged. Taking elder-care and independent living as an example, clients help design the Care Plan, which is then implemented by the discharge nurse, community nurse, independent living support and (often) informal carers (Nummijoki *et al* 2018). Providers may include Local Authority social workers, hospital out-reach, private sector assistive/alarm technology, third sector (3S i.e. non-state or market) home care, plus, informal care from family or friends (Stevenson 2000). Replacing "organisational" spectacles with "service system" lenses exposes the efficiency with which the client's needs are met and reveals system failures to the action researcher.

Following Kloetzer's (2018) Parisian psychotherapy clinic study, we use Vygotsky's (1934) social learning approach: researchers making sense of events/artefacts in the light of previously learned experiences, emotions, concepts and frameworks; often digging ever deeper for causes and meanings, Engeström's (1987) *expansive cycles of learning*, using probing tools (Mattelmaki 2008) such as emotional touch points in service systems. For Sanders (2001), action research invites all participants to alter mindsets and envision reframed problems and solutions, and results in action.

Abbott *et al's* (2013) question – "how do the learner's emotions and social context influence research results," can be answered from a Vygotskian perspective by alluding to the importance of effect and context in all learning: human agents are emotional and cognitive? For example, the social worker's investigation cites her commitment to the client, professional ethics, and her team bonds. She is aware of the opportunities and constraints in the service context, interacting with this habitus, yet capable of new ideas often generated from logic-of-practice and referencing concepts from professional education. As Nicolini *et al* (2003) note, reflection and participative discourse with other providers and users can lead to new service solutions, which consensual acceptance

sanctions and authorises. The *learning self* and the *self who organises* (Zepade *et al* 2014) merge as self-confidence grows.

Figure-1 illustrates these action research processes, synthesising ideas from Vygotsky and Finnish and Danish learning theory including Engeström (1999); Sannino and Engeström (2017); Hämäläinen (2003); Illeris (2004); and Elkjaer (2000).
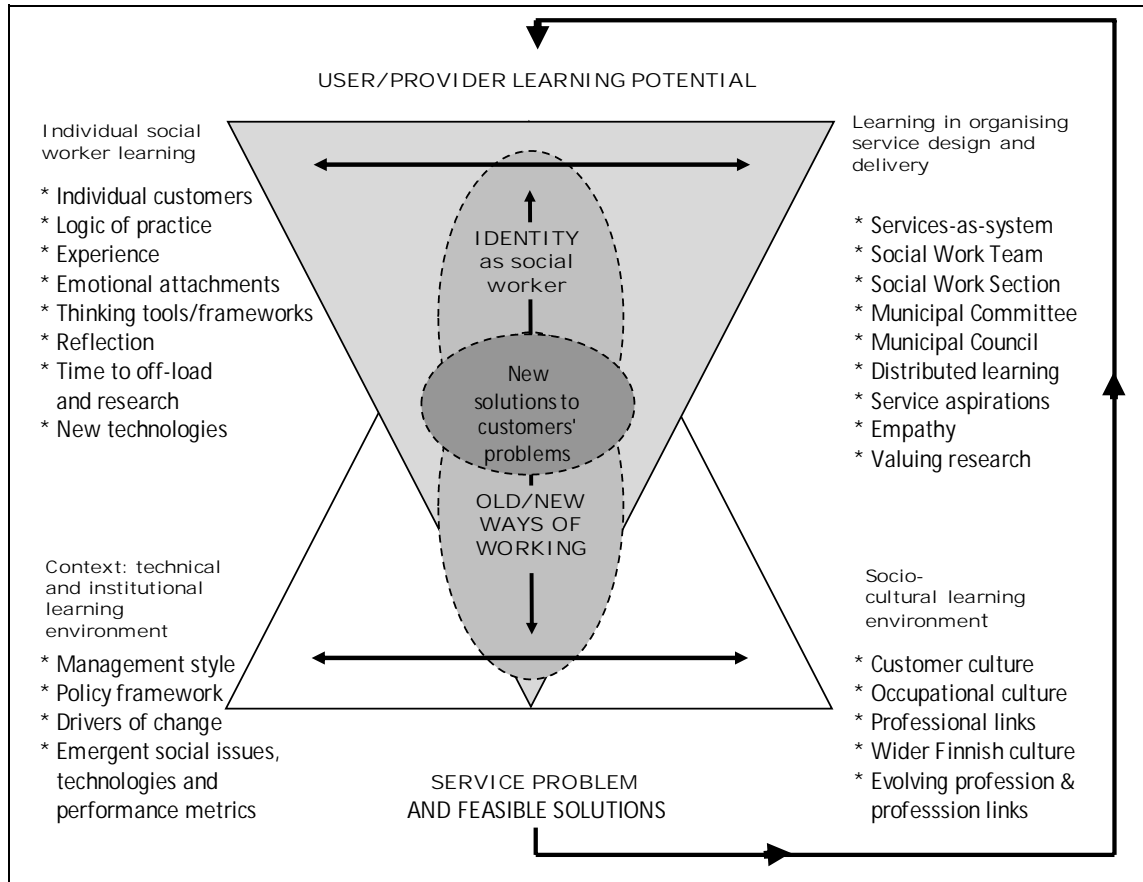

Figure-1: Framework for critical reflection in action research

Top left in figure-1 are emotional-cognitive individual social workers, who from *logic of practice* are researching/learning new solutions to clients' issues, guided by degrees of emotional attachment, trust and empathy; taking time to reflect and to unlearn. Learning is tested with colleagues, and then distributed around a service system that organises and delivers (top-right): this is the practice team, nested within a Department and Council. Teams value learned new solutions, (rejecting inadequate solutions), involving *minds-on*

active cognition instead of passive knowledge management. Context shapes all learning (bottom-left), which for social workers involves local management, national policy, professional ethics codes and change drivers - the 'hard' features of the learning environment. 'Soft' features of the learning environment - culture - (bottom-right) revolve around clients' culture and expectations, the occupational culture of Tampere social workers and aspects of the wider Finnish culture. Centred in figure-1 are the new solutions learned from logic of practice - new learned artefacts. The framework is a thinking tool for social workers conducting action research and presenting the results whether at local level or published in a journal.
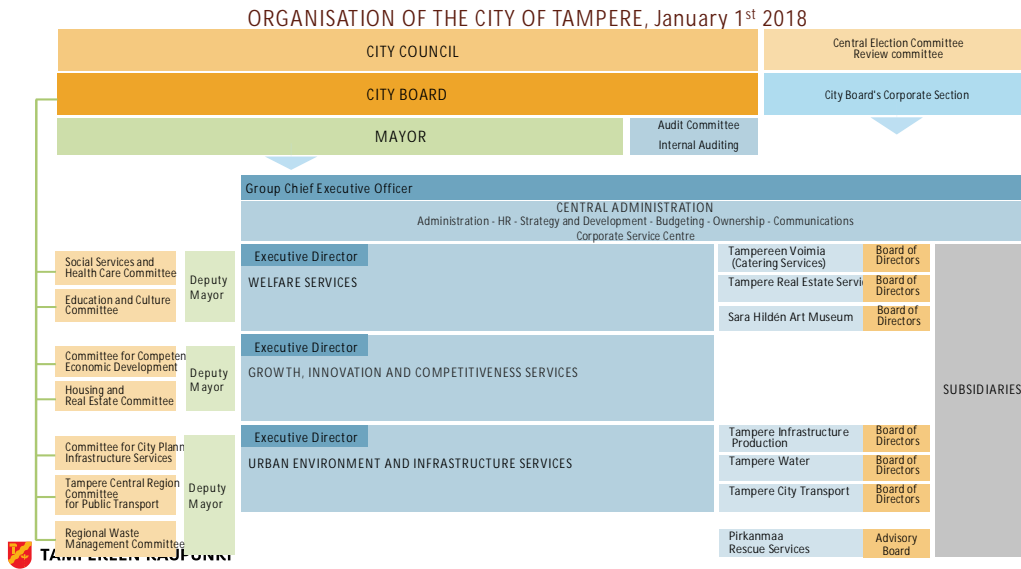
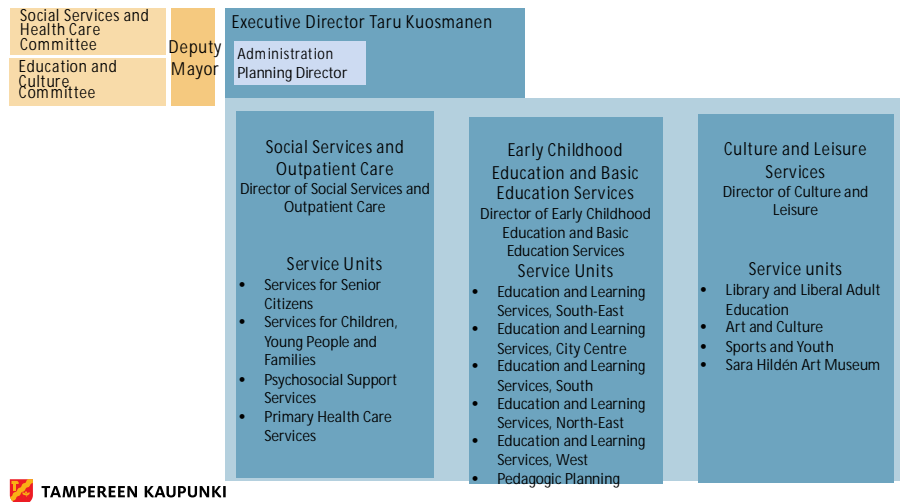## 3   Method

Tampere's social work context
Rising Finnish social welfare spend responds to an ageing population, independent living policy and inward migration. Health and social care productivity are rising as staff numbers rise only slowly and technology devices and platforms are deployed. Special healthcare is regional, social care remains a municipal function. Tampere's 230,000 citizens, in an advanced economy, enjoy rising living standards and service expectations. City services operate in three divisions: (a) wellbeing, (b) innovation and competitiveness and (c) urban environment and infrastructure. These intend to be customer-focused and outward looking, avoiding 'pushed' functionally organised services. 5,000 social and health services staff are currently integrating services around client needs, for example, the Local Square integrated community one-stop-shops recorded in Tirronen *et al (*2019). Social work encourages action research and experimentation; for example, an online symptom check.

Tampere social work operates in a Nordic welfare state, alongside (for example) benefits and social housing, including independent living and support services, minimising residential care. The city measures wellbeing (City of Tampere 2018) using objective and subjective metrics. Currently social workers focus on further integrating health and social care services, loneliness and alcohol addiction.

Figure-2 illustrates how services operate in Tampere, firstly from a city-wide perspective, then welfare services and thirdly the area featuring in this paper - social services and out-patient care.

ORGANISATION OF THE CITY OF TAMPERE, January 1st 2018

Welfare Services

Social Services and Outpatient Care
Director
Anniina Tirronen

Executive board

Administration
• Development
• HR-Management
• Financial Management
• General Administration
• Procurement

Service Line for Children, Young People and Families
Manager
Maria Päivänen

Executive board

Psychosocial Support Service Line
Manager
Maritta Närhi

Executive board

Health Care Service Line
Manager
Eeva Torppa-Saarinen

Executive board

Service Line for Senior Citizens
Manager
Ella Suojalehto

Executive board

Service Line of Customer Guidance
Manager
Kaisa Taimi

Executive board

Child and Family Social Services
Manager
Maria Päivänen

Family Social Services
Home Service and Family Work
Family Centre Nopea
Outreach Work
Family Counselling Services
Emergency Social Services
Emergency Child Protection
Open Care Services
Ward Care (Child Protection)
Päiväperho (Family Support Centre)
Family Care Luotsi
Social Welfare Office for Foster and After Care and Luotsi (Outsourced Service)
Outsourced Services

Health Services for Children and Young
Chief Medical Officer
Tuire Sannisto

Maternity- and Child Health Clinic
School Health Care
Student Health Care
Polyclinic for Children and Youth
Youth Clinic
Family Planning Clinic
Preventive Substance Abuse Work
Family Counselling Unit
Speech Therapy

Adult Social Services
Manager
Maritta Närhi

Social Work for Adults
Economic and Debt Counselling
Pirkanmaa Mediation Office
Pirkanmaa Interpretation Centre
Family Group Home Satakieli
Reception Centre
Noninstutiotional Services for mentally handicapped
Gerontology Open Care Social Work

Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services
Chief Medical Officer
Päivi Kiviniemi

Psychiatric Centres
Psychiatric Day Hospital
Psychiatric Mobile Team
Acute Psychiatric Clinic
Psychiatric Clinic for Adolescents
Psychiatric Clinic for Immigrants
Substance Abuse Care and Rehabilitation Center
Emergency Housing and Support Housing Unit
Day Center for Substance Abusers
Eating Disorder Unit
Psychogeriatrics

Oral Health Care
Chief Medical Officer of Dentistry
Eeva Torppa-Saarinen

Oral Health Care for Children and Adolescents
Orthodontic Treatment
Oral Health Care for Adults
Specialized Dental Care
Urgent Dental Treatment

Surgeries
Chief Medical Officer
Kati Myllymäki

Health Care Counselling
Health Centres
Adult Health Counselling
Outpatient Rehabilitation
Diabetes Outpatient Clinic
Medical Supplies
Adult Physicals
Nutritional Therapy
Infectious Disease Control
Health Care Psychologists
Treatment and Consultation Unit

Five regional areas

Home Care
Home Care for War Invalids
Housing services
Other services supporting living in home
Preventive Elderly Work
Home Care for Elderly
Rauhaniemi Hospital
Orivesi Health Centre

Customer Guidance for Home Care
Manager
Kaisa Taimi

Customer Guidance
IKI-SAS
Support for Caretakers

Customer Guidance
Manager
Milja Koljonen

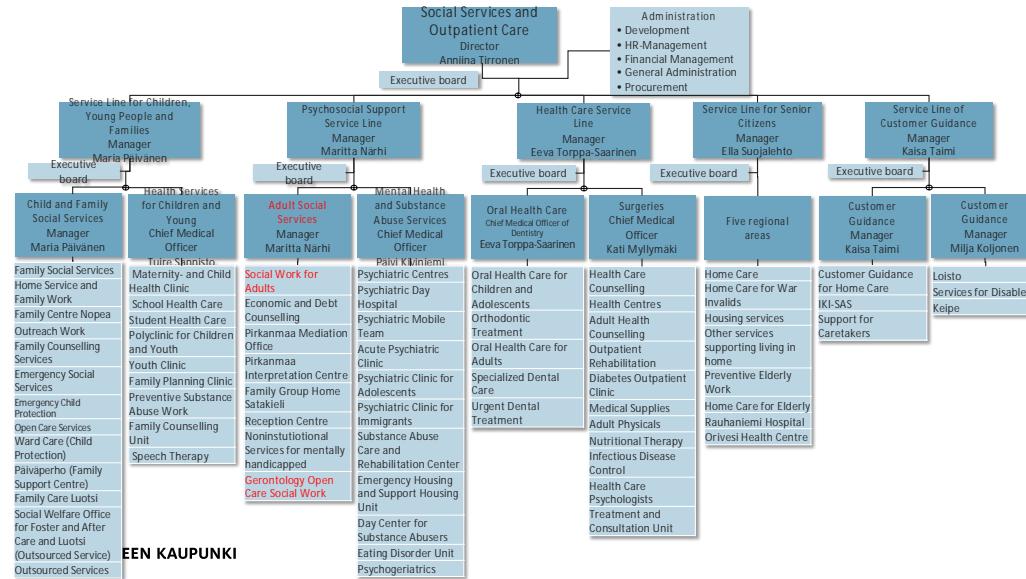Loisto
Services for Disabled
Keipe

EEN KAUPUNKI

Figure-2: Organisation of social services in the City of Tampere

Research design

Our research is exploratory; little research exists on Finnish action research *processes*, categories and inter-relationships are therefore emergent, hence our framework. It is an interpretative inquiry - our data and conclusions are highly situated in Tampere's social work services' context and culture. Additionally, as Rabinow and Sullivan (1985) point out, social research 'facts' are not 'out there' awaiting discovery; the researcher socially constructs a research frame, categories and meanings; Rorty's (1989:73) *knowing and doing in praxis.*

Figure-3 illustrates our datasets. We decided to interview only social workers and not clients focusing on social worker learning to experienced social workers interested in practice learning and practice change. Interviewees self-selected, volunteering after an invitation from the Director - three front-line supervisors and four front-line social workers. Though small, our sample corresponds to good practice in qualitative research in its typicality (front-line and supervising social workers) and is relevant to our research question. The data-rich sample is comparable in size to Eriksson's *et al* (2017) similar research.

Two of us conducted interviews using cognitive conversations (Geiselman *et al* 1985) based around self-selected narratives of change, why change, learning processes in individual learning, distributed learning and channels feeding learning into decision-taking systems. The advantage of cognitive conversations is the interviewee chooses narratives, terminology and sequencing, without the interviewer first framing the issue and terms. Typically, interviewees were asked to describe change processes, prompting them to dig into action research processes. We explored how the research was done, with whom and how it was shared and later distributed.

Data	Gathering method	Data presentation and analysis	Example data
Pre-understanding	One author works in Social and Health Services in Tampere	Experience embedded in data section and analysis	One author closely follows Social Work learning practice in her daily work and oversees filtration of work-based learning embedded into practice as the Manager of the service.
Longitudinal research	The authors have published several papers examining social services in Tampere	Papers referenced in text each of which gives examples of action learning	The Senior Management Team agreed that perhaps tweny minor chnages to practice occur each year as a result of action learning and two or three major changes to practice.
Evidence from other cities	Informal discussions with Social Workers from other cities	Presentations at Nordic Social Work conference (November 2019)	Five of fourteen presentations were from Finland, all cited action research.
Deep narratives on logic of practice and learning from seven senior Tampere social workers	Semi-structured interviews with seven social workers nominated after a call for volunteers by the Head of Social Work in Tampere	Thematic analysis using NVivo, with in-case cross-referencing and triangulation with previous research	Examples cited in this text include learning from Departmental integration and colocation; client-oriented ways-of-working; home visits in pairs; learning from group case-work; learning to cooperate with client's families; and learning what administrative burden can be off-loaded.

Figure-3: Summary of data gathered as evidence

Interviewees were allowed half a working day for the interviews, this and their eagerness to dig deeply into the questions meant interviews lasted for about three-hours. Lengthy discourses revealed an open practice, often with interviewees asking their own follow-up questions of other interviewees.

Written consent was obtained from each interviewee and permission to record, permission to terminate explained and anonymity guaranteed.

Data is presented thematically, using figure-1 variables for top-line NVivo analysis adding sub-categories from NVivo searches, for example budgets, hierarchy, third-sector, other professionals. Analysis is guided by the framework variables and triangulation with previous research.

To reduce potential bias, the second and third authors conducted interviews and first analysis, allowing Anniina Tirronen, who is Director of Social Services and Outpatient Care at Tampere City to then bring reflections based on familiarity.

4   Action learning in Tampere social work

Data is presented in five sections: (1) learning from *logic of practice*; (2) individual learning; (3) learning in organising services; and (4) are the context and culture influences on learning from practice. Quotations are in *italics,* annotated as (interviewee) I-1 to I-7.

4.1   New practices from action learning

Figure-4 summarises the individual learning moments social workers mentioned. I-6 comments *When I started in 1991, they needed money. Now they need housing, they need education, they can need day care. What has changed? We have changed.* She refers to using 3S organisations such as the Red Cross and volunteer groups. I-5, whose clients are refugees, points to 3S organisations adapting to meet changed needs: … *the Martha Association, it's a very old organization … They started by helping people to cook, prepare food, grow vegetables, etc.* Migrants (150 per year into Tampere) are a new client set for social workers, requiring significant new practice learning.

As individuals, social workers feel their learning is now shaped by customer-orientation, I-2 comments, *Working practices had to be turned more client-oriented. The initiative for a new way of working came from us. I have learned that my own understanding of the client's welfare is not the same as that of the client*, I-2.

Learning and the wider learning environment
Learning from 3S interactions
Learning from clients
Learning from inter-disciplinary working
Learning and experimenting
Development client
Experienced expert social workers
Professionalism vs tick-boxing
Cooperating with families of clients

Figure-4: Individual social worker learning moments

Help to clients often crosses professional boundaries, as I-1 says, *Different professionals draw up a plan together with the client.* Independent living is an important aspect of individual social worker's learning environment, bringing constraints. As I-3 suggests when discussing waiting lists for sheltered housing, *We cannot solve problems of the system.* I-3 for example, comments that *Four or five years ago we had a social worker, a social councillor and a councillor, three people.* I-3 is here highlighting shortages of sheltered housing and combined staff roles; a wider system over which practice social workers have less control.

Tampere social workers feel empowered to experiment. A Manager advised 1-7 *I should do something differently and be more effective and use your human resources so that you can manage your work.* Clients, she says, *have very good ideas about what could work for them,* discussing new ideas in her team, citing a *development client* (*kehittäjäasiakas*) i.e. one trying a new service model. Development clients give social workers the opportunity to act as *kokemusasiantuntija* (client experience experts). I-7 explains: *We try to listen to our clients more carefully and we take them with us to develop those services.*

Several social workers allude to re-learning face-to-face person-centred working. For example, discussing lonely elderly clients, I-3, says, *I have bypassed the system by cooperating with the family members. The client does not necessarily understand his situation and housing needs if I tell them directly to him.*

Some Tampere social workers feel few constraints in learning and experimenting from their superiors. I-6 says, *I think, maybe we could say that those "upstairs" are waiting for solutions from us.* However, large caseloads can frustrate, allowing insufficient time to learn and experiment. Not all agree, I-4 argues that, *I think there is a lot of change in which the organization is taking the power from us. If we got the power, we would have a lot to give.* Time to research and experiment is not evenly distributed.

4.2   Learning during organising

Figure-5 summarises how Tampere social workers view learning from logic-of-practice when organising services.

Creating and actually using care plans and returning to older social work practices
Pecking orders: social workers in relation to other local professionals
Fewer forms, more discretion on fees
An evolving profession
Autonomous teamworking (devolved power and budget), distributed learning and projects
Community development and working with 3S

Figure-5: Summary of learning during organising

I-1 believes that cross-disciplinary care plans assessing needs created with users, are now critical: *It is increasingly essential that we can form a comprehensive picture of the client's situation and get the services working. In this respect the care plans are important.* Several social workers comment on what person-centred social work means (I-3), *Much of the old ways of working have returned. We are cooperating with our clients again.* I-5 describes returning to an old practice of working through budgets with clients using pen and paper.

Social workers believe that their position in the 'pecking order' (status rankings) of local service professionals has improved: *Doctors appreciate my work. Actually, they are more often asking me and other social workers for advice* (I-1). Others believe hospital health staff to be insufficiently cooperative; *I think it would be good to have more cooperation with them* (1-6).

Direct payments to clients relieve social workers of a burden: they instead focus on client circumstance and discount charges. As I-2 says, *We are still making decisions concerning*

discretionary subsistence support as well as decisions related to reducing fees. I-5 notes that checklists for wellbeing can be too complex and instead prefers direct questions: *How are you?*

Teams benefit by learning from what I-5 calls *experience experts* and distributing research lessons amongst social workers; I-2 says, *We have been able to develop our work independently and autonomously. We discuss together and exchange ideas and experiences and try to find solutions together.* This builds on paired first visits, she says, *four eyes see more than two.* Each team evolves relevant practices: *I couldn't say if our development of working practices has had any effect on the city's social work* (1-3).

Tampere continually launches projects to improve social work services. I-7 notes the need to support projects using client information; *We get a report when the project is over and maybe some good practices can be taken over to our everyday work from these projects.* She goes on to say, *I prefer the informal projects*, noting that the Team Leader encourages experimentation, giving an example of developing *cooperation between Kela and our customers* [the Finnish state benefits agency]. Several social workers comment that while Social Work Managers are closely involved, Municipal Headquarters is distant. Bringing teams together has increased the possibility of experimentation, *.. for the first time, I have the possibility to feel free. We can experiment. We can try something, and if it's not okay, we don't do any harm* (1.4).

Some Social workers view their role matching state and 3S services with clients as *more like community work* (1-4). This is especially important in meeting the initial needs of refugees, though I-5 notes, once settled with a residence permit, few have need of social work services. She suggests that for initial settlement, 3S organisations often have expertise that the City buys. Other social workers, such as I-6 refer to 3S organisations such as addictions groups and the *Osviitta* crisis centre.

4.3 Context influences on social workers' action learning

Some social workers believe the context in which they learn and alter practice is little changed (figure 6). I-1 says, *I've been a social worker for a long time and am close to retirement. In essence, my work has not changed much at all.* I-3 differs saying *we now can develop ourselves more as social workers.* Others point to the Kela reform; I-4 says, *The role of actual social work has become emphasized and now there is time for it.*

Changing context, benefits reforms (Kela) and social workers' discretion
Working with families, returning to old practices and workload
Independent living and inter-professional working
Potential in working with 3S
Potential service integration arising from co-location of services
Professional development and training

Figure-6: Context influencing learning

I-3 emphasises, *The work has changed so that we are cooperating more with the families. They are being informed, negotiated with and the clients' situations discussed. I feel that we've somehow returned to the old ways. Now we're working at their homes again.* Others point to high caseloads (119 was mentioned) and unwelcome staff reductions. I-3 says, *The workload is heavy. This means also that I have to make decisions concerning clients without meeting them.*

With services to offer for independent living, some social workers believe their relationship with other professionals has improved. I-1 suggests, *We have no tensions here. We are cooperating with the doctors.* She goes on to note that now she can now access healthcare records helping care planning. Supporting independent living, I-2 argues is the major contextual change; *We are no longer working just at institutions but also helping our clients at their homes.* She recalls, *We used to wear uniforms. This kind of showed the clients where they stand. Nowadays we have normal clothes.* Independent living is not without tensions, particular I-3 suggests if clients are discharged too early.

I-5 makes the important point that ageing allows more people to participate in 3S volunteering and *if we somehow give this work to someone, they could do that. But we still*

coordinate everything, and we try to keep all the threads in our hands. Welcoming inter-professional working, I-6 argues that closer connections - she mentions co-location - result in new ideas and cooperation.

Two interviewees mention learning from in-house researchers and international best practice. However, the focus is on learning from logic-of-practice, as I-2 says, *We are trying to find solutions to our clients' problems. For that, you don't need theories but practical professional skills.* I-3 is concerned that professional development could be more practical; *There is training … and you get some ideas, but they are not particularly useful. The contents of training seem abstract when you think of your own work.*

4.4   Cultural influences

Customer culture

'Official' nomenclature in Tampere Social Work is *customers* not clients, however, here we use clients (except where quoting), as more recognisable. Interviewees average 20-years service; I-1, I-2, I-3 and I-5 use the term clients. I-6 explains "customer" is *more commercial*, pointing out the Finnish *"asiakas"* refers to either. All seven interviewees speak of negotiating care plans and consulting clients, accepting that person-centred social work gives voice and choice. Several indicate that clients' financial resources limit their choices, with I-4 noting how managing expectations means dissuading clients from *expecting that our services take care of everything.*

Occupational culture

Three interviewees refer positively to integrating previously disparate teams into a unified Department. Co-location benefits include accessing specialist professional expertise (I-6 mentions child protection). Departmental briefs on local research project results, I-2 notes, help cement professional identity. Discussing with newly trained social workers, she notes, helps keep her up to date with the profession's changes. All seven interviewees access occupational culture via their teams; for example, in peer-approval of standards and services-as-a-system designs. Team membership is the access point to occupational culture and professional identity and interaction with clients a major learning catalyst.

Wider Finnish culture

Values from wider Finnish culture influence how Tampere social workers learn and what they learn. At times getting clients to accept support is hindered by 'Sisu' cultural traits (be independent, never give up): *In Finland, clients have strong rights of self-determination. This means that they do not have to accept help that often.* (I-2). Mirroring Finnish esteem for education, social workers take pride in rising levels of professional qualifications. Tampere social worker learning closely references wider social norms. Those working with refugees, such as I-4, emphasise their role as culture-carriers, for example in the "*Puhu minulle suomea*" (*Speak Finnish to me*) campaign: the importance of clients appreciating and integrating into Finnish culture.

Cultures (here clients, occupational and wider Finnish cultures) mediate social worker learning providing thought-corridors i.e. frames within which thinking occurs, similar to paradigms, within which the legitimacy of service innovation are judged.

5   Discussion

Analysis follows the figure-1 framework structure, exploring action research processes and where possible, comparing processes in previous research. We comment on our findings, reintegrating with previous research literature to answer to our research question. Our point is that (a) a considerable amount of action research is being conducted by social workers in Tampere, and possibly across Finland, however, (2) little action research from Finnish social workers appears in Finland's social work journals.

5.1   What Tampere social workers are learning?

Social workers in Tampere accommodate their practice to strategic aims such as independent living. The profession is evolving based upon learning from *logic of practice* that includes person-centred care, featuring coproduced services in services-as-a-system. This learning is rarely published but instead validated and legitimised by teams that are encouraged to experiment. Our examples illustrate the enactment into practice of action research in Tampere. At a high-level of abstraction, Tampere social workers have learned

that learning from logic-of-practice, benefits clients by improving services. We argue below that figure-1 offers added legitimacy to this action research and also a way for individuals and teams to understand and analyse their practice.

5.2   Individual social worker learning

All seven interviewees gave examples of learning from logic-of-practice justifying Bartlett's idea that vocational professions evolve by learning from practice and Schein's (1985) characterisation of reflective practitioners. All attend continuing professional development training, though I-6 confesses that sometimes work pressures interfere. Reflective activity is informed by *methodological training and use in practice* (I-7), in some cases by learning concepts from newly qualified social workers (I-5). Logic-of-practice entails learning by negotiating the match between the needs of individual clients and available services, including the 3S. Social workers experiences of solving problems as (1-3) says by *visual sense of things and situations* rather than written records: metaphors, imaginings and mind-wanderings rather than what 1-7 calls *some cut and dried services or benefits*. Client ideas and actions directly input into social workers learning – clients join social workers as co-producers in negotiated, personalised services-as-a-system; distinct from pre-prepared packages of one-size-fits-all services regardless of individual needs - I-7 refers to as *listening to our clients*. This corresponds to the listening and learning perspective in Kinder (2012). Social worker action research arises from puzzling through solutions to clients' needs: the logic-of-practice, shown as the innovative solution at the centre of figure-1.

5.3   Organising services and learning

Following Weick (1979) the services-as-a-system perspective emphasises organising solutions, discarding organisational boundaries as distractions and rejecting approaches such as knowledge management that de-centre learning as an *active* cognitive and social activity (therefore human, empathetic and subjective) (Nicolini *et al* 2003). Particular configurations of services-as-a-system as Laitinen *et al* (2017) note, are legitimised by team peer-approval: social workers as professionals gain legitimacy from solving problems (independent living), with other professions (Doctors, housing, social care) benefiting from

social worker involvement. Team working gives social workers a sounding board for new service solutions and the support of a vibrant occupational culture, echoing Paynes' (2008).

Organising solutions, such as independent living, do not focus on technology. Instead, person-centred solutions, for many social workers, highlight person-centred care - a welcome change from NPM efficiency targets. These are the trajectories found in Kim and Lee (2009) and Radnor *et al* (2014). For example, with team approval, social workers are consulting families about clients' needs and discarding formal wellbeing checklists in favour of person-centric evaluations.

Innovative solutions require marshalling resources. An important aspect of social worker learning is identifying 3S capabilities and linking these together with Kela and City services to meet clients' needs. Social workers differ in how successfully they marshal resources from hospital services (I-6 has difficulties, I-1 finds Doctors cooperative) and prefer experimenting with service arrangements, to formal projects. In Tampere, Managers and Team leaders encourage experimentation, as I-7.

5.4   Context and Tampere social worker learning

Social workers feel re-professionalised: they no longer wear uniforms, now engage in (often lead) inter-disciplinary work, involve 3S, users and their families in care planning, gain benefits from co-location and initiate experiments and action research. The dead hand of NPM efficiency is receding, being replaced by emphasis on quality of care and service innovation (effectiveness). In learning, for Engeström (1987) *context is everything*. The evidence suggests that Lymbery's (2001) questions about crisis of identity in social work are answered negatively in Tampere - context is stimulating learning and service change and innovation.

5.5   Cultures and Tampere social worker learning

Finland is not the easiest place to practise social work. Even obviously lonely or addicted people may refuse help, citing Finnish self-determination - in a country were Väinö Linna's (1956) idiosyncratic hero *Rokka* is widely admired. Tampere social workers follow Potter-

Efron's (2002) advice and focus on guilt (maladaptive) instead of shame (adaptive), often encouraging *Local Square* participation.

Tampere social workers' occupational culture appears strengthened as a result of co-locating teams (I-6) and the active role of teams in supporting research and experimentation (I-2). This support Morriss (2016) and not the burnout that Kim and Lee (2009) suggest characterises a volatile environment.

Consumer culture sits easily with Finnish values of autonomy: social workers take comfort and stimulation from clients as active citizens coproducing services-as-a-system, though several note that over decades, limited resources constrained actual clients' choices.

In summary, this research finds that deep grounding in local cultures can serve to support learning and service innovation; the opposite to Sennett's (2003) negatively spiralling collective self-esteem.

5.6   Alternative viewpoints and summary

Two comments from social workers suggest difficulties facing Tampere social worker learning. I-6 suggests hospital-based staff are less prone to cooperate than other healthcare staff and I-4 feels the Council diminishes social work by reducing budgets. We note also that NPM can have negative effects on learning.

It seems fair to suggest that the impact of action research by social workers in Tampere is positive. Individual social workers feel empowered to research and experiment, though some operate under time constraints. Organised service systems allow social workers' research to benefit from the ideas of families and clients. Overall, the context is supportive of innovation arising from reflection on logic-of-practice and strengthening occupational culture.

6   Conclusions

This small-sized research reveals a significant amount of action learning from a logic-of-practice by social workers in Tampere. While one study cannot validate a new framework, the figure-1 framework offers a useful way of appraising social workers' action research.

Building on Suoninen-Erhiö's (1983) idea of Social Work as instrument of knowledge production and from Engeström's work on learning, the study suggests that action learning from the logic-of-practice is an important driver.   Much of the action research occurs in interactions with service (especially development) clients within services-as-a-system, which are strongly influenced by the context and culture in which the services occur.

Our research shows that the emotional responses and commitments of social workers and their clients are important influences on action learning, which is under-represented in academic publications. We refer to (and criticise) rational-cognitive models of agency in research (referencing both users and social workers), counter-posing this with an emotional-cognitive model, which, as we show, sits easily with learning as socio-cultural activity. We suggest that encouraging social workers to view their action research in a framework, such as that represented in figure-1 may encourage periodic evaluation and cumulation of learning lead to the framing of the action learning.

From a policy perspective, the research notes the success of encouraging experimentation and the idea of development clients: we suggest that expanding time available for individuals and teams in these areas, coupled with the use of a systematic framework for action learning, will increase innovation rates in social work.

Tampere's experience of using action learning continuously to improve practice provides a general lesson for all social work services, not least since the reflective practitioner better contributes to the team and better supports clients. In particular, where social work is newly emerged and legitimated as a service, action learning provides a means to ground practice in a socio-cultural setting, instead of adopting best practice from elsewhere, which may prove poor practice in the new context. This conclusion is perhaps especially apposite

to social work practice in developing countries, where formal research time and resources may be even more limited than in developed country services, yet action research offers opportunities to reflect and learn from practice; especially so since each context and culture is likely to require uniquely shaped solutions.

In summary, Bartlett's (1958:8) call for action research importantly argues that a vocationally oriented evolving profession needs the injection of *practice at its most fully developed points* i.e. embedding learning from logic-of-practice into improved practice. Our study shows that social work action research guiding practice is (a) practice problem-centred and context-specific; (b) features professionals and users as emotionally cognitive active agents; (c) critically interprets a *logic of practice*; and (d) is useful for practice when referencing context and culture. We find plentiful action research in Tampere social work and evidence from elsewhere in Finland (figure-3), which we believe is representative of social work elsewhere in Finland; however, this is under-represented in journal publications.

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